

# Bofuri

15

★ I Don't ★  
Want to Get  
Hurt, so I'll  
Max Out My  
Defense

YUUMIKAN

Illustration by KOIN

## Skills

Longsword Mastery X  
Longsword Mastery X  
Strength Boost  
Attack Boost  
HP Boost (L) / M / H  
MP Cost Down (L) / M / H  
MP Recovery Speed Boost (L)

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NewWorld Online

## Skills

Magic Boost (L)



**Bofuri** ★ I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so  
I'll Max Out My Defense. ★



## PAIN

### Pain's STATS

Lv134  
HP 1235/1235  
MP 635/635  
[STR 230]  
[VIT 230]  
[AGI 200]  
[DEX 80]  
[INT 80]





As the battle heats up!

“Let’s see  
if they  
can really  
keep her  
safe.”

“Let’s  
try and  
win this  
thing!”





“I’ll bat it down if  
it gets dangerous.  
Trust me.”

“Okay, got it.”

Their **greatest threat** yet!





### Skills

Longsword Mastery X / Longsword Secrets X / Strength Boost (L)  
Attack Boost (L) / HP Boost (L) / MP Boost (L) / MP Cost Down (L)  
MP Recovery Speed Boost (L) / Magic Boost (L)  
Mining Speed Boost (L) / Gathering Speed Boost (L) / Fire Magic X  
Water Magic X / Wind Magic X / Earth Magic X / Dark Magic X  
Light Magic X / Range Expansion / Poison Nullification  
Paralyze Nullification / Stun Nullification / Sleep Nullification  
Freeze Nullification / Burn Nullification / Throw / Fishing  
Swimming X / Diving X / Shearing / Leap X / Mining X / Gathering X  
Cooking I / Attack Aura / High Voltage / Arms Logic / Limit Break  
Blood Frenzy / Ultimate Martial Arts / Guard Aura / Immobile  
Defensive Formation / Protection Prayer / Weapon Guard  
Sword and Shield / Fortress / Specter of Pain / Like Wind  
Heavenly Splendor / Green's Grace / Eyes Over Vigilant  
Dauntless / Sinew / Disarming / Super Speed  
Knight's Pledge

**Bofuri**  
★ I Don't ★  
Want to Get  
Hurt, so I'll  
Max Out My  
Defense.

**YUUMIKAN**

Illustration by **KOIN**

**YEN**  
**ON**  
NEW YORK

### PAIN'S STATS

#### Pain

Lv134    HP 1235/1235    MP 635/635

[STR 230]    [VIT 230]    [AGI 200]    [DEX 80]    [INT 80]

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**NewWorld Online.**



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Bofuri I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense., Vol. 15

YUUMIKAN

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ITAINO WA IYA NANODE BOGYORYOKU NI KYOKUFURI SHITAITO OMOIMASU. Vol. 15

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First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: February 2025

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere

Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Yuumikan, author. | Koin, illustrator. | Cunningham, Andrew, 1979– translator.

Title: Bofuri, I don't want to get hurt, so I'll max out my defense / Yuumikan ; illustration by Koin ; translated by Andrew Cunningham.

Other titles: Itai no wa iya nano de bōgyoryoku ni kyokufuri shitai to omoimasu. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2021– Identifiers: LCCN 2020055872 | ISBN 9781975322731 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) Subjects: LCSH: Video gamers—Fiction. | Virtual reality—Fiction. | GSAFD: Science fiction.

Classification: LCC PL874.I46 I8313 2021 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020055872>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9146-1 (paperback)

978-1-9753-9147-8 (ebook)

E3-20241227-JV-NF-ORI



# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Defense Build and the Rain of Poison](#)

[Chapter 2: Defense Build and a Close Call](#)

[Chapter 3: Defense Build and Bait](#)

[Chapter 4: Defense Build and the Eye](#)

[Chapter 5: Defense Build and the Ultimate Duo](#)

[Chapter 6: Defense Build and a Final Respite](#)

[Chapter 7: Defense Build and the Climax](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)





# CONTENTS

I Don't Want to Get Hurt,  
so I'll Max Out My Defense.

✦ Prologue ✦

✦ Chapter 1 Defense Build and the Rain of Poison ✦

✦ Chapter 2 Defense Build and a Close Call ✦

✦ Chapter 3 Defense Build and Bait ✦

✦ Chapter 4 Defense Build and the Eye ✦

✦ Chapter 5 Defense Build and the Ultimate Duo ✦

✦ Chapter 6 Defense Build and a Final Respite ✦

✦ Chapter 7 Defense Build and the Climax ✦

✦ Afterword ✦



## NewWorld Online Status

## GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Maple**LV **74**

HP 200/200 MP 22/22

## PROFILE

## The Tankiest Great Shielder

She was a gaming noob, but by putting all her points in defense, she grew so tanky that all attacks just bounce right off. The kind of girl who finds fun in everything, her imaginative leaps astound those around her. When she fights, she negates all incoming attacks while unleashing a barrage of counter-skills.

## STATUS

STR 000 VIT 20430 AGI 000

DEX 000 INT 000

## EQUIPMENT

New Moon: Hydra Bonding Bridge

Night's Facsimile: Devour/Lure of the Deep

Black Rose Armor: Saturating Chaos

Toughness Ring Life Ring



## SKILLS

Shield Attack Sidestep Deflect Meditation Taunt Inspire HP Boost (S) MP Boost (S) Heavy Body  
 Green's Grace Great Shield Mastery X Cover Move V Cover Pierce Guard Counter Quick Change  
 Absolute Defense Moral Turpitude Sheep Eater Hydra Eater Bomb Eater Indomitable Guardian  
 Giant Killing Psychokinesis Fortress Martyr's Devotion Machine God Bug Urn Curse Zone Freeze  
 Pandemonium I Heaven's Throne Nether Nexus Crystallization Cataclysmic Eruption Unbreakable Shield  
 Twisted Resurrection Earth Wielding II Apex of Authority Glow of Deliverance Dark Rebirth

## TAMED MONSTER

Name **Syrup** A turtle with high defense

Giganticize Spirit Cannon Mother Nature etc.

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## NewWorld Online Status

## GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Sally** LV **77**  
 HP 32/32 MP 130/130

## PROFILE

## The Unhittable Assassin

Maple's friend and partner, she's got a good head on her shoulders. Her top priority is to ensure she and Maple enjoy the game together. Light armor and twin daggers are the core of her combat style; her raw gaming talent and astonishing focus allow her to evade all attacks.

## STATUS

STR 150 VIT 000 AGI 190

DEX 045 INT 060

## EQUIPMENT

Deep Sea Dagger Seabed Dagger  
 Surface Scarf: Mirage Oceanic Coat: Oceanic  
 Oceanic Clothes Bonding Bridge  
 Charnel Boots: One Step in the Grave



## SKILLS

Gale Slash Defense Break Inspire Down Attack Power Attack Switch Attack Pinpoint Attack  
 Combo Blade V Martial Arts VIII Fire Magic III Water Magic III Wind Magic III Earth Magic III  
 Dark Magic III Light Magic III Strength Boost (L) Combo Boost (L) MP Boost (L) MP Cost Down (L)  
 MP Recovery Speed Boost (L) Poison Resist (S) Gathering Speed Boost (S) Dagger Mastery X  
 Magic Mastery III Dagger Secrets V Affliction VIII Presence Block III Presence Detect II  
 Sneaky Steps I Leap V Quick Change Cooking I Fishing Swimming X Diving X Shearing  
 Superspeed Ancient Ocean Chaser Blade Jack of All Trades Sword Dance Shed Skin  
 Web Spinner X Ice Pillar Subzero Domain Nether Nexus Cataclysmic Eruption Water Wielding VII  
 Substitute

## TAMED MONSTER

Name **Oboro** A fox with skills that bewilder foes

Fleeting Shadow Shadow Clone Binding Barrier etc.

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# NewWorld Online Status

## GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Chrome** LV **92**  
HP 940/940 MP 52/52

### PROFILE

#### The Unstoppable, Unyielding Zombie Tank

Known as a top player since the early days of *NewWorld Online*. Reliable, caring, everyone's big brother. Like Maple, he's a Great Shielder. His unique gear gives him a 50 percent chance of surviving any hit with 1 HP, and he has a ton of healing skills that make him extremely tenacious.

### STATUS

STR 145 VIT 200 AGI 040  
DEX 030 INT 020

### EQUIPMENT

Headhunter: Life Eater  
Wrath Wraith Wall: Soul Syphon  
Bloodstained Skull: Soul Eater  
Bloodstained Bone Armor: Dead or Alive  
Robust Ring Impregnable Ring  
Bonding Bridge



### SKILLS

Thrust Elemental Blade Shield Attack Sidestep Deflect Great Defense Taunt Bulwark  
Impregnable Stance Iron Body Guardian Heavy Body HP Boost (L) HP Recovery Speed Boost (L) Cover  
MP Boost (L) Green's Grace Great Shield Mastery X Defense Mastery X Cover Move X Multi-Cover  
Pierce Guard Counter Guard Aura Defensive Formation Guardian Power Great Shield Secrets X  
Defense Secrets X Burn Resist (L) Stun Nullification Paralyze Nullification Poison Nullification  
Sleep Nullification Freeze Nullification Mining IV Gathering VII Shearing Swimming V Diving V  
Spirit Light Indomitable Guardian Battle Healing Reaper's Mire Crystallization Stimulation

### TAMED MONSTER

Name **Necro** An armor monster that really shines when worn

Polterguard Impact Reflection etc.

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## NewWorld Online Status

## GUILD Maple Tree

NAME Iz Lv 76  
HP 100/100 MP 100/100

## PROFILE

## The Ultimate Crafter

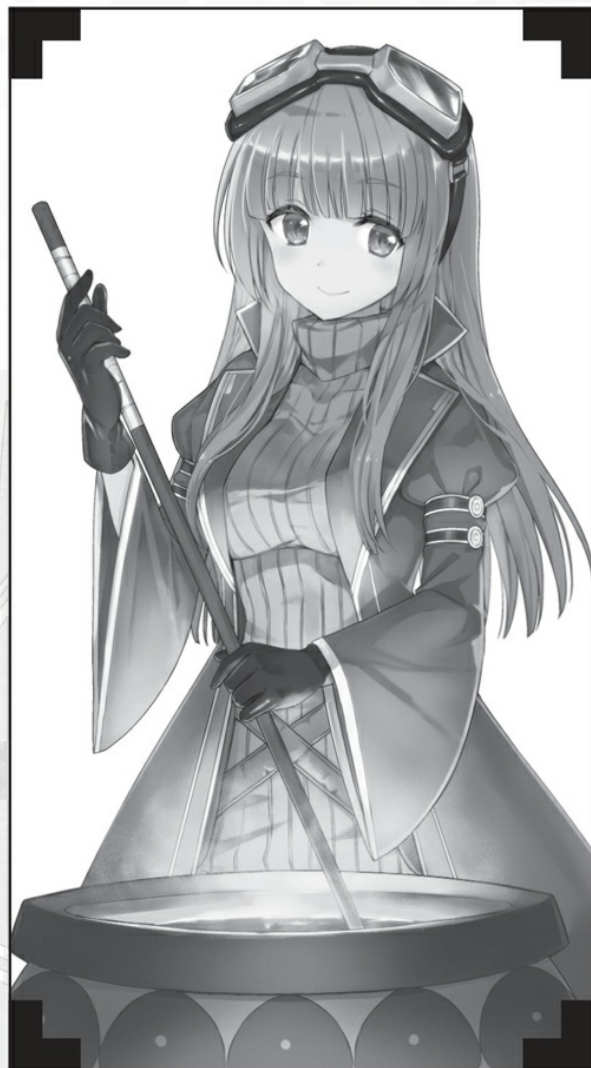
A specialized crafter, she's proud of her work and particular about the results. Her gaming style is all about making clothes, weapons, armor, and items. Originally, she wasn't that active in combat, but her stock of attack and support items now makes a huge difference.

## STATUS

STR 045 VIT 020 AGI 105  
DEX 210 INT 085

## EQUIPMENT

Blacksmith Hammer X  
Alchemist Goggles: Faustian Alchemy  
Alchemist Long Coat: Magic Workshop  
Blacksmith Leggings X  
Alchemist Boots: New Frontier  
Potion Pouch  
Item Pouch  
Bonding Bridge



## SKILLS

Strike Craft Dusting Crafting Mastery X Crafting Secrets X Enhance Success Rate Boost (L)  
Gathering Speed Boost (L) Mining Speed Boost (L) Crafting Quantity Boost (L) Crafting Speed Boost (L)  
Affliction III Sneaky Steps V Keen Sight Smithing X Sewing X Horticulture X Synthesizing X  
Augmentation X Cooking X Mining X Gathering X Swimming X Diving X Shearing Godsmith's Grace X  
Observer's Eye Attribute Endowment VII Botany Mineralogy

## TAMED MONSTER

Name Fey A spirit that helps with item creation

Item Boost Recycle etc.

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## NewWorld Online Status

## GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Kasumi** LV **88**  
 HP 435/435 MP 70/70

## PROFILE

## The Solitary Sword Dancer

A katana-wielding female player with a strong knack for solo play. Always calm, she's good at assessing the big picture. Yet she's frequently left reeling by Maple's and Sally's outlandish antics. Has a range of katana skills that let her contribute to almost any combat situation.

## STATUS

STR 210 VIT 080 AGI 120

DEX 030 INT 030

## EQUIPMENT

Yukari, the All-Consuming Blight

Cherry Blossom Barrette

Cherry Blossom Vestments

Edo Purple Hakama

Samurai Greaves

Samurai Gauntlets

Gold Obi Fastener

Cherry Blossom Crest

Bonding Bridge

## SKILLS

Gleam Helmsplitter Guard Break Sweep Slice Eye for Attack Inspire Attack Stance  
 Katana Arts X Cleave Throw Power Aura Armor Slicer HP Boost (L) MP Boost (M)  
 Attack Boost (L) Poison Nullification Paralyze Nullification Stun Resist (L) Sleep Resist (L)  
 Freeze Resist (M) Burn Resist (L) Longsword Mastery X Katana Mastery X Longsword Secrets VIII  
 Katana Secrets IX Mining IV Gathering VI Diving VIII Swimming VIII Leap VII Shearing  
 Keen Sight Indomitable Sword Spirit Dauntless Sinew Superspeed Ever Vigilant  
 Mind's Eye Specter of Carnage

## TAMED MONSTER

Name **Haku** A white snake that ambushes foes from the mist

Supergiant Paralytoxin etc.



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## NewWorld Online Status

## GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Kanade**LV **66**

HP 335/335 MP 250/250

## PROFILE

## The Whimsical Genius Mage

A certifiable genius with an androgynous look and a memory beyond compare. His mind once left him avoiding human contact, but Maple's innocent cheer broke through that shell. He can store all manner of spells in the grimoires on his book stacks, ready for use in combat.

## STATUS

STR 015 VIT 010 AGI 125

DEX 080 INT 205

## EQUIPMENT

Divine Wisdom: Akashic Records

Diamond Newsboy Cap X

Smart Coat X

Smart Leggings X

Smart Boots X

Spade Earrings

Mage Gloves

Bonding Bridge



## SKILLS

Magic Mastery VIII Fast Chant MP Boost (L) MP Cost Down (L) MP Recovery Speed Boost (L)  
 Magic Boost (L) Green's Grace Fire Magic VII Water Magic VI Wind Magic X Earth Magic V  
 Dark Magic III Light Magic VIII Swimming V Diving V Sorcerer's Stacks Technical Archive  
 Reaper's Mire Magic Meld

## TAMED MONSTER

Name **Sou** A slime that can copy a player's abilities

Mimic Divide etc.

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## NewWorld Online Status

## GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Mai** LV **60**  
 HP 35/35 MP 20/20

## PROFILE

## Conquerer Twin

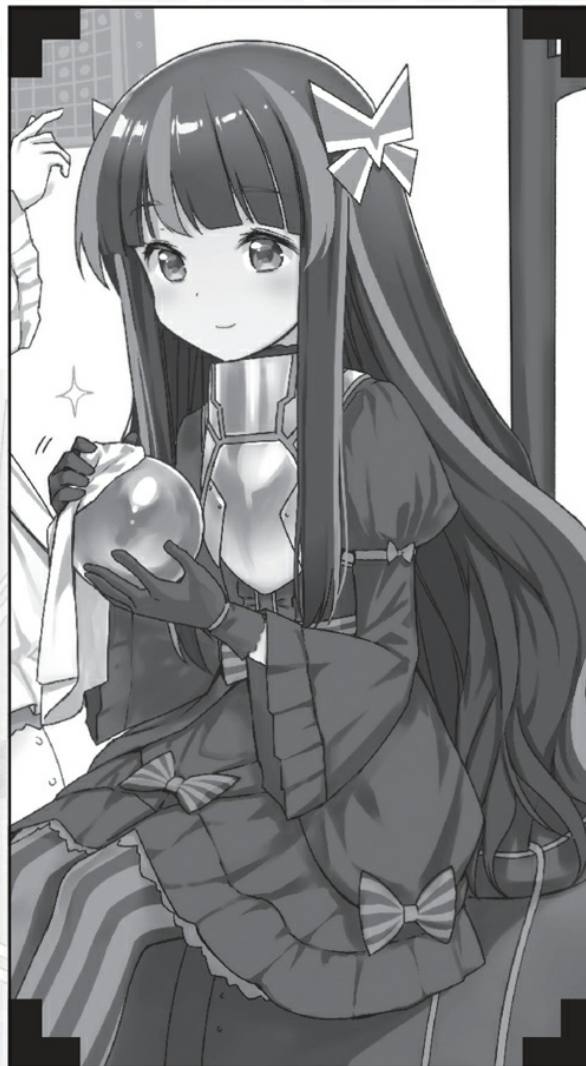
A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her younger twin sister, Yui, were scouted by Maple. She does her best to help everyone out. The twins have the highest DPS in the game and crush nearby enemies with a unique style of wielding eight hammers.

## STATUS

STR 530 VIT 000 AGI 000  
 DEX 000 INT 000

## EQUIPMENT

Black Annihilammer X Black Doll Dress X  
 Black Doll Tights X Black Doll Shoes X  
 Little Ribbon Silk Gloves  
 Bonding Bridge



## SKILLS

Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (L) Hammer Mastery X Hammer Secrets I  
 Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Destroy Mode Titan's Lot

## TAMED MONSTER

Name **Tsukimi** A bear monster with distinctive black fur

Power Share Bright Star etc.

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## NewWorld Online Status

## GUILD Maple Tree

NAME Yui

LV 60

HP 35/35

MP 20/20

## PROFILE

## Annihilator Twin

A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her older twin sister, Mai, were scouted by Maple. She's more positive than Mai and quicker to recover. The twins have the highest DPS in the game and take out distant enemies by sending specially made iron balls flying with a swing of their hammers.

## STATUS

STR 530 VIT 000 AGI 000

DEX 000 INT 000

## EQUIPMENT

White Annihilammer X White Doll Dress X

White Doll Tights X White Doll Shoes X

Little Ribbon Silk Gloves

Bonding Bridge



## SKILLS

Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (L) Hammer Mastery X Hammer Secrets I  
Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Destroy Mode Titan's Lot

## TAMED MONSTER

Name Yukimi A bear monster with distinctive white fur

Power Share Bright Star etc.

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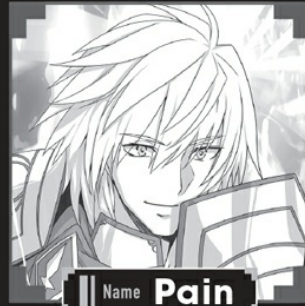
GUILD **Maple Tree**



**Tenth Event Camps**

※ As of noon on day one

GUILD **The Order of the Holy Sword**



Name **Pain**



Name **Frederica**

**FIERY  
WASTELANDS**

**VS**

**WATERY  
NATURE**

GUILD **Thunder Storm**



Name **Velvet**



Name **Hinata**

GUILD **Rapid Fire**



Name **Lily**



Name **Wilbert**

GUILD **Flame Empire**



Name **Mii**



Name **Marx**



## Prologue

The ninth stratum was split between two very different areas—one filled with water and natural splendor, the other with fire and arid wastelands.

When the tenth event began, players had to side with one of these two kingdoms and attempt to reach the opposition's throne room.

Maple Tree chose the fiery wasteland. This selection resulted in an alliance with the Order of the Holy Sword, and together they faced off against the combined might of Flame Empire, Thunder Storm, and Rapid Fire.

It had been a long time since the game offered real PvP action, and Maple was all fired up. Yet in small skirmishes, Wilbert and Lily's advanced enemy-detection skills gave them control of the battlefield, and Mii's ultimate skill, Daybreak, ignored damage-nullification skills, doing massive AOE damage in large-scale fights.

Not everything went as planned, but Maple Tree pulled off surprise attacks and backed up the other guilds.

Then the field monsters went berserk, charging at the enemy lines. Both sides had their hands full dealing with that and clashed hard at the center of the map.

Pain unleashed attacks with his holy sword. Velvet used Thor's Hammer, and Mii used Daybreak—but Maple and Sally escaped those threats, and Maple's new skill, Dark Rebirth, turned the tide of battle.

After transforming allies, both players and monsters alike, into hideous creatures, Maple forced the enemy back.

The battle that followed was fierce. Sally defeated Shin and Maple took out Misery, but Velvet and Hinata got payback, eliminating Dread and Drag. As losses mounted everywhere, Lily's snap decision bailed her side's leaders out of danger, and both camps were left licking their wounds.

The sheer scale of the conflict had forced both sides to use their biggest guns,



unable to hold anything in reserve. And yet it proved indecisive. With that battle's end, night fell—and the event's focus shifted to sneak attacks and underhanded schemes.



## Defense Build and the Rain of Poison

The war had taken its toll on both sides. Mentally and physically exhausted, the players didn't try to force their luck. For a while, both camps took it easy and simply watched the sun sink below the horizon.

"Maple, how you feeling?"

"Great! I got some rest."

She'd been in the castle, eating a dessert the chef made. That proved more than enough.

"Once night falls, we're back in action. I've touched base with The Order already."

"Sounds good! I hope this works."

"Hard to know until we do it, but at least nobody's figured out your trick just yet."

Night was a time for sneak attacks and small-scale skirmishes. But this time Maple would be leading the way—not Sally. Most players would assume Maple's flashy skills were ill-suited for ambushes, but they had a clever plan.

"The rest of us are on standby."

"Yes, just waiting to see what happens."

The longer the fight went on, the fewer players there were. And with the cover of darkness, it would be that much easier to move undetected—and harder for their foes to notice an enemy in their territory.

Going on the offensive would put them far from their defenses. If they failed to return before the throne was taken, it would all be over.

They had to balance a strong defense against their efforts to thin the enemy's numbers. This balance would be critical if they wanted to survive the night.

"If you do have to head outside, try your best to avoid moving around on your



own.”

“Yeah, that’s much more likely to get us killed.”

Mai and Yui were particularly ill-equipped to withstand ambushes. If they went to back someone else up, they’d need to be especially careful.

“Maple, Sally! Good luck out there!”

“And be careful...!”

“Don’t you worry! I’ve got Sally with me.”

“I’ll do my part. Especially until Indomitable Guardian comes off cooldown.”

They’d all been preparing for what lay ahead, but now the door swung slowly open and Frederica poked her head in.

“All rested up? Ready to go?”

“Yup! Just say the word!”

“Then it’s time. The sun’s going down!”

Maple and Sally said farewell to their guildmates and left the room, ready to attack in the darkness of night.

“Okay, let’s do this!”

“Mm-hmm. This is all you, Maple! Make it count.”

Outside the castle, Maple summoned Syrup, and together the girls covered its head and feet with black cloth before climbing aboard.

“Up, up, and away!” Maple cried, prompting Syrup to leave the ground and rise straight into the air.

“Whew! I was worried you’d ask Mai and Yui to send us flying.”

“No need for speed this time.”

Syrup was now higher than the clouds, at the upper limits of the nighttime sky.

“Wow, we’re so high up! Good thing I’m not afraid of heights.”

“Still, don’t fall off!”

Only Maple could survive a fall from this height. But despite the peril, they flew toward the enemy camp. Without any visible landmarks, the darkness seemed boundless. Fortunately, the game provided a map.

“We should be hard to spot.”

“That’s what the cloth is for!”

They’d wrapped Syrup in black fabric so it would blend into the night sky. From the ground below, it would just be a black dot against a sea of darkness.

Given how cloudy it was, the enemy likely wouldn’t have a clean line of sight to begin with, making the camouflage just an extra precaution.

If they wanted to catch their opponents by surprise, it was vital the enemy never saw them coming.

On they flew, reaching enemy territory without anyone the wiser.

“About time. Frederica?”

“Yup, yup! Notes, you’re up!”

Frederica called out her pet bird. Once it had perched on her head, she had it use a skill.

“Sonar!”

Light effects rippled out around them, detecting anything in range. Like Martyr’s Devotion, this skill was unaffected by height and easily captured anything on the ground below.

“We’ve got some.”

“That *is* handy. How many are there?”

“Like, ten? Seems like they’re all clumped together.”

“Maple, let’s do this. We can call it an experiment.”

“Okey-dokey!”

“Shall I join you? Notes, Pump That Volume!”

At Frederica’s command, her bird applied a buff that expanded the area covered by skills and spells. Once that was done, she watched closely, curious



about Maple's plan.

"Acid Rain!"

"Create Water!"

Purple magic circles extended outward, and drops of poison began to fall.

Meanwhile, Sally's spell generated blue circles that dropped perfectly ordinary water, which fell as rain. The idea was to make those on the ground assume that's all it was.

With the ground itself getting wet, it would take them longer to realize there was poison mixed in.

".....That's it?"

"Yup, that's it. Like I said, mostly an experiment. You know how powerful Maple's poisons are, right? Get hit with Hydra once, and it's obvious."

"Can't argue with that..."

Frederica shrugged. She'd expected something much crazier.

"We're still debating whether to try this over town. If they spot us, I doubt we'd get away."

"And Wilbert seems like he *would* spot you."

As they chatted happily, Frederica was blissfully unaware that the rain falling below could *instantly* kill anything it touched.

Bug Urn Curse was a skill that could turn any poison attack into a death sentence. Combined with the sheer range and number of hits applied by this rain of death, far more players would be eliminated.

The weather tonight was rainy with a chance of demise. Corpse warning in effect.

As the rain fell, the trio sailed on across the enemy territory.



There was plenty of water on the ground, some of which had reached toward the sky as pillars of ice. The players had gathered beneath the canopy of night and, with one eye always on their surroundings, were bound for the enemy

camp.

“No one nearby...”

“Don’t imagine they’d be this far in. Too risky.”

“That didn’t stop us, though...”

Their goal was to sneak into the enemy camp for a surprise attack. Thus, they were doing their best to be stealthy.

“Check again. We’ll have to back off before we get surrounded. And if we do fight, we go all out, and finish it quick.”

“You got it.”

“Glad to hear it.”

They stayed focused, their morale high. Raindrops were falling from above, making ripples on the water all around them.

“Rain, huh?”

“Didn’t know they had weather on this map.”

“I guess they do.”

Their kingdom’s environment was all about water and natural splendor. There were little creeks running everywhere and the scenic locations all featured water elements, so the rain didn’t seem out of place.

It was hardly fair to call this a careless assumption, but it did prevent them from realizing exactly what was falling on their heads.

The sound of something shattering echoed through the night.

“Hmm?”

Frowning, the player in the lead turned around.

They were down a person at the back of the group.

“Hey, where’d they go?”

“They’re dead?! But...”

Everyone had been on high alert. They’d have spotted an incoming projectile.



As they all blinked in surprise—another one shattered.

“.....!”

“R-retreat!”

Whatever was going on, its cause was a complete mystery. But they knew this must be an attack and that they had to get out of there as soon as humanly possible.

“Run! Run!”

“What’s going on?! Where are they?!”

Two more players shattered, vanishing even as they ran away.

Unable to tell if the source was players or monsters, and thus completely unable to fight back, all they could do was scatter.

They had been skilled players with countermeasures in place to defend against Maple—namely, poison and paralysis nullification. Even if she had skills to make them vulnerable, they had brought items to fix that.

But since all Acid Rain did was apply the poison status effect, negating that made it unclear that this was an attack at all.

And thus, a quiet rain of death had fallen upon the world, with no one the wiser. Everyone knew Maple used poison, but they were unaware that she’d added an instant-death effect to the mix.



Up above, the rainmakers were still perched in the sky. Once their toxic terror had finished coating the surrounding area, they moved on.

“That was so dull! This was a Maple plan, so I was expecting a lot more,” Frederica said.

“Uh, sorry?” Maple replied.

“Ah-ha-ha, don’t be. Nothing wrong with an easy win. But you’re sure you got them all?”

“Well...who knows.”

“Not like we’re seeing it up close.”

It would be a while before Notes could use Sonar again, so at this point they still didn't have an accurate measure of their success.

"It'd give Maple's presence away, but do we wanna hit them with something harder and then beat a hasty retreat?" Sally suggested.

"Sounds good. I wanna see what we're accomplishing!"

"In that case, where should we go?"

"While we were on the ground, I took notes on probable way stations. Let's swing by one and have Frederica scope it out."

Those locations were more likely to have lots of players, so their sneak attack would do some real damage.

They soon found themselves in an area where the ground was covered in a thin layer of ice.

This would crack if anyone approached, making it a good spot to take a rest.

"Notes, Sonar... Wow, you were right!"

"We got lucky. There are plenty of other spots they could have picked."

"Maple, you're up!"

"Okay! Let me get ready."

Maple equipped Helping Hands and had them hold her second shield so that it acted as a hovering platform.

"Full Deploy!"

"Frederica, can you buff the number and spread?"

"You betcha. Well, Notes will, anyway."

"Cool. Then hang on to Maple."

When she saw Sally using her webs to attach the two of them to Maple, Frederica worked out just how they'd be getting home.

"That is no way for a human to travel!" she wailed.

Maple put Syrup back in her ring and pointed her hand toward the ground.



“Here goes!”

“Hngg...fine! Fine! Notes!”

Frederica gathered her nerves, threw her arms around Maple, and got ready to bark orders at her bird.

“Hydra!”

“Notes, Pigeon Post! Pump That Volume! Round! Amplify!”

The buffs hit Maple, doubling the size of the hydra’s head and coating an even larger area in poison.

Too powerful to be called rain, the torrent was more like a sudden waterfall eager to swallow up every player around.

The poison swamp this created would let no one escape alive—especially with Maple’s special brew.

They’d prepped and attacked so fast that Sonar was still active, and Frederica could easily track the number of deaths they’d caused.

“Huh...did none of them have resistances?”

“Let’s go home!”

“Augh! I almost forgot!”

“Martyr’s Devotion!”

Protecting her passengers from the explosions, Maple rocketed them off toward their camp.

She had enough height. They’d cover the rest of the distance on the descent.

“How are we landing?”

“We aren’t! We’re just slamming into the ground!”

“Again, no one was meant to travel like this!”

Although Frederica’s shrieks echoed across the sky, from this high up no one could hear her.

But even in the enemy camp, they could see the light cast by the three-person comet. They streaked across the sky, flames billowing in their wake until their

momentum gave out and they fell toward the ground. The question remained, though: Would anyone realize that was Maple?

If they did, what could they do about it? The swamp she'd made would prove she'd been there, but by the time they realized that, she'd be back in town.

Leaving deep wounds in the opposition, the trio hurtled toward their own camp.



As Maple's group became a shooting star, their enemies were kicking back in camp, resting like Maple Tree had—still unaware of the poison downpours.

Among those relaxing were Thunder Storm and Rapid Fire, two guilds that had been discussing strategies long before the event began. Even now, they were discussing what lay ahead and when to make their next excursion.

".....You come across so different when you're keeping quiet," Lily said, glancing at the girl across from her.

Velvet seemed so refined it was hard to believe she'd been dropping lightning and punching players to death not long ago.

"That is the intent," Velvet smiled softly. "I aim to impress."

"Let me revise that statement. If you can talk like that, you don't even need to stay quiet!"

Even the girl's smallest gestures spoke to her good upbringing, so Lily had no clue what chain of accidents had led her to become a bare-fisted brawler.

"Velvet often adopts this act when she needs to keep calm," Hinata explained.

"So you start with appearances, then?"

"This certainly makes it seem like we don't have to worry about her charging in headlong."

If she was able to sit and rest, then Lily wasn't about to pry further into any baggage from outside the game.

Lily took a sip of the tea she'd prepared.



“The sun has set. Will and I should take to the field in due time.”

“What will you be doing, Velvet?”

“Our plan calls for you to...”

“Yes, I’ll be on standby. But a part of me—a small part—does wanna get the hell back out there!”

“Ah, she finally cracked.”

Lily started laughing—it was clearly more of a *large* part. Still, Lily and Wilbert were focused primarily on supporting from the back line, and Hinata used her Gravity Control skill to make Velvet tow her around. Velvet, meanwhile, had been running all over the map, getting in one pitched battle after another. She was far more worn out than the others.

No one wanted exhaustion catching up with her when it really mattered.

“Something going on outside?”

“There sure is a lot of noise.”

Wilbert and Hinata glared at the door. There were several raised voices outside.

“Will, check it out. Perhaps they launched a surprise attack...”

“Hinata! Hinata!”

“Fine...but don’t strain yourself.”

All four stepped outside and found a crowd of men in a tizzy and talking over each other as they tried to explain the situation to their guild master.

“We were outside! Attacks started coming from somewhere, no idea where!”

“Mind if we listen in?”

“Not at all.”

They approached the commotion, but the more they heard, the worse it sounded.

“I see. Thank you for sharing. We’ll have to be wary of that when we take the field.”

“Please do...augh, it was a nightmare.”

The players trailed off, looking drained, and the four leaders conferred amongst themselves.

“I’d imagine this was either an attack from underground or the sky above. Lily?”

“Agreed. That sudden rain seems suspicious, so I’m leaning toward the latter.”

The rain was the most obvious sign before the deaths began. Odds were high that rain hadn’t been *real*.

“Oh! One more thing, like, caught my attention...”

Signs of battle had clearly ended Velvet’s ability to remain genteel. She was back in combat mode, her perceptions sharpening.

“Why did nobody see any damage sparks?”

No matter what kind of attack hit you, sparks would fly.

If Wilbert sniped a player from outside their line of sight, they might die without even realizing why—but sparks would still spray from their body where the arrow hit.

Not many attacks legitimately killed in the blink of an eye.

“An instant-kill effect, perhaps? They’re rare, though. I’ve almost never seen a player with one,” Lily said.

And the skills she *had* seen balanced out their power with very limited ranges or areas of effect—neither of which applied in this instance.

But it was true that those skills didn’t produce damage sparks.

“They were attacked without their knowledge. We’ve gotta take steps to ensure that doesn’t happen to us. But we’re short on options...”

Will scowled. Lily knew why.

“Yes, go ahead. We need that range. Mind checking, just in case?”

“They were pretty close and might still be lurking around.”



“Fair enough. Go on, Will—Rest.”

Lily used a skill—and not long after, used the opposite skill, Awaken, returning things to their previous state.

“Well?” she asked.

“.....Nothing. They’re long gone.”

“Hngg...those are, like, tamed monster skills!”

“An ace up our sleeve. A secret weapon, as it were.”

“If you put it away, and took it back out, that means it’s with us now. But then...?”

A pet certainly wasn’t visible. And it was Wilbert, not Lily, who could determine the results of the search. Thunder Storm’s leaders could not even begin to imagine what kind of buff *that* was.

Still, given the circumstances, they knew Rapid Fire wouldn’t lie to them. They were certain the enemy was gone.

“Well, that’s that. Hmm...I’d love to see *your* partners in action someday...,” Lily murmured.

Velvet and Hinata’s pets were just as much a mystery as their own. No one had ever seen them.

“Just, like, waiting for the right moment!”

“Expect great things.”

The enemy had scored, and it was time to get payback. They began to scheme.

The number of casualties was becoming more and more dire, so they could not afford to stand idly by.

The night’s darkness grew deeper, awaiting the next round of battle.



## Defense Build and a Close Call

Something black hit the ground with a clang, scattering pieces of metal in all directions as it tumbled along. As the object slowed, its original shape no longer discernible, the fragments became shards of light and soon faded away. Finally, the object came to a rest in a cloud of dust.

“And we’re here!”

“That was more exhausting than the actual surprise attacks.”

“Well, we’re back home, safe and sound.”

This mystery black projectile was Maple. Propelled by the power of explosions, no players could pursue her—and she’d successfully landed near her own camp’s castle, just as planned.

“Shockingly, no one’s on our heels.”

“Absolutely shocked.”

“Should we go back inside?”

“Yeah, we probably should. We’ll want to get you back out there soon, though, Maple. Especially if we’re going to try that tactic again with Frederica in tow.”

“Okay, but next time, we better have a *normal* trip home.”

“You’re the one who insisted we do something flashy.”

“I’ve changed my mind! Boring is good!” Frederica nodded.

As long as their attacks went undetected, they could make a leisurely trip back aboard Syrup.

“Then let’s go in! Don’t want anyone targeting us.”

“Yeah, never let your guard down.”

They hustled through the town gates. Maple had gotten better at blowing



herself up and dropping in the right vicinity, so the gates hadn't been that far away.

"Whew, I'm beat! But there's some real advantages to that kind of height. Notes, tell me you're gonna learn how to get big enough to carry me."

".....Looks like that's a 'no.'"

"I can't even imagine that!"

"Fine, fine. Besides, Ray carries us around most of the time. At any rate, let me know when you're making a real run at it, and I'll dish out all the buffs you could want."

"Will do!"

"Can we coordinate that with full Order membership?"

"I imagine so. It'd certainly make it easier for me!"

They did a quick scan of the skies for anything suspicious, then headed for the castle. What they'd done, the enemy might do too.

The three guilds they had to be wariest of could all attack from above, with Velvet, Hinata, Lily, Wilbert, Mii, and Marx all possessing ways of taking to the air.

To make matters worse, those players could all do massive damage to a wide area, even when playing solo. Rather than hope they wouldn't attack, it was best to assume they would and prepare accordingly.

"I guess we'll spend the night making the odd attack run."

"If that's all that happens, great."

"Not likely, huh? Velvet in particular may charge in at any moment."

They'd spent the day fighting, and now more and more players were taking the chance to rest up. If neither side led the charge, the night would be spent bunkering down behind their defenses, with no major shifts in the standings. But if one guild decided the fatigue and darkness made for an opportunity to thin the enemy numbers, another huge battle would likely break out.

"And since it's harder to see what's happening, it's harder to back up

anyone.”

“True enough...”

“But if they’re gunning for us, we’ll just have to fight. Maple, be ready for it.”

“Okay! I will be!”

When attacked, one must defend. Lest they suffer the consequences.

“Rather than wait for them to come, I’d like to line our pieces up and be the aggressor. Our last run let us do some solid damage from an advantageous position, right?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But Wilbert is a thorn in our side.”

“Yeah, so at some point—”

“We’ve gotta take his ass down!”

He was out there somewhere, and that was a constant threat. Players like Frederica would be dead before they even saw him coming.

“Can we actually do it...?”

“He’s not particularly tanky, so if we just get close enough...”

“*That’s* the hard part!”

He clearly had a detection skill that was constantly active—one far more powerful than Notes’s Sonar, at that. With his sharp eyes, even if they got the drop on him, he’d be able to figure out a way to escape.

“I’ll think of something more practical than my current plan.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re our only hope, Sally!”

“I won’t let you down.”

It seemed like she already had at least one idea. Frederica was curious, but Sally made it sound too risky to propose just yet, so she decided not to pry.

“Well, lemme know when you figure it out. Shoot for, oh, eighty percent

odds?”

“Asking for a lot there.”

“Yeah?”

“But odds that high would be reassuring!”

This venture had been a success, so Maple wanted to make their next excursion even better. She had a fresh spring in her step.

“Hmm, a way to guarantee victory...,” Sally muttered.

She knew there was no such thing. Just as their foes didn’t know about her illusions, they had skills Sally could never predict.

And that removed certainty from every battle.

If they wanted to drive a foe to their death, they had to get them to stay in the fight without retreating.

Doing that meant leaving themselves exposed. After all, they had to dangle bait that was enticing enough to draw out their foes even if they suspected a trap.

Sally did have an idea on that front, but it was a gamble she didn’t want to take.

“I’ll keep thinking. Maple, you kick back a while.”

With that reassurance, Sally turned her gaze to the walls behind them.

Who did their enemy most want to eliminate? Who was their primary target? Maple—and specifically, Maple without Indomitable Guardian.

Waiting until tomorrow was safer. It was their best choice.

Even the best players could not get to her inside the castle.

If that proved a viable threat, then maybe it could work...but as things stood, Sally was not about to risk using Maple as bait for any plan.

“Okay, Maple, rest up.”

“Will do!”

Sally escorted Maple to a room deep inside the castle, then closed the doors,



breathing a sigh of relief.

No matter how powerful the enemy attacks were, they could not crack open the castle and defeat Maple inside.

“The war won’t hit the town for a while yet.”

The outer walls, the town itself, and then the castle. Each of those had a durability stat.

In the final battle, they’d have to break down the gates or the walls so their forces could pour into the town itself. Ideally, Sally’s side would be the one doing that.

“It went well?”

“Oh, Pain.” Frederica had already reported back to him with the results of their surprise attack. “I don’t think anyone spotted us. Though I imagine they can guess who it was.”

“Yeah, I heard you employed Hydra. Only one player can create that much poison.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“It’s a tough call. A lot of players are taking a break right now, so it’s unlikely we’ll see many large-scale battles. At the same time, smaller excursions probably won’t achieve anything tangible.”

And unsuccessful attempts would only result in wearing everyone out. If the enemy did nothing, there was no real need for their side to act.

But if they *did* act, they’d better have a clear goal in mind.

“I’ve got no enemy-detection skills, so if I want to be efficient, I’ll need Frederica,” Pain admitted.

Frederica was busy flitting about from one battle to the next. While her demeanor never seemed to change, she could only hide her fatigue for so long. At some point, she would need to make time for rest.

“If we still had Dread, I’d have him leading our night operations, but that option’s lost. There really is no substitute for Umbra’s skills. What about Maple

Tree?”

“Honestly, I think we’re better off intercepting. Maple’s not back in full form.”

“And we certainly don’t want her taken out. Fair enough—we’ll try not to press our luck, and instead focus on discouraging enemy actions.”

“That’ll help.”

Ordinarily, Maple could use Machine God to rocket herself to any battlefield, but with Indomitable Guardian used up, that carried a tangible risk.

Just as they reached an agreement, a powerful light shone through the corridor windows.

Lightning flashed in the distance. The fiery wasteland had plenty of monsters with fire or electric elements, and no shortage of terrain with lava plumes or arcing lightning.

But this?

“Pain.”

“.....Yeah, let’s go take a look.”

This was different. It didn’t feel like a terrain effect, but it was hard to be sure. They didn’t exactly have a list of every terrain, pattern, and direction—but if it wasn’t natural, then it could only be one thing.

Just as only Maple could create poison lakes, only one player could produce this kind of voltage.

“Ray, please.”

To get out of town fast, Sally and Pain hopped onto his pet dragon.

“Even if it’s Thunder Storm, why draw attention to themselves?”

“Yeah, and that far out? Why...?”

“Could be a trap. Might have to make Ray take the fall for us. Safety first.”

“Got it.”

Hinata’s Isolation Domain had trapped Dread and Drag within, but the exact conditions were still unknown. As long as they weren’t sure who she could trap

and how, the only way to minimize risk was to send top-class players whose strengths weren't dependent on teamwork.

To that end, Pain and Sally both had skills that would negate a single blow.

They could afford *one* mistake.

This needed checking out, and with as few risks as possible.

After all, there might be a massive army incoming.

Ready to retreat at the first sign of danger, they flew out across the town walls.



Not far past the walls, Ray began to descend.

"Hinata can force flying foes to the ground, so...better safe than sorry."

"Yeah, that would let her limit our options."

Once on the ground, they looked around, but saw only empty wasteland. A few large rocks here and there did provide cover, but there at least weren't any hostiles in sight.

"So, not lying in wait at our landing spot."

"Right. Was expecting an arrow or two..."

Bracing for Rapid Fire's presence, Pain and Sally began scoping things out.

Velvet and Hinata's skills could blanket an area, so they were impossible to miss. If those girls came in for a kill, Pain and Sally would see them coming.

That meant it was Wilbert they had to keep an eye out for. With his detection skills, he was built for unleashing surprise attacks, and it made sense he'd tag along.

Sally threw out the occasional Ice Pillar, trying to block line of sight as they investigated. Despite that earlier bolt of lightning, however, the area remained relatively calm.

".....Nobody here?"

"At the very least, they didn't bring an army."



“They could still be hiding somewhere...but I doubt we’ll find them.”

“Yeah, let’s go back to checking critical points around town. Still...I really don’t like this.”

While it was true that enemies *could* be out there, the pair was in no position to plunge blindly into enemy territory searching for opponents. Best to simply make sure there wasn’t an army waiting just outside their base and head back.

“Thoughts?”

“I think they *are* here, but not to launch a major offensive.”

Perhaps they were simply planning on a small victory followed by a swift retreat—like Sally, Maple, and Frederica had scored with their poison tactics. Perhaps they’d just come to lay down traps, like the bombs Iz had set earlier in the day.

But without clear signs of their presence, it was hard to even speculate.

“Even that bolt was something we only noticed by accident. It drew the eye but might merely have been a precursor to their actual attack.”

“Yeah...I can see that.”

On this side of the map, thunder and flashing lights were not really something to get all that alarmed about. After a while, most players probably started tuning out the distant rumbling.

“Still, it’s worth keeping our guards up for a while, just in case. We should let our guilds know to take turns on lookout.”

Even if someone was out there, it was too risky for them to linger in hostile territory for long. More than that, it was exhausting—if this enemy made no major moves in the near future, their side could probably afford to relax again.

And since this was close to town, they held the advantage of being able to easily place troops here.

“I’ll send word, too. Numbers never hurt; the more the merrier.”

“Appreciated. I can’t get a read on this.”

Each sent instructions to their respective guild as they retreated, careful to

watch their backs the whole time.



Meanwhile, in the castle, the others were reading these messages.

“Oh, dear...”

“Already looking ominous.”

Maple Tree’s members had gathered round a large table and were dining on a meal Iz had crafted for them. They’d been relaxing after their meal when Sally’s message arrived.

“Can’t believe Sally spotted that. I might have missed it.”

“Kanade, I feel like you’re the first to spot anything out of place.”

“Am I?”

“But what do we do?”

“If they’re really here...”

“I don’t want to dump this all on Pain. C’mon, let’s head out!”

“All right. If you wanna go, Maple, I’m not about to argue. But we should consider who to send.”

It wasn’t often Chrome served as the voice of caution, so Maple gave him her full attention.

“I’d say this is my job. I don’t want to risk Maple just yet. With my build, I can make quite a few blunders as long as I’ve got luck on my side.”

Unlike her, he couldn’t rocket himself to the front lines.

If a fight was coming, who should be waiting out there already? The answer was clear.

“Then I’ll come with. Against crowds, you’re less likely to keep the twins safe—and that doubles in darkness. Also...”

Kasumi glanced around, chuckling.

“Most of the others are irreplaceable.”

Iz’s items and Kanade’s grimoires were both inimitable. That was true for any

members with extreme builds.

“Our goal is victory for our camp. In which case, I’m the right choice for a dangerous role like this. *Not* that I plan to go down easily, of course.”

“If it gets dangerous, we’ll help, but for now, let’s wait and see.”

“.....All right, let’s do it that way! Be careful out there!”

Maple trusted Chrome and Kasumi. They could sense that behind her words, and left the castle well aware of the risks involved.

As they neared the town walls, they found Pain and Sally waiting.

“That was quick.”

“We made haste. Anything new?”

“No signs of activity yet. But that’s unsettling in its own right...”

“On the walls...would be risky if Wilbert’s here. If we have Haku protect us, do you think we could venture out...?”

“No need to risk that. If they do attack, the walls are sure to be important.”

Chrome tapped the wall with his knuckles. Their durability was quite high—the enemy could even hit them with powerful skills and get absolutely nowhere.

If anyone actually tried to bring the walls down, it would be hard to miss. If they were waiting for the enemy to act first, this location would serve them well.

“What’s your side doing?”

“I’ve called for backup, too. Less focused on combat than locating enemies.”

As if they’d been waiting for their cue, four players riding monsters came into view.

“Oh, nice! That’ll really speed things up. And they can help find enemies?”

Necro was a wearable monster but did not yet have a mode that increased Chrome’s speed.

“That sounds useful. Our spotting abilities are never exactly guaranteed.”



Sally's were astonishing, but they were based solely on experience. There was simply no competing with the accuracy of a dedicated skill. If they wanted to be absolutely sure, they'd have to rely on skills like Notes's Sonar.

"A variety of builds is certainly the Order's greatest asset."

It was a strength befitting the game's largest guild. Leaving detection to the new arrivals, Kasumi made ready to summon Haku at any time.

"Pain, should I run detection once here? They might be just outside, and we've got uses to spare even if I use mine up here."

Multiple players had similar skills, so they could take turns without worrying about cooldowns, covering a broader area.

And if they didn't find them, great. That clearly meant they weren't around!

"Yes, go for it."

"Range Expansion. Area Locate."

After buffing the skills effect, there was a burst of light as information flooded back to the skill's user. He gasped and looked up.

"Huh? Above us?!"

Even as he spoke, a powerful flash lit up the heavens. A column of lightning scorched the ground, connecting the heavens to the earth.

"Guardian! Spirit Light!"

The sound was deafening, and the light was so bright they couldn't see. In a mere instant, the buildings in the vicinity were reduced to rubble.

Chrome acted quickly to protect them all, nullifying the damage this should have done by weathering the single strike himself.

As the light faded, Velvet landed nearby, wreathed in lightning and with Hinata in tow.

"Hot damn! It ain't just Maple, huh?"

"You almost got me! You're just gonna come right at us?"

"You believe you can win this here?"

The surprise attack from above wasn't all they had up their sleeves—as shown by their readiness to drop right down into the middle of a group of enemies. Although they had been taken by surprise, Chrome and Kasumi had their weapons ready nonetheless.

“We’re not letting you escape,” Pain said, readying his sword as well.

“Escape? We’re here to finish this!”

“Yes. We’re not letting *you* get away.”

Everyone here wanted to make this battle decisive.

It was a far more aggressive assault than Sally had anticipated, with the start of the battle marked by an inescapable chill and a furious deluge of lightning.

“Pain,” Sally said.

That was all he needed.

“Indeed, if they’re not running, we merely need to take them down.”

If they could pull it off, it would give them a huge advantage. But the risk involved was far too great. These two stood at the pinnacle of their enemy—they *had* to win.

“Show me what you got!” Velvet roared.

The lightning above grew stronger, and Pain’s side closed in.

Pain, Sally, and Kasumi charged down the street toward Velvet.

As the storm above intensified, lightning rained down, demolishing the buildings around them—yet the three plunged right into the midst of it.

They knew the dangers. But this was the only way to take out Velvet.

“Purple Bolt!”

She swung a fist forward and lightning shot from it, striking the Order members behind the charging trio.

“Not happening! Necro, Polterguard!”

Fearless, Chrome stepped before the bolt, his great shield held firmly in his grasp, and soaked the hit.

“You three focus on support! I’ll handle any bolts that slip through!”

“Thanks!”

Their nerves calmed, they started casting and scanning for enemies.

“.....No other hostiles in range!”

“Cool. Then focus on the ones we’ve got!”

Chrome adjusted his shield, eyes on Velvet and Hinata. If they hung in there, more players would come running. Thunder Storm specialized in fighting crowds, but that wouldn’t make victory easy—they lacked the home field advantage.

“I ain’t hitting those three!”

Each of the front-runners was racing right through Velvet’s lightning.

“Eighth Blade: Gale!”

“Holy Guardian!”

Kasumi’s move lowered STR and INT to speed her up, while Pain’s reduced incoming damage and improved his shield guard—and he had a ton of passives boosting his stats to begin with. Sally, meanwhile, was slipping through the storm on pure dodging talent.

“Damn, they’re good! Hinata!”

“Celestial Chain!”

“Holy Banishment!”

Since he was barely dodging, Pain made it in range first—only for chains to shoot out of the ground and bind him. In response, his holy sword swung down, shattering them instantly.

But that moment bought Velvet time to put distance between them.

“Not something you can easily ignore, is it?”

“No...it’s certainly not.”

Binding a specific target was a powerful counter to Sally’s play style. Hinata was well aware of that.



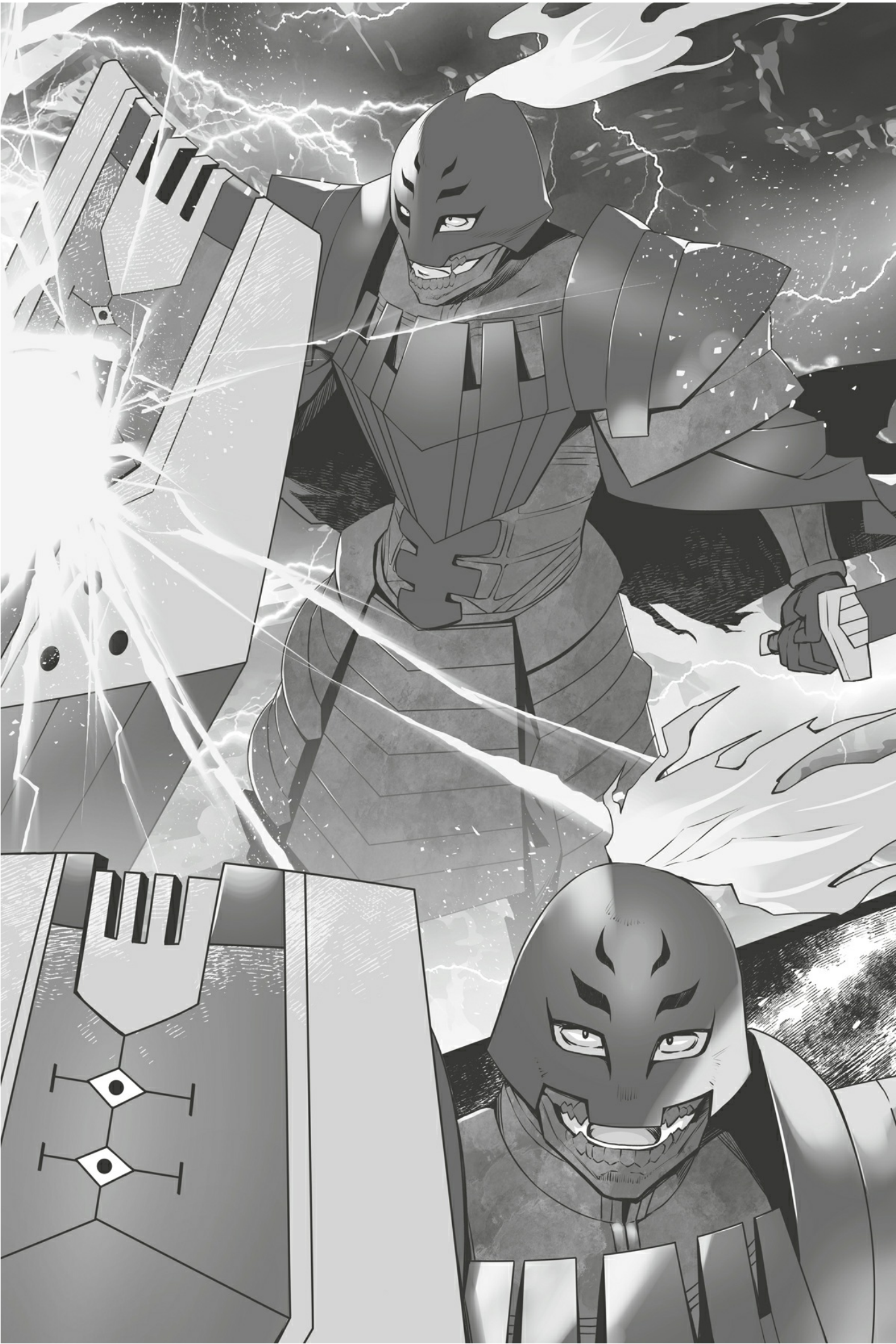
However, Sally was always placing herself just outside the skill's range, almost as if she knew exactly how far it reached. Meanwhile, the other two were applying too much pressure for them to save these skills for Sally alone.

"Pain!" Kasumi called.

"On it!"

They closed in, drawing out one after another of Hinata's skills so that Sally could join the fray in earnest.

"Time for us to clap back! Spark Impetus! Dart!"



Velvet used a skill to shoot toward Kasumi, leaving Hinata on standby in the back.

“Mind’s Eye!”

With this, Kasumi knew exactly where the lightning would fall next, allowing her to streamline her steps.

“Brittle Ice Sculpture! Gravity’s Groan!”

Hinata was lowering her defenses, but Kasumi took a swing at Velvet anyway.

“Sixth Blade: Inferno!”

“Parry! Mighty Blow!”

“That’s not a problem!”

Velvet’s right fist swung in, but Mind’s Eye caught it, giving Kasumi the chance to lean out of reach. Her swing complete, the tip of her katana leapt up, slashing at Velvet.

“—! Whoa!”

Damage sparks were still flying when Pain got to her. She righted herself and faced him.

“Now!” Chrome yelled.

A barrage of spells was released.

“Ice Wall! Ice Pillar!”

Hinata’s last-second defenses stopped the spells—but not Pain.

“Ray, Light Flux!”

“Polar Flash!”

Seeing the glow on Pain’s sword, Velvet summoned an incredible volume of electricity all around her. The ground lit up, and a column stretched up to the sky above, attempting to ward off Pain’s approach.

“Doesn’t matter!”

“—?!”



“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

Even as the lightning scorched him, even as he took damage, Pain swung his blade. A torrent of light every bit as bright cut through the column, bearing down on Velvet.

“Superspeed! Electromagnetic Leap!”

And yet—Velvet was *still* on the offensive. Accelerating, she lunged forward, slipping past Pain’s attack and closing in.

“Flash Spout!”

“—! Sally!”

The moment Velvet forgot about her—Sally pounced.

A gush of water interrupted her charge, knocking her off balance. The lightning continued to rain down, but that didn’t bother Pain or Sally.

““Superspeed!””

Accelerating, they shot toward Velvet together.

Dead even. They wouldn’t give Velvet even a moment to back off and recover.

Sally and Pain’s intentions were clear.

Prompting Hinata to act.

“Cocytus!”

White mist spread across the area, bringing with it a powerful chill that froze everything in its path. Pain and Sally backed off fast, and Velvet righted herself, sighing.

She had the distance she needed, but Hinata made a face—it was clear they’d *forced* her to use that skill.

“No biggie, Hinata. You saved my ass!”

Velvet’s smile still looked confident.

But the din was rising, and footsteps were closing in. The situation was escalating.

Their battle had been a spectacular one, and players in range were rushing to

the fray.

“Pile on!”

“Yeah!”

“Go!”

Now that the front-runners were aided by the new arrivals, Chrome changed positions and began moving forward.

The crowd was now large enough that Thunder Storm couldn't afford to ignore the front line to aim for the back.

“I'll guard, you keep swinging!”

Little by little, they were wearing the two girls down. Even if they lost a few allies, it was worth it to take this duo out. Everyone knew that.

“We're surrounded...”

“Ah-ha-ha, so we are! But that's what we were waiting for!” Velvet cried. She flashed a grin. “Overcharge!”

The sound of thunder rumbled through the air. Sparks raced across the ground, pushing back the approaching crowd.

Velvet called over her shoulder to where Hinata floated, controlling gravity.

“Watch my back!”

“I will.”

“Thunderclap!”

At her cry, boosted lightning columns extended outward, scorching players and buildings alike.

The front-runners dodged, but the lightning was striking so fiercely, it prevented any players from approaching.

“Gravity Boost! Gravity Cage!”

Hinata used AOE movement debuffs, and as they kicked in, Velvet charged at Pain.

“Stimulation! Guard Aura! Necro, Dead Weight!”

“Chained Strike!”

Chrome jumped in front, reducing Velvet’s speed and raising his shield.

He could *not* let her get near Sally in this state.

Velvet punched his shield head-on, sparks showering everywhere as her bolts crashed mercilessly upon his head.

“Gah...is this Hinata’s fault?”

It was more damage than he’d expected. The chill around them was debuffing him enough that even his defenses could not handle it.

“Chrome!”

Sally’s webs yanked him back, and she put a pillar of ice in Velvet’s path.

“Thanks, Sally.”

“Indomitable Guardian?”

“She took a lot of health, but not that much!”

“Let’s forget the buildings. This skill must have a time limit.”

“Yeah, if she could keep it going, she’d have started with it. I bet it’s like Frederica’s Mana Ocean.”

Once Overcharge ran out, they could attack again.

“You ain’t getting away!”

As if defying gravity, Velvet leapt over the ice column. She was still trying to take them down. The moment her eyes lit upon them— “Now!”

““Flame Cannon!””

““Mighty Shot!””

“Gah!”

“Velvet, fall back...!”

All these ranged attacks were gunning for her. Velvet wanted to go after Pain and Sally, but couldn’t. The crowd around her was a powerful reminder of just *where* she was fighting.

“Yeah...it’s getting kinda hairy!”

Velvet was still spraying lightning everywhere and claiming a lot of victims.

But that wasn’t enough to overturn the numbers advantage. Players backed off as their invulnerability skills were used up, only for others to take their place—resulting in far fewer casualties than expected. Realizing that, Velvet called over her shoulder.

“Hinata, do you mind?”

“.....As you wish.”

Velvet stopped fighting and ran toward the outside walls, clearly trying to escape. All who realized that gave chase, trying to keep her surrounded.

“You’re not going anywhere!”

“Nope!”

“We’ve got men on the walls!”

“Yeah, no one’s getting through us to the throne!”

Velvet was hard to miss—no way were they about to lose track of her. If anything, she was easy to intercept.

“Ice Palace!”

Frozen walls rose to block their pursuit.

A flurry of attacks quickly brought the walls down, but that was just what Velvet wanted.

“Get ’em!”

She’d bought herself a moment’s respite.

Velvet raised her hand high and the skies lit up, brighter than ever before. A crack of thunder followed—Thor’s Hammer was poised to burn all players on her heels.

“Down her before it lands!”

“Not on my watch...! Melting Wings! Zone Freeze!”

As they closed in, Hinata forced them to the ground and then pinned their



feet to it, buying precious seconds. Ice Palace had opened a gap between them and their prey, and they had needed that time to close it.

But before that lightning could connect sky to ground, a boom burst out from the town castle.

Everyone recognized that noise...as well as the angel wings extending from the explosion.

Maple had come to the rescue.

This was not lost on Velvet.

“Maple...”

“About damn time!”

She’d finally shown herself.

Tired as she was, Velvet smiled.

Up above...

Wilbert and Lily were on a flying machine, clad in black robes designed to block detection skills.

“Will, don’t miss.”

“Not on my life.”

Wilbert’s bowstring was drawn taut. Thor’s Hammer was *not* the main attack here—that was merely a distraction.

“She’s coming. We knew she would. That’s how she plays.”

If her allies were in trouble, she’d come. Maple would never choose to abandon the players on her side. Lily had not known her long, but she knew that much to be true.

She would come flying, and they would shoot her down.

This entire operation had been designed to lure Maple out of the castle.

“You can’t use a shield with those weaponized arms.”

Explosions framed Maple against the night sky. Wilbert let his arrow fly the moment she was in range.

“Long Range. Annihilation Arrow.”

It was the fastest arrow speed possible, and she didn't have Indomitable Guardian to save her. Maple had no way of seeing it coming.

And at the moment, she didn't even have a shield to block it.

A red streak ripped through the sky, but by the time Maple spotted it, it was too late to react.

“Augh.....!”

Certain there was nothing she could do, Maple squeezed her eyes shut.

A metallic clang resounded through the air.

“Not happening.”

“.....Sally!”

There was no mistaking the blue scarf fluttering in front of her. With one arm around Maple, Sally dragged her behind cover so they couldn't try to snipe her again.

“Lily!”

“Yeah, grab 'em and go!”

“Of all the...”



Wilbert had seen everything.

Even as Maple took to the skies, Sally alone had turned and dashed straight for her.

Not responding to the arrow—not even predicting the attack to come. The way she moved felt different, like a promise. Like a vow.

In that moment, she *was* Maple's shield.

"How...?!"

Like Wilbert, Hinata knew their plan had failed. She'd drawn Sally to a location where she could pin her down, all to stop her movement right at the most critical juncture.

It should have worked.

But in the moment before the skill name left Hinata's lips, Sally had used Spirited Away to escape its effects and flee out of range.

Burning a precious defensive resource without any hesitation, coupled with her downright unnatural level of snap decision-making—that had completely turned the tables.

"Emergency Charge!"

Velvet's cry pulled Hinata from her stunned stupor.

Lightning from the sky wreathed Velvet once more, but the "emergency" part was in no way an exaggeration. This was a last resort, one that briefly allowed her to maintain her electrified state before Overcharge's penalty kicked in.

"Electromagnetic Leap!"

Leaving lightning in her wake, Velvet bounded away. Hinata's gravity control turned that into a vertical ascent.

Trailing blue across the night sky, Lily's platform swooped toward them.

"Ray, Shooting Star!"

Pain leapt on his dragon, taking off.

"Bring them down! Ray, Palidragon's Breath!"



“Reproduction! Retainer Rampart!”

Lily switched to defensive mode, warding off Ray’s gleaming breath. Her walls were soon shattered, and the platform crumbled beneath their feet.

“Ack...!”

“Range Expansion! Holy Splendor!”

As Lily and Wilbert fell, a torrent of light shot toward them.

Just as it was about to strike home, a powerful force yanked them both down, out of the attack’s path.

“I got you!”

Hinata’s gravity control had dragged them out of harm’s way, leaving the two duos almost on top of each other.

Spells were flying at them from every direction, but Lily waved her flag.

“Formation Change!”

And just like that, all four of them were gone.

This skill was basically a teleport—no towering walls or army of players could stop it.

Kasumi and Chrome exchanged glances, then turned on their heels and ran toward the outer walls.

Pain did the same up above. And seeing that, the crowd below began to follow.

That skill let them move instantly, but only a certain distance away. Those who knew how Maple’s Ark skill worked were pretty sure Formation Change couldn’t teleport them all that far.

Through the gates, with a view of the field—Kasumi spotted the blue fires of Lily’s flying platform.

“Haku! Supergiant!”

“Joining you!”

The Maple Tree duo reacted first, but Ray was faster and pushed on ahead.

“Okay, we’re catching up!”

“Yeah, that machine ain’t nearly as fast as Maple’s!”

As they closed in, the angle of the flames changed, lowering the fleeing four toward the ground.

Ray swooped down as well, close enough for Pain to make out his targets.

“Damn, that was quick!”

And with that, the fight was back on. The air all but crackled with tension—and also literally crackled, thanks to Velvet’s electric discharge.

“Jacked Current! Polar Flash!”

Light spread out around Velvet, covering a vast area.

Every bolt in that radius was buffed. Thunder boomed, and white light connected sky to ground, forcing the pursuers back.

This lasted only seconds—but when the sound and light died down, there was no sign of their foes.

“She blinded us...?”

“Search for ‘em! I dunno how, but they’re blocking our detection skills. Kasumi, try to cut off their escape route!”

On their own, Velvet and Hinata might have been long gone, but with Lily and Wilbert with them, they couldn’t get far.

If they’d vanished in that brief a window, they must be nearby.

Pain canvassed from the sky while Kasumi and Chrome scoured the ground, swinging at shadows.

The other players soon caught up and joined the hunt, searching every last nook and cranny they could think of.

But in the end, nobody else was around.

Only Pain, Chrome, and Kasumi had managed to get a good look at them right before their disappearing act.

“What do we make of it? Is this for real?”

“We would not have missed them easily. Safe to assume they were gone before we started looking.”

“I had a good view up above. I’m sure nothing flew away. And I saw no unusual skill effects, either.”

That left Polar Flash. A column of lightning that briefly hid them from view—and took them with it. That was the only explanation.

“.....We’ve gotta assume they have a powerful retreat skill. It explains why Velvet and Hinata were on board with such a risky assault.”

“That does make sense.”

“And with Formation Change in the mix, they knew they could get home even from within our walls.”

“Right, but they didn’t bust that out the second their plan failed. Which suggests the skill has conditions.”

All three of them believed the escape *must* be skill-based.

Given the flow of this clash, it made sense that they’d never planned to leave on foot—they’d always meant to use that skill.

“They got us there.”

“Yeah. Oh well. Thank god for Sally.”

“Her reflexes really are incredible. Did she even see that arrow coming?”

“Come on, we need to focus on our next steps. We’re not taking these guild leaders down without considerable risk.”

Maple Tree’s offensive was built around the game’s best defense. The Order’s was based around numbers and buffs. Both often found themselves soaking the enemy’s attacks, and then striking back with counter-like moves—but that meant letting the enemy go first.

They needed to take the lead. Without Dread, that was hard for The Order—but with Maple Tree involved in the plan, the wheels in Pain’s brain were already spinning.



Abandoning the search, they went back into town, where they found Maple and Sally waiting.

“Any luck?”

“Afraid not. No sign of them.”

“We believe they used an escape skill. And planned to all along.”

“I doubt they’ll try that again. Without Formation Change, the escape won’t go as smoothly.”

Pain told Sally he was working on a plan—and if they wanted it to succeed, his guild and Maple Tree would need to work together.

“Makes sense. Chrome, can you escort Maple back inside?”

“Sure thing. Safety first!”

Sally had done her part, and Chrome wasn’t about to blow his. He hefted his shield to emphasize that. Meanwhile, Maple looked dejected—her choice had come back to haunt her.

“I’m so sorry, Sally!”

“Ah-ha-ha, don’t worry about it. I mean, it’s nice to protect *you* for a change.”

That helped mollify Maple somewhat.

“.....Sure! Next time I’ll do better!”

“Yup, that’s the spirit!”

“I’ll head back in myself. Call me if you need anything,” Kasumi said.

Flanking Maple, they left Pain and Sally behind and headed back to the castle, keeping an eye on the outside walls all the while.

“Can I get a rundown on what happened after?”

“Yeah, I meant to start there.”

Pain brought Sally up to speed, and she nodded, considering the facts.

“I’m on board with the skill theory. It’s unsettling that we can’t even be sure of that, but a teleport sounds far more likely than a speed boost.”



“Agreed. Ultimately, they pulled it off—and only our side incurred any losses.”

“So we’ve gotta make a move ourselves.”

“Exactly. If they make a run like that every time this escape skill comes off cooldown, we’re gonna take a beating.”

“.....So you want to take those four down?”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. If Maple Tree has any schemes in mind, I’m all ears.”

“.....”

Sally had a long think about that one.

“I take it you do, but it’s risky?” Pain asked.

“Well...yeah.”

“Then we’re likely thinking along similar lines. How about I go first? I want to put Maple in the fray.”

“We kinda have to, huh?”

In that last fight, Wilbert could have easily sniped Chrome, Kasumi, or Pain without them ever realizing it.

They’d discarded that opportunity and forced Velvet and Hinata into a long, risky battle just so they could take down Maple.

It was hard to target a specific player without doing what they’d done and forcing opponents to act. They could aim for those four, but there was always a chance the bait might be ignored.

They had to give their foes a reason to join the fray—load that trap with cheese.

“I can’t force you. I’m sure you know the risks. I’m aware it’s the last thing Maple Tree wants to do.”

“Yeah, I’d happily avoid it if we could. But...”

Personal feelings aside, Sally was very aware that they needed a plan like this.

“I also don’t have any better ideas. Me going out there alone wouldn’t be

enough to draw out all four of them.”

“No other player carries the sheer value Maple does.”

Her involvement was critical to the plan’s success, and it had to be done while she still lacked Indomitable Guardian. Once the date changed, this scheme’s effectiveness would crater.

“You’ll have to ask Maple yourself. I can’t make this choice.”

“And if she agrees?”

“I’ll get ready. Gotta warm up first.”

“Very well. I’d be happy to join you there.”

“Please.”

She needed her performance at its peak. She could not afford a single mistake.

“It’s Maple’s call, but if she’s in, we’ll sort out the details, then move out.”

“Okay.”

With that, Pain turned, and headed off to the castle after Maple.

“.....I know she’ll agree. That’s who Maple is.”

Sally knew her friend well enough.

That’s why she hadn’t suggested the idea herself.

It wasn’t that Maple couldn’t tell if a plan was good or bad—she’d know just how vital taking out those four was.

And if the cost of that was Maple herself, then Sally knew she wouldn’t mind.

“Whew...gotta focus.”

It was on her to knock away all attacks. If she couldn’t, this would never work.

Muttering to herself, Sally headed to the training area to start her warmups.



“I see...”

“What do you say? Sally wanted this to be your decision, Maple.”

Inside the castle, Pain had caught up with Maple and explained the vital role she'd play in this plan. He'd been very clear about the risks involved, and Maple nodded along as she let it all digest.

".....I can do that!"

She looked a little nervous, but spoke emphatically.

"Excellent. Then we'll have to hammer out the details. Naturally, I have no intention of exposing you more than absolutely necessary."

"Good!"

"Gather Maple Tree and join us in the castle training grounds. Sally's there already, and I intend to join her soon."

"Gotcha!"

Maple headed off to where her guild was resting.

"Hey, everyone!"

"Oh, what's up?"

"You've perked up. Or rather...you seem motivated again."

"Pain's putting a plan together and we're all in it!"

A ripple went through the guild. Instinctively, everyone knew this would not be just another surprise attack, nor merely an attempt to thin the enemy numbers.

"Are the details settled?"

"Not quite yet...but we're after Thunder Storm and Rapid Fire."

"All four of them?"

"Ugh, we..."

"...may not be much help."

All four of those players were a major threat to Mai and Yui, and their concerns were reasonable. But if Maple was with them, it was a very different story. It all came down to the specifics of this plan.

"Then it's time for a planning session. Where's Pain run off to?"

“He’s with Sally in the training area!”

“Cool, let’s join them. I ain’t about to keep losing!”

Maple Tree headed to the training ground, where they found Pain and Sally exchanging furious blows.

The sheer speed and ferocity of it did not seem at all like a warm-up, and Maple gaped at them.

“Oh, Maple’s here! Hey! Break time!” Frederica called.

Weapons were sheathed.

“Thanks.”

“Sure, but...consider me astonished. You’re aiming for even better performance?”

“I am.”

“Impressive.”

“Just don’t gun it so hard that you run outta gas!” Frederica chimed in.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Everyone’s here, right? Let’s get down to brass tacks,” Pain said, and began to explain the plan. “Our enemies want to eliminate Maple. We’ll use that against them. In other words, she’ll be bait to lure them out.”

“Maple, you okay with that?” Sally asked, double-checking.

“Yep! It’s fine!” Maple said, nodding.

“But if we bring in the entire Order, they’ll think twice.”

“So that’s where we come in?”

“Exactly. There aren’t many of you, but each one of you is powerful enough to be a potential threat. Perfect for this plan.”

Pain focused on Wilbert first.

“Maple, if Wilbert’s detection skills locate you, you’ll definitely draw the enemy out. It won’t really change things if they know you’re baiting them—which is why I want to keep our forces at a level that won’t discourage them



from taking action.”

“We want them seeing it as a risk, but one worth taking. That’s a fine line to walk.”

Aside from Maple, only a few players would be on the front lines. The rest would be backup if things went wrong.

“Assuming we snare all four—the most obvious formation is Velvet and Hinata in the lead, with Lily and Wilbert providing cover fire from the rear.”

“Agreed. Their abilities and personalities both lean that way.”

“Once the fight starts, we’ll hit them hard and split them up. I and a few others will fly at Rapid Fire on Ray, isolating Thunder Storm.”

“And where will that leave them?”

“See, those two are a problem,” Frederica said. Referring to Hinata’s Isolation Domain.

If she was capable of using that again, she could drag two players into a fight they’d surely lose. Mai and Yui? Iz and Frederica? Their deaths would be inevitable.

“So we can only send in two players—two who can match them.”

“And one’s gotta be Maple, since she’s our bait. So the other choice is clear.”

“Me,” Sally said. She was strongest when at Maple’s side.

Partly down to compatibility between stats and skills—but also because they each knew how the other fought.

No one argued with this decision.

“That’s the gist of it. Now for the fine print...”

“The longer this goes, the more the other guilds will get involved. And we have to split their forces so Sally and Maple can focus on their fight.”

“Let’s do our part, Yui!”

“Mm-hmm. If anyone gets close, we do *this*!”

Yui mimed swinging a hammer. The best way to split forces was to eliminate

them entirely.

Much of this plan would depend on the enemy's response. It was clearly risky, but given the odds of the enemy coming after the castle again, they had to act now.

Time was running out. Everyone focused on the discussion as they tried to eliminate obvious strategic flaws ahead of time.

Once the plans were set in stone, Pain got ready to leave.

"Frederica, we'll relay this to the relevant parties. Help me out."

"Will do! Bye, Maple, Sally! Break a leg!"

To avoid Wilbert spotting them, The Order was prepping highly mobile teams and stationing them at the rear to help in case of a retreat—or worse.

With his movement skills, this should have been Dread's job, but Plan B involved a lot of Frederica's buffs.

"Begin as per the schedule."

"Yup! We'll be good to go!"

With that, Pain and Frederica left.

The remaining Maple Tree members did what prep they could, reviewing their item stock, *etc.*

"Kanade, mind making sure?"

"Sure thing, Sally. I'll double-check."

"Kasumi, can you help with my warmups?"

"Absolutely. Those are the backbone of this plan."

Once they were in the field, there'd be no time for inventory checks. Best to handle that sort of thing now, and rest assured later.

"Whew, now it all hangs on their response."

"Yeah, but we know their goals and have just the thing to lure them in."

All things considered, they'd set Operation: Maple Bait for a time not far from the date change, believing that would force their foes to a snap decision. If they

missed this opportunity, she'd have Indomitable Guardian back—and the barriers they'd need to overcome would be that much higher. Their foes would likely be all too aware this was their last chance, and one they could not afford to miss.

“Maple!”

“We'll come running if it gets dangerous!”

“Cool! Let's try and win this thing!”

“Good luck!”

“We'll be watching the perimeters.”

This was a plan that would change a lot depending on how their opponents responded to it, and there was only so much they could do in advance. And since there was no time to doctor the field with Iz's items, their side had no clear advantage. This would be a fair fight, but they planned to win nonetheless.



A while later...

With their departure time approaching, Sally finished her warmups and headed back inside.

“Maple.”

“Hey, Sally! Let's do this thing!”

“Yeah. You clear on your part?”

“I am! But your end seems far harder...”

Maple looked mildly concerned. Sally *did* play a major role in this plan, one no one else could hope to handle.

But her concern just made Sally grin.

“I'm good to go,” she said, looking Maple right in the eye. “Trust me. Your life is in my hands.”

“Okay, I believe in you! I'll handle the rest of the defense.”

“Cool. I know you will.”

Trust begets trust. When Sally was in trouble, Maple was there. When Maple was in trouble, Sally would handle it. They each did their part and left the rest to their partner. This was a strategy that relied upon that trust.

“You all ready to go, Maple?”

“Yep!”

“Then let’s move out.”

Joined by the rest of Maple Tree, they headed to the outer walls, where the Order of the Holy Sword members were waiting.

“You’re here?”

“You *look* ready. Let’s head out!”

If they lingered to chat and the date changed, it would blow the whole operation. Not wanting to waste any more time, they set out for the enemy lines.





## Defense Build and Bait

With no major clashes occurring, the nighttime field was cloaked in silence.

Next to no players were wandering around, so the quiet was only natural.

Wilbert was moving through that field, monitoring it with his unique vision, accompanied by Lily—who doubled as his bodyguard.

“Less players makes all the difference. We’re a good ways from town, too.”

“The daylight hours must have taken quite a toll on you.”

“It was a necessary price to pay. We needed to know where those red sparks were coming from.”

Early detection on Maple’s surprise offensive during the big midday battle had minimized their losses. Had they wasted precious moments there, it could have changed the tide of battle.

“Still nobody?”

“No one so far. All quiet.”

They were being vigilant in the event of enemy pursuit. They’d made a big splash and fled—most players would want to give chase.

But to their surprise, they’d yet to spot a single foe.

Just as they were about to pack it up—

“.....!”

“Found someone?”

Just as he’d spotted Maple earlier that day, Wilbert was scanning far beyond his usual scope. And a group of players had just entered the outer limits of that range.

“Maple and Sally, coming our way...and only the two of them in range. I’d know them anywhere.”

“Have they lost their minds?”

Lily could not believe her ears. Their plan had come up short, but they’d still been a hair’s breadth away from eliminating Maple altogether. Sending her back into battle before Indomitable Guardian came off cooldown, with barely any guards?

That must be the point.

“Will, you’re sure they’re alone?”

“Yes, I’d hardly miss *that*.”

“Fair. So they’re trying to lure us out.”

“That is likely their goal, yes. What say you?”

They could ignore it, and return to their base as planned.

Their foes clearly had a scheme in mind, but hardly one that would take them all the way to the enemy castle.

If they chose to do nothing, there’d be no battle here.

“Can you hit her?”

“.....They’ll be in effective range soon enough. But I doubt I’ll land a clean hit.”

“Yeah, they’re counting on Sally to block that. Genuinely terrifying that she actually can.”

Defeating them from a position of safety was unlikely—if Wilbert couldn’t do it, nobody could.

Their only option would be to take this bait, and close in for a fight. Both agreed on that point.

“Will, just to be absolutely sure, there really isn’t anyone else?”

“.....Yes, I swear upon the eye.”

Lily thought for a moment, then nodded.

“Okay, let’s go for it. If they can prep a whole army outside your range and get here in time, I’d like to see them try.”

“Very well.”

“I’ll send word. If we call in too many, they’ll likely bail—and they’re counting on us knowing that.”

“Perhaps so.”

Lily contacted her camp, requesting reinforcements.

They’d have to do their part and lure those two as far in as they could. Waiting patiently would make it that much harder for them to escape.

“Once our allies arrive, surround them. That’ll help block their backup. But if they act like they’re leaving, attack.”

Their enemy was serving up this chance, and no matter how fishy it smelled, it was still a *viable* opportunity. It was one they wouldn’t get again, and couldn’t afford to let slip away.

“Let’s see if they can really keep her safe.”

“I’ll stay vigilant, and if I see any other foes, I’ll let you know.”

“Yeah, hang in there.”

Their course was set. Now they merely needed to await the start of combat.



Maple and Sally were walking across the darkened fields. There were no signs of enemies, but Sally had both daggers out, ready for anything.

“Anyone out there?”

“Not sure. We won’t know till they come at us.”

This was a wasteland area without many obstacles and nowhere to hide. At the very least, they weren’t about to get swarmed.

“The time limit’s coming up,” Sally muttered, checking the time. The date was getting ready to roll over. This was a plan that hinged on their opponent’s choices—and if they never noticed Maple out for a stroll, nothing *could* happen.

Just as it started to feel like they’d have to turn back—a bullet made of crackling electricity split the night, landing right before them.

“Didn’t think you’d, like, come to *us*!”

Before them stood Velvet, with Hinata in tow. That lightning signified she was

ready to throw down.

“Same. After all you did earlier, you still got more left?”

“You betcha!”

Anyone expecting Velvet to be exhausted from the previous battle would no doubt feel betrayed by the smile she now wore. If anything, she seemed excited about the fight to come.

She took a bold step forward, speeding toward them.

“Polar Flash!”

A powerful bolt of lightning filled the air around Velvet. Even Sally couldn’t slip through that.

“Martyr’s Devotion!”

But Maple’s presence changed everything. As long as Martyr’s Devotion covered the area Velvet’s skills hit, Sally could soak Polar Flash and live to tell the tale.

Maple knew her part. If she kept Sally safe, then Sally could fight back.

But a red flash from behind shot past Velvet. A high-speed arrow had been hidden by Polar Flash’s glare.

The lightning was meant to blind Sally—and let Wilbert seal the deal.

“Ha!”

There was a *schiiing*—and Sally knocked the arrow out of the air.

Martyr’s Devotion let her go on the offensive, but her *priority* was always this type of defense.

Even in the thick of combat, Sally’s mind was focused only on threats to Maple.

“Yikes, you actually did that?! Hot damn!”

“Clearly...that was no fluke.”

Their initial plan thwarted, Thunder Storm backed off.

Sally had seen this coming before they even arrived. Without someone to

spot them here, Velvet and Hinata would never have shown up at all.

That alone suggested Wilbert was nearby.

“Maple, shield up.”

“Got it!”

Sally hid behind Maple, quickly searching her inventory for some flashbangs, which she threw up high.

That was the signal.

The number of flashbangs told the others which direction Wilbert was.

Far to the rear, Frederica, Kanade, and Iz had buffed Ray so much that the dragon streaked across the sky like a shooting star.

Even with the countless speed boosts, Wilbert could tell exactly what was flying directly toward him.

A holy sword, glowing every bit as bright as Velvet’s lightning.

A torrent of light rocketing toward him and Lily.

They swiftly swapped gear and got ready to soak this hit.

“Retainer Rampart!”

The soldiers Lily summoned just barely saved them, but an instant later, Ray was right on top of them—with Pain, Kasumi, and Chrome aboard.

“A bold way to find someone. If you blow half the vicinity away, it forces us to deal with it. And my skill let you pin down our location.”

Even as she spoke, Lily was replenishing her armies.

“We can’t afford to have you backing up Thunder Storm.”

“So we’re here to bust it up!”

“And you can’t retreat this time.”

Given the speeds Ray could reach, and Rapid Fire’s low mobility, they’d have a hard time escaping. Even if that weren’t the case, it would mean leaving Thunder Storm surrounded by enemies. Hardly acceptable.



“Okay, Will. Full power.”

“Indeed.”

Both raised their weapons.

And as they did, innumerable troops spawned—signaling the start of the true battle.

When the star shot by, Thunder Storm knew there was a fight brewing behind them.

“There goes our backup!”

“And we’re not letting you go to the rescue.”

Sally hefted her daggers. No more incoming arrows from Wilbert meant she was free to attack.

“Ah-ha-ha! But that makes it simple. We just gotta take you both out, and go flank ’em!”

“Quite.”

Thunder Storm had their plan...

And neither side was backing down.

“We’re not going down that easy.”

“Neither are we!”

Maple’s side had successfully aligned the fights the way they’d planned. Once Ray took off, those left behind remained on standby in case anything went wrong.

“Nothing yet...but I bet it won’t stay that way...”

The Order members were spread out, using detection skills to keep tabs on things. And they soon sent word that made her scowl.

“Ugh, Flame Empire is coming!”

Thunder Storm and Rapid Fire had been working closely all event long—but it made total sense they’d call in the third major guild for this battle.

“Ah. So they did send word.”

“In which case...”

“Mai.”

“Yeah, we’re up!”

“Come on, everybody! That’s why we’re here!”

“““Yeah!””””

Frederica, Kanade, and Iz set about buffing everyone’s speed.

This was why they’d been on standby. They were soon headed out to prevent Flame Empire from tipping the balance of either battle.

“Multi-Hasten!”

Between Frederica’s spells and Iz’s items, their forces moved out quickly.

Their goal was to block Flame Empire’s arrival before the worst could happen.

And to that end, some losses were acceptable.

“We’re working hard, so you’d better deliver!” Frederica muttered, eyeing the distant lightning as she ran. That was her way of praying for Maple and Sally’s victory.

The scouts who dotted the map allowed them to detect Flame Empire’s approach ahead of time and be in position to intercept them.

“Be ready for anything!”

“Yep. Stick to the plan.”

They’d been forced to cover a lot of ground, which limited the player count. That left them a bit shy of the forces they needed to stop Flame Empire.

But where there’s a will, there’s a way. Maple Tree had weapons that could turn the tide of any battle.

“You two ready?”

“““We are!”””

Mai and Yui were aboard Tsukimi and Yukimi, and each girl was wielding six hammers.

These twins could upend any situation.

“We’ll back you up. Don’t worry about what happens to us.”

“Good luck!”

Mai and Yui did not *need* to chisel away at HP pools. The events earlier in the day had proven their side’s best option was to keep the twins alive.

“Mm-hmm! But that means you’re our only offense.”

“We’ve got this!”

“We’ll do our best!”

The twins were the core of this plan. Their unparalleled pulverizing power would make up for their side’s lack of numbers.

“Can you help me set up barricades?”

“Okay. Let’s hurry, they’re close. Hey, give us a hand!”

“Coming!”

A sloppy defense would soon crumble before Mii’s flames and her guild’s numbers.

But if they bunkered down too hard behind Iz’s walls, the opponent would march right on by.

With this operation, that alone was unacceptable. Which meant they *had* to engage, even if it meant their deaths.

Even if they wiped out here, as long as they took out enough of the enemy to stop their advance, that was satisfactory. Naturally, victory was preferable.

“You two go straight for Mii. Keep attacking even if it seems dangerous.”

““Right.””

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe. For once, I’ll use everything I’ve got.”

Kanade gestured to the shelves behind him, packed full of grimoires.

“Please!”

“We’ll hit hard enough to make up for it!”

“There we go. That’s the spirit!”

With the minimum number of barricades down, they were ready to do battle. At the front stood Mai and Yui, along with a number of Order members positioned to back them up. Toward the rear were Iz, Kanade, Frederica, and a row of Order great shielders who stood poised to defend them.

“What about Daybreak?”

“Hmm, not really something we can do anything about.”

“We just need to get her before it goes off. Easier said than done, though...”

“It does have a long windup, so let’s hope the twins can get there first.”

Invulnerability skills did not seem to stop Mii’s ultimate attack—if she used it, they had no way of saving Mai and Yui.

Their only option was to get in there while she was chanting the spell, while Mii herself could not fight back.

They didn’t have to wait long. Ahead, they spotted lights in the darkness.

The glow came from lanterns and skill effects. Their opponent’s numbers were far greater than their own. It was a massive army formed from members of all *three* enemy guilds.

They were outnumbered, but that didn’t matter now. They just had to trust their plan.

“Okay, everyone, let’s go! Multi-Toughen!”

Frederica’s defense buff was the starting gun. Everyone sprang into action. No tricks here—they just deployed the twin annihilators at the fore.

Despite the darkness, the enemy soon spotted them, and spells started flying. Blades of wind, bullets of fire, and—as if that wasn’t enough—a rain of arrows from above.

“Multi-Barrier! Notes, Round!”

““Multi-Cover!””

““Heal!””

The many, many barriers Frederica and her bird put up caught a lot of the projectiles, and those that slipped through were soaked by the tanks. Then the healers topped them up.

Iz and Frederica had buffed their stats in advance, so they could handle a few stray spells—as long as barriers were blocking most of them.

Only Mai and Yui couldn't afford such stray strikes, but the others kept them safe as they surged forward. Their speed was buffed, so they soon closed the gap.

Then...a phoenix rose from the army ahead, crimson flames tracing its path.

“Scorcher!”

Mii unleashed a wave of fire, trying to halt the twins' advance.

But Mai and Yui plunged straight into the inferno—confident they'd be kept safe.

“Rift.”

Kanade opened a grimoire, and space itself tore open, swallowing Mii's flames. It was a spell that ordinarily could only be used once—but Kanade had far more aces on his shelves than any other player would ever own.

Mii's attack was effortlessly invalidated, so before further flames could arrive, the bear-mounted twins hoisted their hammers high.

““Farshot!””

Shockwaves shot forward.

Every player the shockwaves so much as grazed *burst*, as if they were balloons stuck with needles.

“Dodge, or go invulnerable!”

The enemy players spread out, keeping their distance from the twins even as they moved to surround them.

Boosting defense and reducing damage meant nothing before the might of these hammers.

“Eruption!”



Again, Mii's flames roiled in. Spouts of fire burst from the ground, forming into a pillar that threatened to engulf the twins.

"Water God's Grace!"

Kanade was already in action, surrounding the pair in a cocoon of water. This not only canceled out the fires, keeping them safe, but also allowed them to keep running.

""Double Strike!""

"Spirit Light...huh?!"

"Guardian's Luster! Seriously?!"

Even the players who had nullified the damage were knocked back, rolling and taking out everyone behind them until their momentum was finally spent. But those were the lucky players—the unlucky ones were sent flying upward, never to be seen again.

""Superspeed!""

Some players accelerated to dodge the hammers and get in close. All they had to do was land a single hit.

""Cover!""

But the Order's defenders made it in time, and the twins emerged unscathed.

"We can't have them going down!"

"They're under our protection."

"I see."

With the Order acting, Kanade didn't need to use a skill. The Flame Empire members had to give up and back off, lest the hammers turn them to dust.

And the unnatural offense meant no close quarters exchange of blows could come to pass.

Mii barked orders to Ignis while dodging the flurry of spells from Frederica's direction—and changed her own target.

"Pyre!"

Fires burst across the night sky, the sheer scale of the flames swallowing all spells bearing down on Mii herself—and raining down on her enemy's back lines.

“Multi-Barrier!”

“Fay, Item Boost!”

As Frederica renewed her barriers, Iz used items to lay more barricades and shore up their defenses. Meanwhile, the Order members added even more barriers—and blocked all of Mii's flames.

“Tanky.”

Dodging spells left and right, Mii dropped back to her formations. Much as she'd have liked to take out their back line and leave their front line exposed, she was not shocked to find the Order far too stable for such a feat. Even if Kanade had been stingy with his grimoires, it would take time to break through their protection.

In which case, Mii had but one choice—set her sights on Mai and Yui, and light them up.

“Flame Empress! Flame Spear!”

“Enhance Function! Spirit Light!”

Two balls of fire shot toward the twins, followed by a giant fiery spear—only for Kanade to null all the damage. With Kanade, there was no telling what skills he might have, which made him tricky to deal with. But attempts to target him would be blocked by all the barriers around Frederica, making it better to aim for the twins and hope the defenders ran out of ways to keep the girls safe.

Or...

“From Marx?”

Mii ran her eyes over the message she'd received.

*They're trying to pin us down and thin our numbers. Even if it takes a while, I think you should end this.*

The long chant to use Daybreak served as a countdown to the end of the

fight. Mai, Yui, and Kanade could not defend against it.

And if they moved out of range of the skill, Flame Empire could go help their allies.

Mii had Ignis drop her next to Marx.

“You’re in, Mii?”

“That’s the idea.”

“I’ll cover you until then. I can keep the twins at bay.”

“Understood.”

Marx activated the One Night Fort underfoot, keeping Mii safe; once he was sure she’d started working on Daybreak he stepped out in front.

“Installation: Flower Cavalry. Installation: Water Army.”

He summoned knights made of vines and infantry made of water, sending them at the whirling hammers of death.

“Can’t have you running wild.”

“We’re not...”

“...stopping!”

“Remote Installation: Wind Blades. Remote Installation: Fire Blades.”

No matter how weak the attack was, the twins and Kanade *had* to react to it. That was their weakness. They were far easier to get past than Martyr’s Devotion.

“Clear, Vanish.”

The wind and fire blades spewing from Marx’s traps, as well as the troops he’d summoned, all disappeared.

Baffled by this, an Order great shielder paused—just as a vine lance pierced through his shoulder. Red sparks flew.

“.....!”

“Back down!”

““Okay!””

The enemy was invisible. Since it was a very basic skill, any contact would end the effect, but it still made guarding the twins infinitely harder.

“I don’t *just* twiddle my thumbs at the back of the crowd. Spring All Traps.”

From the ground and the air sprang troops made from every element, with every last one of them a foe Mai and Yui could not afford to ignore.

“Clear, Colorless World.”

The myriad summons turned colorless, melting into the air. Not good. The great shielders soaked the fire and wind blades’ stabbing attacks as they hustled the twins toward the center of the pack, forming a wall around them in the hopes of preventing any attacks from getting through.

Marx’s skills were really turning up the pressure on the twins and seemed poised to turn this battle on its head.

But from the rear, magic circles appeared, as plentiful as the troops that had been summoned. Flying machines showed up, each bristling with gun barrels. The sheer quantity of lasers unleashed was every bit as intense as Maple’s Machine God barrage, forcing the invisible soldiers to reveal themselves.

“Urgh, there they go.”



If Marx had time to prep, so did Iz.

And given enough time, Iz was a threat far greater than any crafter should be.

“How are *items* matching my spells?!”

“Good thing I set this up!”

“Appreciated, but holy moly!”

“Yes, I agree.”

Marx was not exactly going all out. He knew if he could just fend the twins off for a few minutes, Mii would end the fight.

Thunder Storm and Rapid Fire guild members were on the same page; as long as they won in the end, they didn’t mind a few losses.

“Mai, Yui!” Kanade called.

The twins hadn’t advanced very far—they were still mowing down the front lines.

“Kanade!”

“I don’t think we’re...”

*...gonna make it in time.*

Before she could even finish, a sun appeared in the night sky.

Mii hovered at the center. Marx had bought her enough time to generate the all-consuming fires.

“Daybreak!”

Pulsing white fires surrounded her, mere seconds from release.

As everyone tried to get out of its range, Marx held up a hand to the twins on the front line.

“You’re not going anywhere! Holy Chains!”

Chains shot out of a white magic circle, binding Mai and Yui to the spot. The effect lasted only three seconds—three whole seconds.

All he had to do was prevent them from escaping Mii’s fire.



“Raging Inferno!”

Billowing flames made the ground itself do damage as everything in sight turned red. Mai and Yui looked back at Kanade, nodding emphatically.

“Flight!”

Trusting the look in their eyes, Kanade evacuated to the air above.

Left behind, the chains released Mai and Yui just as the flames were right before them.

But they’d been well aware there was no escaping this.

Which left them with one option.

“Go for it, Mai!”

“Titan’s Lot!”

Mai slammed five hammers into the fire. If her STR was higher, it would null and reflect the damage. With Daybreak invalidating the ‘null’ part, what did that leave?

A sacrificial counter.

Fires consuming everything—but Mai sent a section of the wave back the other way.

“Shit! Clear, Existence Lapse!”

Like Oboro’s Spirited Away, this removed Marx from the map long enough for the wave of flames to pass him by.

And when he emerged from the inferno, he saw infinite scattering lights, left by the sheer quantity of players who’d been unable to escape the counter.

Only a few of their back line had survived.

Still...

“Seriously...?”

Mai and Yui’s counter had even worked on raid bosses.

But beyond the fire—there was no sign of them.

They'd known this attempt would kill them.

And the damage it had done was prodigious.

They'd only returned a portion of the flames, but that still hit a wide area and caught everyone by surprise.

With no time to retreat, the line collapsed.

Marx looked ahead and saw Kanade coming in for a landing on a giant boulder, avoiding contact with the burning ground.

"We're still going?" Marx wondered aloud.

The twins had only turned back *some* of the flames, so the losses on the other side were even greater. They should not be able to keep fighting.

Her attack complete, Mii landed next to him.

"Thanks, Mii."

"I see Kanade's covering the retreat?"

"Looks like it."

The flames started to die down, but Mii showed no mercy, generating more with both hands. Kanade opened a grimoire.

"Smog."

Black smoke spread, obscuring everything it touched.

This was no debuff; it merely obstructed their vision.

"Tornado!"

Someone nearby cast a wind spell that swiftly pushed the smoke away.

Everyone had assumed this had been to cover his escape, but when the smoke cleared, Kanade was standing on a thick vine, facing Mii and Marx.

"" .....!"

An unexpected choice that glued their eyes to him.

"Look up!" someone yelled.

Mii's head snapped up just as a figure in white dropped toward her.

In free fall and with hammer raised—it was unmistakably Yui.

“Blue Fire!”

“Titan’s Lot!”

Yui batted away the blue flames.

Mai alone had handled Raging Inferno. She’d swung only five of her hammers—the remaining one had launched Yui skyward.

Yui was slightly better at this sort of Maple-esque move.

As the flames came back at her, Mii rolled away, scrambling to escape.

Kanade had stayed behind, out front, for one reason alone—to ensure Yui landed safely.

“Hyah!”

She touched down with a boom—and slammed her hammer Mii’s way.

She was too close, and the formation too scattered. No dodging it, and no chance of help.

Realizing this, Marx threw a charm at Mii.

“Swap!”

As the charm wrapped Mii in watery robes, Marx used a skill to swap the locations of two traps. The trap around Mii took her with it, moving her to the back lines—and out of harm’s way.

“Uh...the rest is in your hands.”

But he’d only had time to do that once.

The hammer found a new target. And Marx couldn’t withstand the blow.

It was over in an instant. With a crack, the mighty blow turned Marx into light.

And as the hammer shattered Marx, Kanade opened a grimoire.

“Flash Spout! Let’s bail, Yui!”

“Okay!”

The water swept Yui up, with Kanade catching her as he ran for it. This was

why he'd put so many points in AGI.

“Let's hope the other fights are over!”

Their losses were huge. He was out of grimoires to keep Yui safe, and could not pin down Flame Empire any longer. Concerned about the rest of the war, Kanade hurried to rejoin Iz and Frederica.



## Defense Build and the Eye

Elsewhere in the wasteland, Lily and Wilbert faced off against Pain, Chrome, and Kasumi.

Ray had charged in, Pain had attacked, and Lily had fended that off, generating armies to turn the tide.

“Blood Blade!”

“Holy Splendor!”

Kasumi’s katana liquified, and Pain’s sword unleashed a torrent of light. They easily pulverized the army of sword-bearers Lily had sent.

“Reproduction.”

“Able Aide. Tactical Tutelage. Transcendent Power.”

But she added new troops as fast as the old ones went down, buffing them and blocking all paths until a vast quantity of guns was aimed at their foes.

“Stimulation! Multi-Cover!”

Wearing Necro, Chrome blocked the barrage. He took damage, but not enough to overwhelm his self-healing.

“If we can just thin these enough, we’ve got this.”

The troops she summoned weren’t that big a threat—there was just a *lot* of them. None of these three were particularly built to dish out AOE damage, and it would be tough to clean them out without skills.

“Pain, I’ll handle it. Fighting as-is would be futile.”

“Go for it.”

“Awaken.”

Kasumi called out Haku, had it use Supergiant, and charge into the armies. Each turn of its bulk crushed entire hordes.

“Ha-ha, so sad to see them go down this easy. They should be tougher than that!”

“But you’ll just make more.”

“Naturally.”

True to her word, Lily kept on summoning and buffing, but Haku was not letting her gain an advantage.

As the wall of soldiers crumbled, Pain stepped in.

“Holy Schism!”

“Hah.....!”

Lily blocked his swing with her flag.

“This is technically a spear!”

The sword deflected, she spun the flag round, delivering a series of thrusts.

Her summons were her main strength, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t handle herself in close combat.

“Sand Swarm!”

“I knew you’d be good.”

“Appreciated.”

Lily sent new summons at Pain, forcing him to fight against the odds.

In a one-on-one battle, he’d prevail, but her constant reinforcements did not allow him the leeway required to score a clean hit.

Kasumi and Haku were busy keeping the horde at bay, so this was still not *that bad*.

“Cover! Necro, Dead Weight!”

“Holy Condemnation!”

Matching Pain, Chrome moved forward and reduced Lily’s movement speed, pulling a number of troops away.

With the pressure on him eased, Pain took a shot at her.



“Guard Heart!”

Lily yanked her troops in, forcing them to soak his strike, then swept the flag horizontally as she backed away.

“You all right, Lily?”

“Yes. Still...these three are making it rough.”

The trio knew Wilbert was sticking to buffs and understood that the pair’s fighting style was not just a matter of simple synergy.

In a situation like this, buffs were far less effective than if Wilbert was attacking himself.

Either he couldn’t attack, or there was a downside if he did—that much was clear.

“Kasumi, I’d like to keep pushing.”

“Got it. I’ll match you.”

“I’ll handle defense.”

If they let the pair back off and swap to Wilbert, he’d shoot Kasumi down first. That was their worst-case scenario.

Meanwhile, the armies were whittling down Haku’s HP. Better to go for a quick end than draw this out further.

With that brief consensus achieved, they matched each other’s pace, lunging in.

“Sword Mountain!”

“Holy Havoc!”

Right after Haku tackled, two skills went off, clearing troops and giving all three the necessary space to lunge forward.

“Will, shall we?”

“.....!”

He nodded once.

“Rest,” Lily said.

It was a familiar command—which is why it felt so out of place.

If she was simply summoning her pet monster, she'd use Awaken.

"Mandate: Divine Punishment," Will said.

That didn't sound like a buff.

"Mind's Eye!" Kasumi cried.

Her skill showed a red column covering the entire area. Kasumi swiftly ordered Haku back in her ring, shouting Chrome's name.

"Guardian! Guard Aura!"

A column of light descended, damaging anything it passed through. All three raced outside the range to avoid taking more damage, and their gazes followed the column up to its source.

Clouds passed by, the clear night sky behind them, and floating against that darkness was a giant eye surrounded by a fissure-like pattern.

An eye peered out from a crack in the heavens, gazing upon the ground. This was clearly the source of Wilbert's preternatural spotting powers.

"Whoa...you tamed a doozy."

"Ours is rather unique. It takes the two of us to control it."

"So the real fight's just starting?"

"Ah. All the more reason we can't let them pass."

Sharing a single pet between them, Lily and Wilbert used two rings to borrow the power of the eye in the sky.

That meant Rest functioned differently—if either used that command, all power not only flowed into their partner, but it also gave them access to a new set of skills.

"Now we attack together."

"Seeing too much is rather exhausting, so I'd like to end this fast."

Wilbert could see for miles, which meant having mountains of information pumped into his head at once. He was wincing even as a magic circle appeared

behind him.

“Mandate: Apocalypse Fire!”

“Toy Soldiers! Rapid Factory!”

“Argh, this is nuts!”

The circles behind Wilbert—he called them mandates—unleashed all kinds of elemental attacks.

He still had all his buffer abilities, and these new skills were as powerful as any mage’s spells. Wilbert’s threat level had skyrocketed, but Chrome’s guard had bought them enough leeway that Pain and Kasumi cut through the flames, charging in.

“Range Expansion! Holy Guardian!”

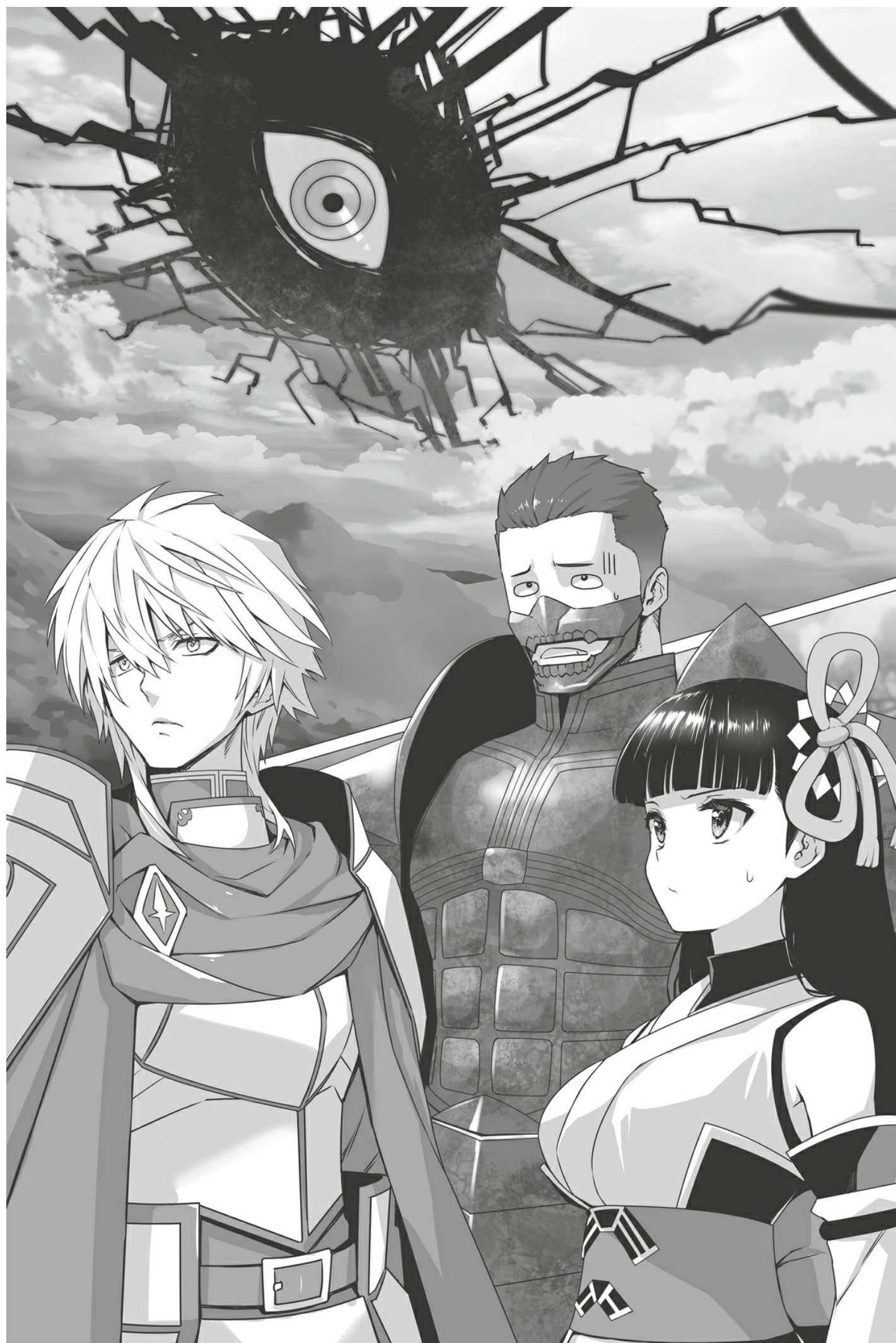
Pain’s AOE mowed down soldiers, as well as the wall guarding Lily.

“First Blade: Heat Haze! Armored Arms!”

Kasumi slipped in during that momentary opening, teleporting herself right up to Lily and attacking with three blades at once.

“That was fast!”

Lily blocked Kasumi’s blighted blade with her flag, but the two arms floating behind both cut into her.



“Mandate: Rise Again!”

“Versatile...! Third Blade: Blue Moon!”

Wilbert had brought Lily back, so Kasumi dove at her again. With her summon-focused style, Lily was no match for Kasumi’s mobility in a one-on-one battle.

“Reproduction.”

“Ray, Palidragon’s Breath.”

A glittering breath blew the new soldiers away, and Pain lunged in.

“Hah!”

*Clang, clang*—their weapons clashed. Pain pressed his advantage. His sword glowing, the blade snaked up, slicing deep into Lily’s shoulder.

“Retainer Rampart!”

She made a wall and tried to back away, but neither of them would let her.

They vaulted over Wilbert’s flames and water, shattering each wall she made—each time taking another step forward.

“Fourth Blade: Whirlwind!”

Kasumi slipped a powerful combo under Lily’s guard. Unable to withstand it, she lost her balance.

Just one more hit—but a shout went up from behind them.

“She’s luring you in!”

“.....!”

Different roles, different speeds. A battle too fast for anyone to take a breath. As Lily backed down, Kasumi and Pain had left Chrome behind, moving a bit too far ahead.

“Will!”

“Mandate: Celestial Weight!”

“Gah...!”

Chrome's feet were forcibly halted. He was out of range of Cover Move.

A moment's hesitation—and Lily took another step back. Kasumi and Pain made eye contact. Best to back off.

““Quick Change!””

Lily and Wilbert swapped gear, switching to their other fighting style. Suddenly, there was a massive shift in their range and a one-shot arrow ready and aimed.

They could neither advance nor retreat.

“Origin Bla—!”

The shot tore through the air, a match for Kasumi's speed. The arrow, aimed true, beat her teleport—and pierced her body.

“Gah...!”

Success. Lily and Wilbert shared a moment of relief, but even on the brink of death, Kasumi did not let that go unpunished.

“All-Consuming Blight.”

“What?”

“Oh, dear...!”

Before she vanished, Kasumi used a skill, commanding blood-soaked blades to shoot out of the ground and enveloping the area in a purple mist.

This was a long-term debuff, one that could not be dispelled—and cost a portion of Kasumi's stats.

It could only be used once a day, and required a resource she could not regain. But if not now, when? She was not about to die lying down. If a few stat points could buy her victory, then that was a small price to pay.

“The rest is yours.”

Those were her last words. Pain nodded once, and tightened his grip.

“And here I thought we'd won.”

With this debuff, they were no match for Pain and Chrome.



But likewise, this was the last means they had of making this strategy succeed. The two remaining could not let their opponents rendezvous with Velvet and Hinata.

Realizing there was nothing else they could do...they made their choice.

“Rest.”

“Awaken!”

“Ray, Total Mana Release. Light Flux.”

Pain raised his gleaming sword, and Wilbert passed all powers from the eye in the sky to Lily.

“Mandate: Transcendence! Formation Change!”

“Range Expansion! Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

They vanished, replaced by a wave of light that filled the area. Its brilliance flowed outward, sweeping all traces of darkness from the field.

“Did I reach them...?”

Back in town, Formation Change had only taken them so far. He could reach that distance, but he was uncertain that its range hadn’t been extended.

“Sorry, I fell behind.”

“No, we pushed our luck. Played aggressively so they’d not swap to Wilbert—and that worked against us.”

If Lily changed her gear, her defenses would drop. They’d been hoping to take advantage of that and take her down, but Lily and Wilbert had far more practice with role-swapping strategies.

“I feel bad for Kasumi. We gotta win this for her.”

“Lily and Wilbert can’t rejoin this fight. Let’s turn back.”

Rapid Fire had taken out Kasumi, but in exchange, they had been forced to retreat.

In other words, it was a draw—and so, to tilt that scale toward victory, Chrome and Pain hurried off to back Maple and Sally up.



## Defense Build and the Ultimate Duo

Thunder rumbled as the cascade of lightning overhead intensified. With Hinata bobbing along behind her, Velvet bore down on Sally.

“Letting you move freely will be real rough!”

“What about just letting me win?”

“As if!”

As long as she was within range of Martyr’s Devotion, Sally had no reason to fear Velvet’s lightning or Hinata’s debuffs.

It was a struggle against two of the best players in the game, and Maple was letting all those attacks hit her without a scratch to show for it.

“Commence Assault!”

“Ice Wall!”

Hinata blocked Maple’s barrage, keeping Velvet safe while she blocked Sally’s daggers with her gauntlets.

They’d obviously decided Hinata should handle ranged attacks, letting Velvet focus on the close-quarters battle.

That was really their only option. Given the sheer ferocity of Sally’s onslaught, Velvet could not afford to divert one iota of attention to Maple.

If she didn’t focus on Sally, her head would roll.

But that didn’t mean they were on the ropes.

“Ice Mountain.”

“Purple Bolt.”

“Whoa! S-Sally?!”

Ice bulged up beneath Maple, sending her flying. She took no damage, but the goal was to *move* her.

And, of course, to get Sally outside the range of Martyr's Devotion.

".....Damn, you've got sharp reflexes."

"I know."

When the lightning faded, Sally was still there, completely unfazed.

Martyr's Devotion had been knocked back, but Sally had simply backstepped along with it, rendering the bolt ineffective against her.

"We won't win like this!"

"No."

The ice mountain had broken a bunch of Maple's weapons, forcing her to redeploy them. Aside from that, though, she had taken no damage—proving once again that they needed to go after *her*, not Sally.

Even without Indomitable Guardian, the fact remained that if they wanted to hurt Maple, they had to get through her defense. Velvet's lightning had doomed many a player, but it was just a lightshow in Maple's eyes.

"And tonight, Sally's got no openings at all. It's, like, legit terrifying."

They'd fought before, but now Sally was like a different player altogether. She was blocking every attempt to slip past her and get to Maple. But that was still a more feasible strategy than trying to land a piercing attack on Sally (and letting Maple soak that damage for her).

Velvet's AOE attacks and Hinata's movement interference were both skill sets that worked against Sally's play style—but Maple completely invalidated them.

To get to Maple, they had to take out Sally. To get to Sally, they had to take out Maple.

"I doubt you're out of options...but if you're not coming to me, I'm coming to you."

".....!"

Sally's vibe transformed, forcing Thunder Storm's leaders to focus once more on the foe before them.

"Thunder God Advent. Lightning Rain."

Electricity crackled around *Sally*. Lightning fell from the sky.

Neither of them would ever mistake those skills—they were the same ones Velvet herself used. The core of her style. She knew their power and range like the back of her hand.

Velvet quickly backed out of that range, eyes wide, aghast at the sight before her.

“Is she seriously copying them?”

“I’ll be ready. We’ve got to be sure.”

Lily had told them how Sally had used Pain and Maple’s skills.

Pain’s had proven to be an illusion, so this might be the case here, too.

“Ain’t no use freakin’ out and turning tail!”

Velvet wasn’t nimble enough to dodge her own lightning. Literally only Sally was that insanely evasive.

To take Maple out, they had to plunge into Sally’s lightning storm.

“Spark Impetus!”

Hinata used Light Magic to keep her health up as Velvet steeled her nerves, added a speed boost, and plunged into the storm.

Moments later, a bolt hit home—and went right through her body, vanishing into the ground.

“That takes guts.”

“So it *is* fake!”

“Basically!”

While they were still in range, Sally opened her menu, buffing herself with a few items. Then she came at Velvet, both daggers crackling with electricity. Certain she didn’t have to worry about the lightning, Velvet focused on Sally’s onslaught—letting Hinata handle anything Maple sent their way.

Martyr’s Devotion made the ground glow, and their shadows overlapped. Velvet’s gauntlets caught each of Sally’s daggers with a metallic clang and a

shower of sparks.

“Purple Bolt!”

Lightning shot from Sally’s daggers, blanketing Velvet’s vision.

Until it struck, it was exactly like Velvet’s own skill. She kept a safe distance, evading it.

“Even illusions suck!”

After blinding her opponent, Sally pressed the advantage, pursuing.

“Ice Wall! Ice Spear!”

Hinata threw up a wall between them and Maple, using that time to fling spells at Sally.

“Ice Spear!”

Sally easily dodged, sending the same spell Velvet’s way.

But Velvet was no longer flinching.

She plunged right on after Sally, focused solely on her target even as the spell hit her left shoulder. To her surprise, there was an audible crack.

“Wha.....?!”

Chunks of ice scattered. Damage sparks flew. Caught off-guard, Velvet briefly slowed her pace.

“Oboro, Phantom World.”

“—! Electromagnetic Leap!”

With Sally’s clones bearing down on her, Velvet bailed, trailing sparks.

This moved her outside the ice wall’s cover—a chance Maple was ready to take advantage of.

“Commence Assault!”

A barrage of lasers surged upward, targeting Velvet in the air. She’d been using those weapons for so long that she could even line up a tricky shot like this.

“Gravity Control.”

Still mid-air, Velvet bounded upward, as if batted higher by some unseen force.

Since Maple’s aim had been accurate, this was just enough to escape her barrage.

“That was close!”

Velvet darted across the air, avoiding Maple’s artillery before touching back down.

Maple had been keeping her distance to avoid Velvet’s piercing attacks, which meant there was enough lag on her barrage for Thunder Storm to work with.

Still, this exchange had added a new concern to the pile.

“That wasn’t an illusion?!”

“That’s for you to figure out!”

Clones in tow, Sally closed in. Looking closely, Velvet saw white mist mixed in with the illusionary lightning around her—quite like Hinata’s own.

Chilled air. Had that done it? Was it a bluff to confuse them? Neither knew for sure.

“Guess we’ll just dodge ice?!”

It hadn’t done that much damage. Hinata knew basic healing spells, so she topped Velvet up before Velvet once more flung herself into combat with her inscrutable foe.

“.....”

She’d landed one trick, so Sally refocused.

What she wore looked like her usual gear, but it was actually her *second* unique series, with the visuals alone swapped out via the Guise skill.

She’d also actually used a water spell. By changing the skill name and visuals to Hinata’s and then using Subzero Domain to freeze it, anyone unaware of the trick would assume she’d copied Hinata’s skill.



“Wind Cutter!”

A spell to make them flinch, and bait them to take a step closer. With Martyr’s Devotion protecting Sally, she only had to worry about getting out of range, or soaking piercing damage.

And she still had Reality Twister up her sleeve.

“Maple!”

“.....!”

Preparing their next gambit, Sally gestured to her friend. They’d prepped a set of these hand signs in advance, and only Maple knew them.

“Ice Pillar!”

After throwing out a pillar to limit Velvet’s options, Sally used her webs to yank herself right on top of the girl.

With Sally’s speed, this distance was negligible.

“Commence Assault!”

Maple was acting as a stationary turret and filling the air with gunfire. Hinata ignored what wouldn’t hit, and if it would, she blocked it with walls of ice or used gravity to draw it off course.

But while Hinata’s skills were preoccupied with the incoming barrage, Sally got in close.

“Double Slash!”

“Vibrofist!”

Skills came with a preset motion. That left Sally exposed where she’d normally be untouchable.

Glowing red daggers slashed at her. Velvet blocked one with a gauntlet, and thrust out her other fist.

“Cancel,” Sally said—and mid-swing, her daggers charted an all-new course, blocking Velvet’s punch.

She’d canceled her skill. Velvet had never heard of anything like that.

Sally ducked down, taking another step in. Velvet tried to react to that—

“.....?!”

And felt a pain on her side.

Her attention snapped to the source of it—a deep wound in her flank, with the sheer quantity of sparks attesting to the power of the blow.

“Gravity Control!”

Velvet’s heart had skipped a beat, but Hinata kept her cool enough to forcibly drag her backward.

“Ice Palace! Heal!”

This blocked Maple’s attacks, and even with Sally’s mobility, she couldn’t get over this wall.

“You okay?”

“Barely...but yeah, yikes!”

When they’d dueled, Sally had been holding back. They’d known that—but this surpassed their wildest expectations.

On the other side of the ice walls, Sally shot Maple a thumbs up.

They’d rehearsed this combo. It wasn’t easy, but knowing she could pull off gambits like this gave Sally a fresh surge of confidence.

She’d used two tricks.

First—Cancel was not a real skill. She’d just faked Double Slash perfectly, using Guise and her own physical abilities. Since the skill wasn’t actually active, she could stop at any time.

All she’d done was swing her daggers, after all.

Second, she’d used her own body to hide one of Maple’s bullets till the last second.

When it was in range, she’d used Mirage to make it look like it was flying away; but it actually passed just over Sally’s head when she crouched, and the invisible projectile ran Velvet through. Much like her previous trick with Maple’s

shield, Sally had made the bullet disappear.

“Let’s finish this...!”

Velvet and Hinata didn’t know how these tricks worked, and the pace of battle gave them no time to stop and think. They’d never figure it out.

Sally was sure of that. She saw Velvet come flying out of the ice palace, landing before her.

“That was nuts! How’re you doing this?!”

“Afraid that would be telling.”

“Seriously, I’ve got no clue! I can’t even begin to get a handle on whatever this is! So...”

Sally had begun to step in, but paused—sensing a hint of steel in Velvet’s tone.

“I ain’t gonna *try*.”

Sweating the details would not get her up to Sally’s speed. And even with Hinata here, Velvet was no match for Sally’s cunning.

A prolonged battle against forces she could not understand would not go well. If her opponent used finesse, she had to use the opposite.

Take advantage of her own strengths, and force a victory.

“Vertex Voracity.”

“.....!”

A blue aura appeared around her. The moment Sally spotted it—Velvet was already slipping past her.

Too fast for her to react. Brute-force speeds that shot right on by.

“Superspeed!”

“Superspeed!”

Sally sped up, but Velvet matched that, maintaining the advantage.

“Maple!”

Sally knew she couldn't catch up, so she shouted a warning.

"Commence Assault!"

Maple took aim and unleashed a hail of bullets, but between Velvet's freakish speed and Gravity Control, none hit their mark.

She was moving too much for Maple to get a bead on her.

"Cocytus."

With Martyr's Devotion live, using this on Sally would just transfer the effect all the way back to where Maple stood.

But when she was *trying* to hit Maple—that worked perfectly.

"Brittle Ice Sculpture. Rusted Armor. Celestial Collapse."

She started with the familiar chaining debuffs. But Maple had fought a lot of foes and knew her own weakness.

"Pierce Guard!"

She blocked piercing damage before Hinata could seal the skill with Thought Freeze.

"Purple Bolt!"

Velvet herself was well aware of the threat Maple's shield posed. While Maple was frozen in place, she fired lightning at it until the shield stopped devouring it.

"Thought Freeze."

"Battle Awakening! Boom Fist!"

It was as if her aura had suddenly strengthened. She slipped around to Maple's side, throwing a punch.

Pierce Guard was in effect. Ignoring defense, Maple focused on the blow.

But Sally got in the way.

"Substitute!"

Sally and Maple swapped locations, and Sally *barely* dodged Velvet's swing.

“Flash Spout!”

A gush of water made Velvet stumble, and once more Sally stood guard before Maple.

“S-Sally?”

“.....How’d you know?”

Maple looked baffled—but Velvet and Sally knew something she didn’t.

Substitute was a powerful skill, one Velvet had not previously seen—but nothing about that lead up had suggested Sally would need to go that far to guard Maple.

Velvet had been convinced the plan would work—and was baffled that it hadn’t.

“Our guild has pretty detailed info on what skills are out there. We’ve got a walking game guide.”

“Prior knowledge, then?”

“It’s not piercing, right?”

Kanade remembered every skill description, cost, and name that Akashic Records had given him. Over time, he’d been teaching these to Sally, so she had the whole set in her head.

And Boom Fist was on that list.

It was an ultra-high-power attack. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Ah-ha! Yup...but that ain’t gonna work twice.”

A bluff? It was possible, but it was out of character for Velvet to act so boldly without the ability to back her words up.

“Careful, Maple. Pierce Guard only negates pierce damage.”

With Hinata’s unmatched debuffs, perhaps Velvet’s mightiest blow might do more damage than they imagined possible.

Maple got what Sally meant.

Right now, Velvet could tackle Maple’s defense head on. Or at least Thunder

Storm *thought* they could. Their own actions attested to it.

“I’ll bat it down if it gets dangerous. Trust me.”

“Okay, got it.”

Maple’s reaction speeds wouldn’t be enough to get her shield in front of Velvet’s punches. For that reason, she focused on offense, and Sally handled the defense.

Velvet was faster, and could get past Sally—so Sally stuck close to Maple’s side, weapons aimed at their foes. They’d have to watch each other’s backs until an opening presented itself.

Lightning was still peppering the ground, for no damage—all she needed to watch out for were Velvet’s fists.

“Dart!”

Velvet dashed toward them. It was a speed skill Sally didn’t have, and Superspeed had run out, leaving her far slower. All this speed purely to land a hit on Maple.

“Commence Assault!”

Velvet sidestepped the barrage, moving closer still. The lightning-wielding girl could circle around faster than Maple could spin.

“Thunderclap!”

A column of lightning swallowed Maple. She wasn’t hoping to hurt *her*—just shatter her weapons.

“Ancient Weapon!”

Blue Sparks scattered into the air. The black cube floating by her side split, forming a bundle of tubes that began to spin.

Like a rapid-fire gun, it fired blue projectiles at Velvet.

“Whoa!”

“Deploy Artillery!”

Her damaged weapons respawned and joined the suppressing fire. But Velvet



was only getting faster, and nothing was hitting her.

Faster than a speeding bullet, Velvet closed in—until Sally blocked her path.

“Ice Spear.”

It was a spell, and one Velvet didn’t like the look of.

She chose to dodge, and as her body went off course, Sally’s daggers swung.

“But I’m faster!”

Velvet hit the brakes. Fancy footwork got her out of range, but sparks flew from her shoulder anyway. Maple was right there and had plenty of ammo. Sally could slip through this barrage like she had eyes in the back of her head, and make any projectile she liked vanish with Mirage.

“—! Again?!”

A mystifying attack. But she was done flinching—Hinata cast a healing spell, and Velvet just kept coming.

“Zone Freeze.”

Hinata bound Maple—and they got past Sally, closing in on Maple.

“—!”

“I ain’t holding back here.”

The pain Velvet felt was stronger than before, meaning this was the deepest strike yet. The gash on her belly was clearly not the work of Maple’s guns or lasers.

“Saturating Chaos!”

“Ice Wall!”

The instant their focus left Maple, a monster’s maw struck the ice wall, smashing it.

“Triple Slash!” Sally yelled.

Velvet spun around, eyes widening as she realized *why* she’d been hit.

In one hand, Sally held a blue dagger. In the other—a gray longsword.

And both were swinging furiously.

“You do the weirdest shit!”

“Cancel!”

Once again, Sally wasn’t actually using a skill. She was just baiting Velvet, then switching up her moves—namely, thrusting that longsword forward.

“Transform.”

The sword became a spear. The sudden change in length was enough to run Velvet through.

Certain Velvet was backing off, she shifted her weapon’s appearance back to a blue dagger, hid it behind her back, and then flipped it in her hand.

Velvet couldn’t tell what was real and what wasn’t.

“I’d love to know where you found all these nightmares.”

It wasn’t just the skill effects—even the weapons they saw were fake. Sally had been using Guise to swap the skill names so many times that only she had the slightest clue what was happening.

As Velvet tried to brute force the fight, Sally was steadily maintaining her offensive. Velvet might have the DPS advantage, but this fight was still under Sally’s control.

“.....”

Still, she was skating on thin ice. She had to keep her expression confident, purely to unnerve her opponent.

Most of the time, Maple was the unfathomable one, but tonight, that was Sally’s role.

She saw a path to victory, and yet—

“Hydra! Commence Assault!”

As Maple attacked, Sally made up her mind.

She had one qualm—and that was the makeup of Velvet and Hinata’s skills.

Each of them had two main vectors. Lightning and fisticuffs. Ice and gravity.

And all four of those involved skills she'd never seen other players use. Sally herself had two unique series, and made use of them both, so she knew. These girls were the same. They had multiple unique series sets. But where Sally was using Guise to hide what her gear looked like, Thunder Storm's gear was visually consistent.

"Guess I've just gotta roll with that."

One less thing to think about. Just one less reason to be optimistic, left in the back of her mind.

"Maple, when this times out, I'm going in."

"Got it!"

If Vertex Voracity was indefinite, Velvet would have started with it. Since she hadn't, it undoubtedly had a time limit.

In which case, Velvet wasn't about to dawdle. Well aware this was her last major challenge, Sally opened her inventory, took out some items, and renewed her buffs.

"Velvet," Hinata murmured.

"Hit me!" Velvet said, done hesitating.

She'd picked this strategy while aware of the risks. Backing out halfway would just put them back at square one.

"Here goes!"

"I'm ready!"

"Zero Gravity."

"Whoa!"

"Maple!"

Sally scowled—one of her fears had been proven accurate.

Purple light radiated from Hinata as everything not attached to the ground began to levitate.

Maple's projectiles, the poison pool, even the falling lightning. Maple

shouldered Sally's portion of this, leaving her alone floating above, defenseless—all while Velvet raced through the air, directly under Hinata's gravity control.

"Hinata...!"

"Commence Assault...huh?!"

The new bullets quickly lost momentum and floated away. Maple couldn't believe her eyes.

"Ice Pillar! Web Spinner!"

Sally alone wasn't floating, so she had to get herself up there.

But her aerial mobility was no match for someone controlling gravity itself.

"Too slow!"

"Brittle Ice Sculpture. Rusted Armor. Celestial Collapse."

"Maple, use it!"

"Atrocity!"

"Boom Fist!"

Maple shifted into her monster form the second Sally gave the word, right before Velvet's fist struck home. An incredible number of damage sparks flew, and the monstrous flesh burst off her, slamming the real Maple back to the ground below.

"Awaken! Syrup, Mother Nature!"

"Ice Pillar!"

Maple's turtle created vines, and Sally dropped a defensive pillar; then she used her webs to prevent Maple from floating away again.

This left Maple immobilized, but that was far better than floating adrift.

"Ain't got time to waste! Let's do this!"

Only Sally could keep Maple safe. With all projectiles off the table, Maple herself was unarmed. Sally was her last—and greatest—line of defense.

Velvet came in for their final battle, and Sally stepped out to face her.

“Polar Flash!”

“.....!”

Sally used a skill she *couldn't* have—hiding herself and Maple behind the blinding light.

But no moves Sally made would be a match for Velvet's speed. With that in mind, Velvet made a big circle—as an unseen attack slashed at her side.

“This again?!”

Sally had slipped through Hinata's ice and gravity, repeatedly landing pointed attacks on Velvet.

Whether it was her arms or her legs, every time she tried to get near Maple, damage sparks shot from somewhere.

But a moment later, they would be healed up as she continued to look for an opening.

When the light of Polar Flash died down, leaving Maple and Sally visible again, Velvet rushed toward the former.

“Not happening!”

““Awaken!””

“.....!”

Velvet and Hinata's cries made Sally stiffen. The gears in her head spun fast, weighing everything she could against the worst-case scenario.

“You're bluffing, right?” she said, lunging forward and swinging a dagger—that promptly turned into a greatsword, just barely nicking Velvet.

“Nothing gets by you!”

Bloodred damage sparks.

Thunder Storm's leaders used two power skill sets each. There had to be a downside, and Sally figured they'd filled all their accessory slots with gear that provided combat skills.

These two *couldn't* equip Bonding Bridge.

And yet, this closely guarded secret had been enough to delay her attack.

And a moment's hesitation made all the difference.

Sally cut through the flesh to bone—but even as she soaked *that* damage, Velvet slipped past Sally.

“Deploy Artillery! Commence Assault!”

“Iron Heart!”

She couldn't avoid Sally's strikes, so Velvet used a skill that provided a dramatic—if short-lived—damage reduction. Combined with Hinata's defenses, she plunged into the barrage, minimizing her evasive moves.

“Purple Bolt!”

The lightning shattered Maple's weapons, and brought her into range.

“Ancient Weapon!”

Maple replaced her shattered weapons, and held out a hand, making her spark-shooting cylinders spin up again.

“Hinata!”

“Brittle Ice Sculpture. Rusted Armor. Celestial Collapse.”

“Boom Fist!”

Before Maple's weapons could start firing, Velvet's fist slammed home.

And of course—Maple couldn't dodge.

Like they'd feared, the skill overcame Maple's defenses, blowing her HP away.

Nevertheless—even as Maple winced at the damage, her eyes were locked on the furious cascade of sparks around her right hand.

“Counter!”

“—! Electrobeast!”

Blue light gushed from her right hand. She had *one* HP left. If she was alive, she could act. She turned Velvet's ultimate attack into her own, forcing Velvet to transform into a giant white tiger to bail herself out. Maple's thick blue laser pierced the beast's sides, blowing it away before disappearing over the horizon.

“Maple!”

“Mm-hmm!”

Unwavering trust. Sally had *let* Velvet through—because she was certain Maple would survive.

No dodging, no defending necessary. She need only attack.

Sally’s judgment call determined if she lived or died.

Sally had feigned reapplying buffs but actually was checking the time. She’d put this plan into effect on the assumption that she could time things down to the second.

Just before the blow landed—the clock hit midnight.

“.....!”

“Now it’s my turn.”

Sally closed in on Velvet, who still had the speed advantage. Retreat, or fight back?

Sally didn’t hesitate. This was her whole plan—now she just had to seal the deal.

“Godspeed!”

“What...?!”

Hinata, who’d been ready to bind Sally down, could only stare in shock at hearing the name of Dread’s skill.

And then Sally *disappeared*.

“Velvet!”

As if warping through space, Sally appeared to her left. But no matter how suspicious it might be, they *had* to react.

“Ice Spear!”

The instant the spear hit, they knew it was an illusion. The real girl wouldn’t *let* it hit.





The real one was to their right. After distracting them with Mirage, she'd used Godspeed to close in, webs extended from her left hand.

On the other end of those threads was Maple, now fully healed up.

And on her chest was a bloodred orb, spraying sparks from beneath her cracked armor. The light of Break Core about to blow them both away.

"Shit...!"

"Run for it," Hinata said, and cut the gravity link between them—placing herself in front of Velvet. "Isolation Domain!"

She was targeting only herself and Maple. A purple dome spread out around her, trapping the two of them in a zone free of outside interference.

"Huh?!"

"Heh-heh, you can't have her."

Hinata smiled softly—and a moment later, Maple exploded. In an instant, the blast swept Hinata up and filled every inch of her domain.



## Defense Build and a Final Respite

“Argh! Pain’s blow didn’t land!”

“Oh well. Ain’t nobody gonna match him in a short-range fight. He just got outplayed.”

Three fights had started at once, and in the spectator room, they were played in sequence.

Players taken out during the fight started teleporting in.

Drag was still howling. Pain’s torrent of light had *just* missed catching Lily and Wilbert.

He and Dread had been watching the fight with Misery and Shin when Mai, Kasumi, Marx, and Hinata joined them.

“Sorry. At least I kept Mii safe...”

“Hey, that’s more than enough! Who could have predicted that?”

“Yeah...”

“That was a tough situation, but you made the right call.”

He’d done what he could. Now it was in the survivors’ hands. Marx had saved Mii because he knew she’d come through.

“Yui pulled it off...whew.”

Mai was relieved to see Marx here without her sister. That proved their plan had worked.

They’d hoped to get Mii, but defeating Marx was a result to be proud of.

“Yeah, those were some sweet moves. A bold choice that flipped the tables!”

“Nobody else could pull that off.”

“Th-thank you!”

Knocking another player skyward and returning an attack to its sender were both moves exclusive to the twins.

“You get those cast-iron nerves from Maple?” Drag asked. “You’re not thinking of becoming a human firework just ’cause you can, are you?”

“If so, I’d recommending finding another plan,” Dread growled.

“Same...”

“I-I’d rather not.”

“Can’t believe Kanade played along.”

While the other camps were talking, Hinata was fidgeting, eyes glued to the screen.

“Worried about Velvet?”

“Kasumi... Yes, I mean...”

With the big battles done, the screens were now flipping around between smaller skirmishes, and it wasn’t really clear what had happened after.

“We wanted to take her out, but from the looks of it...”

“I bet she managed to join up with Mii.”

Neither Velvet nor Mii were there—and that spoke volumes.

Velvet had still had a few minutes left on her buffs.

Hinata hoped she would use that speed advantage to get away from Sally—who would be forced to stick around till Maple was free again.

“If Maple and Sally won, I’m good with this. Pain will step up to fill my role,” Kasumi said.

Both were agile attackers. Their styles might differ, but many players could fill that role.

That’s why Kasumi had taken the risk.

And as a result, Maple and Sally had managed to eliminate Hinata—a player that simply couldn’t be replaced. That alone justified sticking her neck out in front of Lily and Wilbert.

After a while of waiting with their eyes glued to the screen, it became clear that no further battles had taken place. They were soon joined by Shin, who wanted to hear their stories.

“Kasumi, you had that debuff up your sleeve?”

“I wasn’t hiding it. Just never had the right opportunity to use it.”

“True, Maple Tree doesn’t really *need* debuffs.”

Shin shot Mai a look. He was clearly picturing her blowing everyone away with no debuffs at all.

“They really lured us out good. I feel sorry for Chrome.”

Their pet monster had given Wilbert movement inhibitors every bit as powerful as Hinata’s—a problem they hadn’t anticipated.

Chrome had been close enough that, if not for those debuffs, he’d have made it in time.

“It’s my fault, too. If I’d survived...”

Dread’s pet, Umbra, was great at movement and escaping. They’d planned for him to be highly active during the nighttime hours. His early elimination had clearly changed the course of battle.

“Frederica’s gonna chew me out.”

“Oh well.”

“Hinata, you and Velvet had a rough go of it, too.”

“Sorry...we thought we could win that.”

They’d entered the fray intending to take Maple out and steamroll their way to victory. With Maple gone, they’d have had Sally on the ropes—and they’d been counting on Flame Empire’s arrival, too. Sally had just been a way tougher foe than either Hinata or Velvet had imagined.

“Oh, yeah! What is up with Sally?”

“She was all over the place.”

“Really? I didn’t get to see it...”

“Fighting her is one surprise after another.”

Hinata had been right there, but Shin had focused on her the moment Kasumi used her skill and went down. As such, the two of them were leading the discussion.

“Dread, what do you say?” Drag asked. “You fought her one-on-one before, right?”

“Yeah, back in the fourth event. Don’t think I could do as well now.”

Dread was shaking his head.

“Really? That’s a surprise. I thought you’d come a long way.”

“She’s just that much more polished. And Umbra ain’t built for dueling.”

Dread thought Pain would have a better shot.

“That reminds me—Sally used Godspeed,” Misery said.

“Uh...wait, did you teach her that?” Marx asked.

Dread just shrugged, like he was clueless.

“Without that, we might have been able to run for it...”

But the speed boost and disappearing act had let her get close.

And crucially, their judgment had been slowed by the skill she shouldn’t have had.

“Guess we gotta be even warier. And what was up with the shapeshifting weapon?! And the messed-up skills?!”

“Ew...” Marx looked appalled. It was the same look he had worn the first time he’d seen Maple’s monster form.

They wanted to bring as much intel on Sally back to Flame Empire as possible, so the other two joined Shin in observing the screen.

Everyone sat down on the chairs provided, watching the feed—which was currently showing what the rest of Hinata’s guild members were up to.

“.....”

Dread breathed a quiet sigh of relief. He’d managed to pay back Thunder

Storm.

He had no clue how Sally was reproducing the other skills, but Godspeed alone was the real deal.

The letter he'd sent on the brink of death—that was Frederica's skill, Pigeon Post. A skill that let her send buffs to remote players and let them send skills back.

It was a powerful move, so only one person could take advantage of it.

That's why they'd picked Dread—he had a lot of skills with powerful effects.

"I guess...it proved useful."

"It certainly paid off. Notes did good."

"Shush, Drag. Frederica'll be lording it over us for weeks."

"Ha-ha! Let her. She does better work when she's cocky."

".....True enough."

They kept watching. Powerful players they'd had their eyes on might have been eliminated, but the event itself was far from done.

Kasumi and Mai stayed where they were.

They were cheering the other Maple Tree members on, all the while hoping the next arrivals wouldn't be from their guild.

"Sally's so good. I bet she was even better than in warm-ups."

"I watched her fight you! It was wild!"

"She's the kind of girl who never fights better than when she can't afford to lose. Even then..."

Kasumi and Mai had heard about her skills and what they could do, but even they were shocked to hear just how varied that was in practice.

Without the benefit of actually seeing the fights themselves, it was hard to really understand just how nasty these new skills were.

But they were definitely skills that hinged on Sally's own technique; if either of them gained the same skills, they'd have no hope of pulling off the moves



she did.

“Maple’s still in it. Let’s trust her to make it happen.”

“I...I know Yui will do my part, too!”

The Maple Tree members who remained in the battle were the best of the best. The event was in safe hands.

Hoping their camp would emerge victorious, they turned their gazes back to the screen.



The moment Maple was free from Hinata’s purple dome, Sally rushed over to her. After making sure Velvet was long gone, she dropped the illusionary lightning and helped top up Maple’s HP.

“Good work, Maple.”

“Yup! So where’s Velvet?”

“Pretty sure she’s long gone.”

After that brutal battle, she likely didn’t have any way of turning herself invisible. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

Sally’s top priority was Maple’s safety.

“Nice fight, Sally! You were incredible!”

“Yeah? Thanks. Good work keeping the pressure on them.”

“Heh-heh-heh...I knew you could do it!”

“Glad I could live up to your expectations.”

It was hard to check the clock mid-fight. Only Sally could maintain an accurate countdown during action that intense.

Thunder Storm had the sheer power to go after Maple directly, but they’d both done what they could.

“Whew...Break Core was the right move to finish it. No one’s seen it, and it’s hard to avoid.”

Very few enemies were tough enough for Maple to resort to her self-destruct.

Only Maple Tree members knew the exact range of the explosion.

“Glad we researched the skill properly, or I wouldn’t have dared.”

“Yeah. We’d have passed on it otherwise.”

Maple had long held the wrong idea about Break Core. It wasn’t her defense that let her survive it—it was the Bomb Eater skill she’d found early on.

That meant even with Hinata’s defensive debuffs on, she’d still survive the explosion.

By correcting their misunderstanding, they’d been able to use it for the big finish.

“Glad it worked out! As for me, I’m pretty much tapped out.”

This was one reason they hadn’t chased Velvet. Sally had pushed herself to peak performance and was running on fumes. Her focus was wavering, her body felt sluggish, and she could tell her reactions were lagging. If they fought another round, she wouldn’t be nearly as effective.

Ray landed near them, carrying Pain and Chrome.

“Looks like you’re still with us. How’d it go?”

“Got Hinata. But who knows where Velvet’s run off to.”

“We lost Kasumi. Her debuff is on ’em, so I doubt they’ll hit our base again, but...sorry.”

“We needed you fending them off, so...shame we didn’t manage to get Velvet, too.”

Their plan had worked, but Maple was facing another day without Indomitable Guardian.

Eliminating Velvet would have been their best outcome, but...things weren’t that easy.

“Uh, Sally’s at her limit.”

“Makes sense. She’s been going all out all day.”

No one wanted to overwork her. With Hinata gone, Velvet’s defensive and

mobility options would crater. They'd get another chance.

"Oh, a message...they lost Mai and a lot of Order members, but took out Marx and a mix of enemy guild players."

"Considering they were outnumbered, that's a solid outcome."

The group facing Flame Empire had been stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Stopping their advance and returning real damage was a serious accomplishment.

"Velvet, Mii, Lily, and Wilbert are all alive. That's certainly cause for concern. We'll have to match the next monster assault."

"Yeah, rinse and repeat."

Last time, Hinata's Niflheim had helped her side recover from the advance fueled by Dark Rebirth, but that was no longer an option.

Everyone knew that the next big fight could determine the winner of the event, which is why this nighttime skirmish had taken place.

"Let's take a breather. I believe only Sally has any guarantee of preventing Wilbert from sniping Maple."

"Hard to believe when you put it that way, but...you've got a point."

Pain helped them board Ray, and they flew off back to the castle.

And thus, the nighttime fighting came to an end.



They made it back to town without further combat. There, they found the rest of The Order and Maple Tree looking exhausted.

"Welcome back..."

"Glad you all retreated safely."

"It was a nightmare! Spells flying from the enemy survivors! Mii burning everything in sight!"

Mii had boarded Ignis and flown around starting fires, since there was little risk to her up there. Naturally, every kill she earned benefited her side.

“We found some fire-resistant monsters, quickly tamed them, and used them as shields.”

“Between protecting the twins and then covering everyone’s retreat, I’m all out of invulnerability skills,” Kanade said. “I had quite a stock saved up, too...”

His strength lay in his collection, but it took quite a while to repopulate. He’d have to change tactics in the next fight.

“And I’m out of walls and gizmos. In fact, I’m basically down to just bombs,” Iz said.

They’d burned through her items.

Like Frederica, the rest of The Order’s lineup were looking very tired.

Yui alone remained completely unaffected by exhaustion.

“They all kept me safe...”

“That was the idea!”

“You do more damage than all of us combined.”

A chorus of reassurances went up from the great shielders. They’d known this was the strategy going in. No matter how many of them went down, it was in service to their primary offense.

Everyone knew the twins had brought them closer to victory, and they had all done their part to help make that happen.

“Rest up, everyone. I’ll keep an eye on things outside,” Pain said.

“You workaholic! Hnggg, but I gotta take you at your word this time.”

Frederica sounded as chipper as ever, but the fatigue was evident on her face—she stretched once, then trundled off toward the castle with the rest of the rank and file.

“Maple, Sally, you get some rest, too.”

“Will do!”

This was not the time to push herself, so Sally did just that.

Tomorrow, she’d need to be out there with Maple, eyes peeled. And to do

that effectively, she needed rest.

Thus, Maple Tree's surviving members went to bed. Pain made sure Mii and Velvet had not followed them, then took a rest himself, preparing for battles that would come once the sun rose once more.



While their opposition recuperated, Mii picked up Velvet and brought her back to town.

“There are lots of people we could touch base with, but no real need to do so—especially in your current conditions.”

Lily and Wilbert still had Kasumi's debuff on them and were in no state to fight. Meanwhile, Vertex Voracity's downside had left Velvet with substantially lowered stats.

The three of them were hardly the only fighters on their side, but there was also no good reason to start a fight without them.

“We'd hoped to down all three and get momentum on our side. Alas...”

Just as Kasumi had stuck her neck out to take Rapid Fire down, they'd hung back to take her out—and been unable to escape her debuff.

“Yeah, I'm, like, done-zo for the night. Totally wiped!”

“The next large-scale fight will likely settle things. We'll be free of this debuff by then.”

“And my stats'll be back to normal!”

“Then we have no cause for concern.”

“The question is just...how *do* we fight?”

The monster migration would be the impetus. And the first issue they'd have to deal with was Maple.

Lily and Wilbert had been so fixated on taking her out purely because they'd wanted to avoid having to fend off another Dark Rebirth invasion.

“Can't see us doing well tackling her head-on.”

“Yeah, if she wriggles out from my attacks or Mii's, we're up shit creek.”

Pain's holy sword would send torrents of light, disrupting their lines, and then Maple's monsters would charge through the gaps.

They *knew* that would happen. Worse, they saw no way to win against it.

They had relied on Hinata, Marx, Misery, and Shin to delay the devastating skills and defend against those powerful strikes. Losing those four had left huge holes in their plans.

"I'm afraid we have no way of turning the tables."

"Regrettably."

Lily looked at Velvet and Mii, hoping they had answers.

"I've got one idea," Velvet said.

"I also have a proposal."

"Good! Let's hear it."

One last meeting before they rested. Lily leaned in to hear them out.

And what each said made the Rapid Fire leaders nod.

"Yes, that could tip the scales entirely in our favor. It's worth trying."

"Indeed."

"I'll need a bit of prep."

"Yes, and our enemies are playing cautious. Venturing out and stumbling into a fight—they'll not let you leave easily."

There was nothing Velvet could do until her stats recovered. She'd just have to rest until then.

"Lily, Wilbert—if we put this in action, Rapid Fire are going to bear the brunt of it."

"Yes. Fortunately, that's what we're good at."

Before the invasion began the next day, they'd have to share this plan with as many players as possible and get plenty of rest themselves.

"It'll be a tough fight."

“But at least we have a path to victory.”

There were a number of tasks they needed to take care of before hostilities began. They’d have to get cracking on that at the first light of dawn.

“This event won’t make it to the last day.”

With the final battle looming, Rapid Fire got some much-needed sleep.



The next morning, Maple woke to sunlight streaming through the window.

The castle was quiet, so there must not have been any enemy attacks during the night.

“Hnggg...!”

She sat up, stretching her arms into the air. Her fatigue was gone, and she felt ready for action.

Maple hopped out of bed and opened the door to the next room to find Sally standing there, moments from coming to wake her up.

“Morning, Sally!”

“Morning, Maple. All better?”

“Yep! You?”

“Mm-hmm, fully recovered.”

A proper rest was all it took to get her back to her usual performance level.

“C’mon, let’s go eat. We can talk strategy over breakfast.”

“Got it!”

They moved to the room Maple Tree were sharing and found Iz already there.

“Morning! Any lingering fatigue?”

“Nope, all better!”

“Good to hear.”

Iz was taking food items out of her inventory and lining them up on the table. Eating these would provide long-lasting buffs.



They weren't as effective as skills used during fight, but even a few points could prove decisive.

And more importantly, they were delicious.

As Maple and Sally ate, the remaining three members arrived.

With everyone there, they started the briefing.

"The monster wave will start at noon, and I'd rather not fight before that."

"Yeah, stick to the same plan, and we can avoid facing Mii or Velvet."

"Right, they're both crazy strong...but Pain's ridiculous."

Light Flux had a quick startup, and when Frederica had all the buffs stacked on him, it could wipe out everything in its way.

Their path to victory was clear. All they had to do was wait for that path to open up.

"So how will *they* play it?"

"They might have a trick up their sleeve. Like how we baited them out last night."

"Oh? In that case, I'll take them on!" Maple said.

There wasn't anything preventing that, but Sally didn't think she'd need to.

"Better if all the players in our camp work together."

Even if Mii or Velvet rushed in, numbers would help.

They might both be good at AOE's, but as long as there were skills nulling damage or the attacks themselves, it would be tough for them to just wade into their opponent's base.

"So we sit back and wait!"

"You're good at that, Maple. If we play our cards right, we should pull off a victory."

The way Sally saw it, the loss of the opposition's defensive players gave them a big advantage.

"So what? Just keep thinning their numbers and wait?"

“Yeah, that’s about the long and short of it. We’ll leave Maple in the castle just in case. Uh, Iz can get crafting...”

Yui was their ultimate weapon but not much use outside of combat. Without a formation specifically designed to protect her, she was always at risk.

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled for any suspicious movement. Don’t wanna get pincered once we wade into the fray.”

“Cool. Who’s with you?”

“Chrome and me...and Kanade, if you come with, it’ll give us more options.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

The next big battle would almost certainly tip this event toward one camp or the other.

And for that reason, they needed to be as prepared as possible.

“Maple used Atrocity last night, but that was just before the date change.”

“Yep! It’s up again! Gotta save it.”

They were treating the skill less as an attack and more like an emergency evac. Fortunately, this event left them with plenty of allies who could rack up damage and be threats in their own right.

What they needed from Maple was to use the right skill at the right time to support the overall campaign.

Fortunately, Glow of Deliverance, Dark Rebirth, and her machine gun barrages allowed her to contribute even from the back lines.

“You’ll just have to make the right calls in the moment,” Sally said. “Stay focused!”

“Will do!”

Once Sally finished eating, she headed out with Chrome and Kanade in tow.

“Will this next fight end things?” Chrome wondered aloud.

“I think it’s very likely. What’s the plan, Sally?”

Kanade took a few grimoires from the shelves floating behind him.

If they were trying to settle things, he had plenty of cards up his sleeves. He'd run out of defensive skills, but he still had plenty of offense remaining.

"Depends on how things go. Total numbers on each side will be critical, and it'll end in an assault on one of our castles."

"True. If I run through the grimoires too fast, I'll be helpless by that point."

"Pain'll bust out a big gun before our small stuff does anything. It'd be better if we waited for that."

Before heading out to the field, they took stock of the total number of players remaining.

They'd avoided taking major casualties from the enemy's big moves in the fight the previous day, and after the smaller nighttime skirmishes, their side had the numbers advantage. Now they just had to keep from losing that advantage, which meant eliminating any chance of that now.

"Kanade, you got any detection skills left?"

"I do. The Order's members were handling that last night."

"Great. Let's go make sure they haven't placed any items around. I'd also like to make sure there aren't any players in hiding that snuck up on us under the cover of night."

In a large-scale battle, the main damage dealers would be mages, with their spells cast from a distance and dealing heavy AOE damage.

Sally and Chrome were both great at one-on-one fights, but their options were limited in an all-out war.

However, this next battle was set to have both sides going all-in. If an ambush took out a row of cannons, their whole army would be in trouble.

"Our foes aren't gonna take this sitting down."

"Nope, so stay alert. We could get hit at any time."

"We're counting on you to protect us if that happens."

"Will do! I'll keep you both safe."

They made the rounds outside the castle, checking for anything out of place

or any lurking foes. This was the final round of checks before the war began.



Meanwhile, in the Order of the Holy Sword's base, a similar discussion was taking place. Thanks to their sheer numbers, however, they needed to be much more specific about planning than Maple Tree.

In short, the Order had formed alliances with several other guilds and were coordinating their efforts.

Those allied guilds' remaining forces and preferences would play a big part in deciding their plans.

Whether on offense or defense, if their side was not on the same page at this critical juncture, it would be that much harder to win.

"Paaaain! How're things shaping up?"

"Good. Most guilds agree this will be the decisive battle."

"Huh, well, we do have a numbers advantage."

"Exactly. Everyone wants to press that advantage before any fatal mistakes are made."

They'd weathered them once, but Mii and Velvet's super AOE's were still a terrifying threat. If their enemy landed those properly, *they'd* be the ones trailing behind.

Everyone wanted to consider every contingency and minimize their opportunities to use those skills.

"Well, if it goes that way, fine! Best to charge in when everyone's game."

"Which brings it down to our enemy's plans."

The Order knew their first move. Buff everyone, use Frederica's Multi-Transfer, then out goes the holy sword.

Simple, yet powerful. Nothing better.

"What do you say? Should I throw Mana Ocean on top of it?"

"If we're pushing through, it's not a bad plan. But...I have a concern, and I'd like your input."

“Hmm? Shoot.”

Pain ran it by her, and Frederica had to think about it.

“Riiight...yeah, that sounds nasty.”

She mulled the problem over for a minute, then explained her thinking.

“How’s this?”

When Pain heard her proposal, he nodded. It was settled.

“Let’s do that. It’s merely one possibility out of many, but we’d better share it with the other guilds.”

“Roger! No use being too timid, right? And that plan would take real guts.”

They set about contacting the other guilds and hammering out the details.

Nothing harder than turning an advantage into an actual victory, so they needed to make sure they hadn’t missed anything. Like Maple Tree, Pain and Frederica were leaving no stone unturned.



As the second massive battle approached...

On the other team, Ignis landed on the outer walls of the watery nature town.

They, too, were verifying the safety of the area around their base.

“Thanks, that sped things up quite a bit,” Wilbert said, hopping off Ignis. He could search for enemies far faster and more accurately than anyone on the other side, and that gave them peace of mind. After all, it merely required a quick circuit around the battlefield on Ignis’ back.

“It certainly is useful.”

“All right, no one out there and no traps laid. We’re good to go.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

They knew Maple and company would come at them from the fore. They’d have to be ready.

Back in town, they found Lily and Velvet waiting.

“Will, anything?”

“Negative. All clear.”

“Good, then let’s finalize our plans.”

Flame Empire, Thunder Storm, and Rapid Fire’s actions were the core of their strategy.

“We’ll set the plan into motion once the predetermined conditions are met.”

“And if that doesn’t happen, that’s totally fine.”

“Precisely.”

“Still, if we find our forces slowly draining away, this plan will get much harder to pull off. If we’re really going through with it, we’ll have to grit our teeth.”

“True! Okay, will do.”

Velvet slapped herself on the cheeks at Mii’s point, putting her game face on.

“Be careful in the thick of combat. An accidental death will ruin this before we even begin.”

With that last reminder, they waited for the outbreak of hostilities. Everyone wanted to hit hard and fast, closing the numbers gap before their foes could make it worse.

Their motives may have differed, but both sides were eager for war.

And that made it inevitable. The event gimmick simply provided the stage.

All four leaders made sure they’d be ready for it.



## Defense Build and the Climax

With everyone hustling to get ready, time flew by. Before long, the surviving players began steadily assembling by the town walls.

Naturally, the six remaining Maple Tree members were among them, waiting for the go-ahead signal.

“Maple, sit behind me!”

“Thanks, Yui!”

There would be no orbital-weapon Maple this time—not with Wilbert still alive, at least. They’d be watching for it and had figured out ways to handle it quickly.

Up above, she had nowhere to go, and no one could reach her to help. The risk wasn’t worth the return.

She was instead riding Yukimi to make up for her lack of mobility, making it easy to cover them both.

“Okay...you do have Ark, but we don’t want you to have to use that.”

“Without Marx, they’ve got no One Night Fort. I’d like to keep them at bay.”

“I’m thoroughly prepped,” Iz said. “Expect good things.”

Their opponent’s defenses were definitely thin. On a field with no barricades, Mii would have a far harder time focusing on the Daybreak chant.

Maple and the other smaller but strong guilds were expected to move around the field, pinning down threats. Velvet and Mii were at the top of that list.

However, numbers were everything. The main flow of combat would come down to the Order and the other large guilds. They were simply the right guilds for the job.

As they finalized their preparations, the monsters on the field stirred and began charging toward the enemy camp.



“Go, Maple!”

“Yeah!”

With that, Maple Tree set out, merging with the flow of the army.

Even as they marched, each guild had a rotation of members using enemy-detection skills to ensure no one got the drop on them. Parties scouting ahead sent word that there were no traps, and the march proceeded smoothly. At last, they saw a dust cloud of enemy monsters mingled with players.

Everyone drew their weapons, and the air grew tense with anticipation.

The roars of the monsters echoed. The enemy struck first.

“Funeral Pyre!”

“Thunderclap!”

“Don’t panic!” Pain called.

Their scouts had assured them Daybreak was not in use. Staying calm and laying down barriers minimized the damage from both lightning and fire.

Still, those attacks were the starting gun. At their use, both camps began flinging spells.

As both sides laid out their defenses and protected the front lines, the two armies clashed.

“Frederica!”

“On it!”

“Ray, Total Mana Release! Light Flux!”

“Multi-Transfer!”

Thin the numbers, break through the lines, and do it as soon as possible. With his holy sword glowing, Pain found Sally at his side.

“Borrowing that.”

“.....!”

Catching her drift, Pain swung the sword, a slew of buffs concentrated on it.

“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

He unleashed a torrent of light toward the enemy formation. One hit from that would seal their fate—which is why they used every skill they had to survive it.

Damage negation. It was the simplest and best means of defense, and why Daybreak—a hard counter to exactly that effect—was so feared.

But even without invalidating those skills, they had a downside, which Sally knew well.

“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

Sally’s weapon took on the same light as Pain’s, and a moment after his, sent a second light torrent toward the enemy.

Damage negation. While powerful, it was never effective for very long.

“Reality Twister.”

Everyone who’d negated Pain’s single hit was now hit with the same effect a second time. This mingled with the fading glow of Pain’s light but naturally counted as a second attack, doing damage.

Sally had only reproduced Pain’s skill. She didn’t have those buffs. Unaware of that tidbit, many a player was lost.

A huge hole was punched in the enemy lines, giving Maple Tree’s allies a chance to charge in.

They’d known they couldn’t soak the blow and would have to null it. For that reason, they’d skipped barriers or defense boosts.

And that had given her an opening.

“Sally, what about the four leaders?”

“All here.”

“Then let’s go take them down.”

With that one blow, Pain’s job there was done.

If he could take out players capable of felling Maple, Dark Rebirth would win

this for them.

“And Maple is...?”

“Inside a box Iz crafted, handing out buffs.”

“.....? Okay. As long as I needn’t worry.”

Pain called out Ray, had it use Giganticize, and he and Sally climbed aboard, flying high.

The space their combo had blown open was swiftly filled with Lily’s summons, so they knew where Rapid Fire’s leaders were. After all, the glow of their skill effects drew the eye, and their equipment stood out in any crowd.

“Ray, Palidragon’s Breath!”

A beam of light bore down onto the battlefield, aimed directly at the source of the skill effect. Not wanting to get swallowed up in the blast, Lily and Wilbert stepped back, out of its range.

From above, the standings were very clear.

Mii and Velvet were certainly doing damage, but Pain and Sally’s formations were maintaining the advantage.

“.....”

If they kept their distance, the enemy back lines would not be able to trap them.

Still, the possibility existed that this was another attempt to bait them into overextending, like they had done with Kasumi. Pain was unsure if he should pursue.

“Let’s go. Two-on-two, we can win. And it’ll get them away from the main fight.”

“Fair enough. No use sitting on the fence. Ray, Shooting Star.”

Wreathed in light, Ray descended and shot toward the back of the enemy camp where Lily and Wilbert stood.

Rapid Fire knew Pain and Sally were coming for them.

And since Lily had been shoring up their front lines with her soldiers, she knew the battle was not going well.

As Ray swooped down, they quickly took stock.

“Will, this is worse than we anticipated. Sally must have pulled a fast one.”

“Indeed.”

“Send word.”

“.....Very well.”

They’d planned to stop Pain’s initial attack, but that had not worked out. Still, they had no intention of taking this lying down.

“Reproduction. Retainer Rampart.”

Lily’s summons made a wall—just in time for Ray to slam through it, shattering the barricade and landing in front of them.

“You’re not getting away this time.”

“Gotta get payback for Kasumi.”

“Game face on, Will. If we take them out, it’ll be great for morale.”

“Yes, let’s win this, Lily.”

Lily waved her flag, prompting more summons to appear around her.

Sally and Pain both broke into a run.

Lily was not that fast on her feet. If Sally didn’t hesitate, she could close that gap in a second.

“Double Slash!”

Her daggers glowing red, Sally unleashed a combo at Lily—who blocked it with her flag, but made no effort to counter. Instead, she merely watched closely.

“Cancel!”

Sally killed the combo motion midway through and thrust her blade toward Lily, but Lily took a step back out of harm’s way as her troops swarmed around Sally.

“Figured you’d heard the news.”

“Well, yes.”

Velvet had lived to tell the tale, and shared the attacks she’d seen.

“Well, what about this one? Autocancel!”

A red glow appeared around her, and this time she matched Pain’s pace.

“Holy Splendor!”

“Guard Heart!”

Pain still had the full might of Multi-Transfer on him, so his big move swept away Lily’s troops, letting Sally slip in.

“Triple Slash!”

She raised the flag to match Sally’s combo, but the left-hand dagger changed course, thrusting toward Lily.

“.....!”

Lily barely dodged, deflecting the right-hand dagger that had followed the skill’s motion.

Sally returned her twisted left hand to its rightful place, and kept slashing at Lily.

This time, however, she didn’t catch on—the right-hand dagger changed paths, slashing Lily’s side.

“Wha.....?!”

“Servant’s Sacrifice!”

Wilbert refilled Lily’s HP from his own pool, buffing her defense at the same time. Meanwhile, Lily rebuilt her summon walls, blocking their progress and retreating.

“Ha-ha, I see. Even aware of what can happen, I have to react to Triple Slash.”

She knew all the basic skill motions by now, but when facing Sally, that knowledge worked against her. Even when watching for it, she unconsciously matched the proper motion, yet Sally’s daggers didn’t quite follow it.

“How *does* that skill work?”

“It’s not as crazy as it looks.”

“Ha-ha, that’s a good one.”

Sally was telling the truth, but Lily was convinced there had to be a trick.

“Pain, once more.”

“I’ll match you.”

Lily moved her troops defensively. Not wanting to draw this out, Sally let Pain know she planned to end this quickly.

““Superspeed!””

“Toy Soldiers! Reproduction!”

To stop their boosted dash, Lily called forth even more soldiers. But they’d known she would.

“Holy Havoc!”

“You’re making me weep!”

Pain’s unnaturally powerful holy sword vaporized all her soldiers.

Still, Lily’s skills had much shorter cooldowns. If this skill volley continued, she’d eventually gain the upper hand.

But Sally wasn’t about to let that happen. She slipped through the gap Pain made and closed in.

Lily focused on Sally’s weapons, banishing all other thoughts.

“Double Slash!”

Sally’s daggers began to swing once more, even as Lily watched their every move.

“Fire Ball!”

As the sudden spell shot past Lily’s head, the dagger became a longsword and put a deep gash in Lily.

“Interesting...!”

Velvet had told her about a skill named Transform. Lily now realized they'd been fed some false information.

She countered with her flag, but Sally easily avoided it, thrusting her remaining dagger toward Lily.

"Wind Cutter!"

This time, wind blades appeared from behind Sally. Scowling, Lily tried to move out of their path, but her belly was split open before they even reached her.

"Ha-ha, what a nightmare!"

The Sally casting the spell had been a Mirage. The *real* Sally was using a blade even larger than a longsword—a Greatsword. In the instant Lily had been distracted, Sally had landed a deep wound on her.

"Ack, I don't even have time to think!"

Between the skills Sally called out and the effects Lily saw, it was impossible to tell which were real. It was only natural her response time would slow down.

After all, the true goal of Sally's tricks was to hijack and disrupt her opponents' instincts.

Lily had been warned ahead of time, but dealing with it in person was another matter altogether. Controlling her own reflexes and reactions was a tall order.

"Water Ball!"

Trying to figure out what skill Sally was actually using took a moment, and that was all Sally needed.

Lily still didn't have a full grasp on just what Sally's skills truly were, so the lag was in fact far greater than just "a moment."

Water Ball turned out to be Flash Spout. It shot up beneath Lily's feet, launching her into the air.

"This is far, far more unreasonable than I anticipated."

"Ray!"

As Lily spun through the air, Pain hurtled toward her on his dragon's back.



“Sorry, Will! All you!”

“Holy Condemnation!”

She had left the rest to Wilbert. Those were her last words as Pain’s sword sliced through her armor.

“Guard Thy Heart.”

Wilbert’s voice rang out. Pain’s holy sword cut Lily’s body—but Wilbert took the damage, his HP bar shattering.

“Thank you.”

“Mm-hmm. The rest is...”

With that brief exchange, Lily generated a flying machine, landed on it, and escaped toward the crowd.

“Damn it, Will,” she muttered, scowling.

Her eyes turned to the fore. With the eye in the sky entirely under her control, her vision was far broader—but unlike Wilbert, Lily could not process the sheer quantity of information in Awakened mode. At least not for more than a split second, anyway.

While these abilities were on a single player, no Mandates were available—but that brief flash of expanded vision did let her grasp the flow of battle.

“We called it.”

Things were going poorly. But they had not lost too many players yet; they could still resist.

“Okay, it’s time.”

They had options. It was too soon to throw in the towel.



A short while earlier, at the same time Pain and Sally were charging at Lily and Wilbert, the main thrust of the battle was a chaotic clash dotted with monsters.

“Scorcher!”

Mii was merciless. Swooping around on Ignis’s back, her flames incinerated anyone without the defense to soak them.

And keeping their attention on her made things easier for their ground troops.

“Commence Assault!”

“Calamity Cannon!”

“Ignis!”

Maple Tree wasn’t about to just let Mii cook. With Pain and Sally pinning down Rapid Fire, Maple was much safer, so she left the iron box and joined the fight.

To stop Mii’s onslaught, Maple unleashed a barrage from the back, and Kanade cast a powerful spell.

Since Maple was trying to limit Mii’s movements, she was shooting wildly, covering a broad range, and effectively preventing Mii from attacking from the air.

“Pyre!”

Mii was still dropping attacks whenever she could but doing much less damage.

She’d known this would happen, but actually experiencing it was still challenging.

“Message from Wilbert...ah.”

She read the note, then backed off, dodging Maple’s projectiles and other players with flying monsters as she sent word to her own guild.

“Polar Flash!”

Velvet’s lightning scorched all players it struck. Bolt after bolt rained down, with the sheer quantity making it even harder to defend against than Mii’s fire.

She’d have loved to dive deep into the enemy formation, but Hinata was no longer with her. Without Gravity Control, she might find herself surrounded by foes and with no way out.

Additionally, the opposition was being careful to stop her in her tracks. She had to keep one eye on the back lines, as well as the iron spheres rocketing

from it.

“Parry! Look out over there! Yikes...”

She managed to knock a sphere aside, but a moment later, she was enveloped in explosive flames and had to back off to heal up.

“Damn, they’re tricky!”

They couldn’t hear her. Four figures were on that back line. Kanade was hopping around, slinging spells. Maple was standing on a hill, doing her stationary cannon thing. Yui was employing iron spheres to do the same. And, last but not least, Iz was adding to the barrage with cannons she’d crafted.

Stats and weapons varied wildly, but their ranged attacks were all very formidable.

That all four of them could attack from the back lines was already a powerful asset to their side. No matter how much the enemy wanted to take them down, players with short ranges would never be able to reach them.

“Maple, there’s a pack incoming.”

“I see ’em! Ancient Weapon! Syrup, Spirit Cannon!”

A number of players, convinced it was their job to stop Maple, were closing in on flying monsters.

But they were met not just with her Machine God barrage but with further interference from the ground. Maple had two cylinders spinning like a Gatling gun and firing blue sparks.

The doubled—or rather, tripled—cover fire proved impenetrable, blocking all approach.

“Here goes!”

There was a loud boom that no human should be capable of creating. Yui had batted a sphere, shooting it skyward where it exploded in the air and damaged everything in its vicinity.

The sphere didn’t land a direct hit, so most airborne players escaped instant death. But they were hardly in one piece.

“It worked, Iz! With this, I can reach them!”

“Lovely. I’ve got plenty of those, so keep going!”

It was hard for Yui to hit fast players who were midair.

In which case, it was best to make her projectiles explode. It meant dealing less damage but could hit a much bigger area.

It was a flawless anti-air plan. All the while, Iz kept her cannons firing ceaselessly.

“Heh-heh-heh... Talk about an improvement from when you had to throw them!” Iz said, smiling at the nigh-constant explosions rocking the enemy line.

Making use of the numbers advantage, Maple’s camp was steadily pushing back their foes. Lily’s troops had bought the front lines time, but they were now in disarray; players poured into the gaps, further dividing the enemy.

This occurred even as Sally’s fight reached its conclusion.

“Mandate: Transcendence! Formation Change!”

Players were cut off—doomed to oblivion—and abruptly vanished.

This Mandate skill had greatly expanded the effective range and movement distance of Formation Change, causing the whole army to disappear.

But the advantage was still theirs. Everyone knew that much instinctively.

Follow them for as long as it took and pursue them to the castle—that had always been the victory requirement. There was no reason to hold back now.

Sally left Pain in command of the front lines, returning to Maple’s side.

“Maple! Still in one piece?”

“Yep, no issues here!”

“Pain and I got Wilbert. You should be much safer.”

“Really? Wow! You’re the best, Sally!”

“Most people haven’t figured me out yet. Kind of a cheap trick...but if it helps us win, who cares, right?”

Sally spun her matching daggers.

“Maple, climb aboard!”

“Okay!”

Like she’d done on the trip there, Maple clambered onto Yukimi’s back, riding the bear as the army surged forward.

“Mii and Velvet?”

“I’m pretty sure they’re still in it, but they didn’t come over this way.”

“Fine, fine. If one of them went down, we’d have to change our plans, so I was just checking. Lots of people are scouting, so let’s make sure we don’t get caught in the Daybreak and Thor’s Hammer combo.”

“Okay.”

“It’s a crucial responsibility!”

This was where Ark came into play—a low-cost skill that would get them away from those giant AOE’s.

Sally had already used up Reality Twister, so Kanade and Sou would have to handle emergency escapes.

If he had Sou use Mimic on Maple, then they could use Ark in two locations at the same time via means Sally didn’t have access to.

As they marched onward, detect skill effects began to go off all around them.

Lots of players were on guard against the likely chance the opponent had feigned that retreat and were waiting in ambush. For better or worse, Maple Tree had very quirky builds and couldn’t really help with this—something they’d have to make up for once the fighting broke out.

In the distance, they could just make out the castle. It was the enemy’s role to defend that, and theirs to attack it. In other words, combat was unavoidable. Everyone present knew they’d be fighting again soon, so they stayed focused, slaying any monsters that blocked their progress as they maintained a brisk pace for the invasion.

Formation Change had given them a solid lead, and they were headed back to the castle.

Velvet was keeping an eye on the enemy army, dropping lightning any time someone got close to their rearguard.

All the while, she was carrying Lily, who was little more than a ragdoll at the moment—and certainly in no shape to fight.

“Y-you sure about this? You’ll recover in time?”

“Yes...”

She’d cast off her limiters to use Mandate: Transcendence. It had only been for a split second, but the sheer volume of information that poured into her mind was way beyond what Lily could process.

“This skill really isn’t my cup of tea...”

She might have managed it somewhere less populated, but that wouldn’t be the case here anytime soon.

“You think they’re gonna chase us?”

“With Will gone, we’ve far less ways to keep them at bay. So yes. They’ll almost certainly be hot on our heels. Are you ready for that?”

“I was born ready!”

“That makes it sound like you never expected us to win here.”

“Th-that’s not true!”

“It’s all up to you, now. The most I can do is slow them down.”

As shown by Pain’s habit of blowing her summons away, Lily was a poor match against players over a certain power threshold.

But the fact remained that they still needed to deal with her, especially since she could maintain a line of soldiers all on her own.

This was why Wilbert had sacrificed himself. They were past the point where Wilbert shooting down one or two enemies would change the flow of war.

“Where’s Mii?”

“Getting’ ready!”

“Are you prepped, Velvet?”

“No problemo!”

“Okay. Then time for our last shot.”

Lily was finally starting to feel better. A rumble announced the formation of a large cloud of dust behind them, even as the white walls of the town before them seemed to stretch up to the sky.

The Order of the Holy Swords led the way, followed by several other large guilds. Their guild masters were all working closely to ensure a smooth march forward. As they neared the walls of their enemy’s base, they finally caught sight of the army Lily had teleported away. Naturally, there were also plenty of players who had stayed behind to defend the town. At that moment, every guild master was on the same page: take down the retreating force before it could merge with the defenders.

“Charge! After me!”

Pain touched base one last time with allied guild masters and then yelled the order.

With berserk allied monsters on their side, the front line roared into the thick of battle.

“Tornado!”

“Tidal Wave!”

Even among basic spells, these were powerful, and the goal in using them here was to block the army’s approach.

But the charge could not be stopped. As shields blocked the spells and barriers were cast, the gap quickly closed.

“Goooo!” Maple yelled, cheering them on from the back of the main force. She wasn’t there simply to boost morale, though—she had Glow of Deliverance lighting up the ground as proof of her protection. With a sharp damage reduction and an autoheal in effect, the charge wouldn’t be slowing down anytime soon.

“Lightning Rain!”

Bolt after bolt crashed down from the sky above as the rumble of thunder

shook the very air. Healing spells flew thick and fast in a desperate bid to keep pace with the frequent bolts.

As long as they didn't die instantly and their healers still had MP, they could soak this storm.

"Can't reach all the way back!"

Spells were coming fast and furious but losing power before they reached Chrome.

He was taking point and protecting Yui, Iz, and Kanade, but no ordinary attacks could hope to reach them from this distance. He was watching out for the extraordinary.

But given the last battle, something about the situation felt odd to him.

"Where'd Mii go?"

There was no sign of her fire spells. His first thought was a surprise attack, so he scanned their surroundings.

It didn't take long to spot her.

There was Ignis, soaring high in the sky and trailing rising flames in its wake.

"Pain!" Chrome yelled and someone else sent Pain a message.

"They're actually going for it?"

Mii had left the battle a step ahead of them, taking a few guild members with her to fly off and attack *their* castle.

"Forget her! Attack!"

"Don't falter!"

The guild masters shouted to their forces, rallying them to keep pushing ahead.

All of them had known Mii might take this option, but they could only consider it a swift path to her own defeat.

Attacking their base required incredible DPS. And to those left here, Mii's absence made things much easier. After all, they had far more people attacking



this castle—in this race to the throne, they held the advantage. Thus, their call was to maintain this offensive.

In the town ahead, Lily had somehow made it through the gate.

“They’re all yours!” she yelled at Velvet’s back.

“You just do your thing! I got this!”

They’d made it in time. Now all they had to do was carry out their plan to turn the tide of war, and they’d win this from behind.

Sparks began radiating out across the ground around Velvet.

Polar Flash? Thor’s Hammer again? Each had proved their destructiveness in the prior battles. Players at the front line hesitated, not wanting to step any closer.

“Ah-ha! It’s on! Lightning Channel!”

A series of powerful bolts, one strike after another, surged past where Maple Tree stood, finally striking far, far across the field.

It was a high-speed transport skill and allowed her to carry allies to a spot she’d marked ahead of time.

She’d used the same skill to flee town earlier, but now she was using it to attack.

Before their very eyes, Velvet abandoned the base, flying instead to aid Mii in her attack.

Their numbers had been steadily declining, so holding out had never been a practical option. In which case, better to go for broke, leave their defenses thin—and gamble on a swift strike.

“All Armies Attack!”

From her flying machine atop the walls, Lily activated a skill.

Well aware the previous battle was a losing fight, she’d kept this in reserve for the town defense as soldier after soldier filled the streets within the walls.

Wilbert had given his life because he knew Lily was vital to the success of this plan.

“I’m good at buying time. The longer you take, the better for us!”

The distance to the throne room was still quite far. Which side would break through the town defenses faster? Their only choice was to play into the enemy’s plans.

If this plan failed, there were no more chances. Players riding tamed monsters came charging out of the town gates or flew overhead, and even the most fragile player primed for mutual annihilation.

To thwart this reckless plan and seize victory, Maple’s side threw themselves into the fray.



With the battle underway in earnest, a barrage of spells flew at Mii as she rocketed toward the castle.

“Already...?”

Not everyone could fly. There were guild members on the ground below, following her on this castle assault.

She could fly ahead alone, but that would hardly be enough. Mii had Ignis descend, landing on a volcano where she found herself surrounded by smoke and molten lava.

Waiting for her was a motley crew drawn from several guilds allied with the Order, designed to swiftly deal with any surprise attacks.

Once they’d been sure the main battle was going well, they’d split off to act as a safety measure, watching out for suspicious enemy movements.

“Our worst fears were right, huh? Would have loved to be overthinking things...”

“Buff us!”

“Start with Mii. Guard Frederica if it goes south.”

“Yup, yup!”

Frederica raised her wand. She was great at ranged attacks, buffs, debuffs, healing, and defense—in other words, she was the very heart of this formation.

She'd started with the main force, but after buffing everyone and casting Multi-Transfer, she had bailed and joined this defensive line. If they predicted a strategy, they could thwart it.

"Coming through."

"My barriers can stop your flames!"

Frederica's job was much like Lily's—buying time. If Mii never made it to the castle, she had no shot at winning.

"We gotta look out for Velvet, too..."

Pain had sent a quick message, informing her of Velvet's rapid movement.

"*Sigh*...let's do this, boys!"

""""Rahhhhhhhh!""""

At her cry, everyone started activating combat skills.

"Mana Ocean!"

"Pyre!"

Fearsome flames sprang to life before Mii. They'd all be incinerated with just one touch, but the tanks stepped aside to let Frederica through.

"Ultra Multi-Barrier! Notes, Amplify, Round!"

A ridiculous number of barriers appeared. Mii's spells could break one, or even ten—but could they handle a hundred?

Sure enough, Frederica's barrier barrage soaked Mii's flames and lived to tell the tale.

"All right! See? See? I said it would work!"

"Superspeed!"

"War Howl!"

Certain Frederica had pulled it off, the others stepped forward.

Knowing they could leave all defense to her.

"Arrow Rain!"

“Ha-ha! Ultra Multi-Barrier! Ultra Multi-Firebolt!”

Her barriers blocked the arrows, and she deployed another array of magic circles behind those.

Notes’s support skills doubled the number of firebolts, and they shot toward the enemy, the total strength every bit as imposing as Mii’s own flames.

Frederica’s barriers interfered with close-quarters fighting, too. Mana Ocean’s benefits only lasted for so long, but it gave her infinite MP, negligible cooldowns on her barrier spells, and—most importantly—made the DPS comparison *very* one-sided.

“Mii!”

“We’re in trouble!”

“Our attacks can’t get through!”

Frederica’s magic took spells intended to have limited targets or effects and let her cast a huge number of them at the same time.

Just as Pain and Sally’s combo had let them slip damage past invulnerability skills, her magic was very hard to defend against.

“Scorcher! Hang in there, I’ll shift positions.”

““““Okay!””””

Mii’s flames pushed them back, and while Frederica healed, she wheeled around the formation.

But they’d known she would do that and had left no openings.

“Still worried about the Velvet factor...what do we think?”

“I think we’re in trouble either way.”

“That skill of yours has a hard time limit. When it’s out, Mii’s gonna hammer you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Right, then—Ultra Multi-Hasten!”

All on the same page, they focused on Mii. They could hear thunder in the distance but weren’t letting it unnerve them.

A wall of flames had created a gap, but Frederica's buff let them close the distance fast.

"You're not going anywhere!"

"I never planned to."

".....?"

That wasn't resignation. Frederica tightened her grip on her wand as a nasty feeling formed in her guts that she could not put into words.

"Marx, you were right. Nobody knows."

With the volcano behind her, flames poured from Mii's body. Even without any basis for it, alarm bells were ringing in Frederica's mind.

"Raging Inferno!"

"Ultra Multi-Barrier!"

Frederica deployed another barrier barrage, desperately trying to stop Mii's fire. But she'd misread the situation—Mii was aiming flames *down*.

She grabbed a fistful of billowing fire and slammed it to the ground below. Where they should have spread out across the surface, they were instead swallowed up by the earth as glowing red cracks spread out in every direction.

Pillars of fire broke free from the earth, turning the sky red and mercilessly shattering Frederica's barriers.

By the time the pillars died down, Mii had become a floating ball of fire burning as bright as the sun, surrounded by a plume of flame that roiled and coiled like a dragon.

"Took us long enough to get you here."

".....Meaning?"

"Marx discovered this terrain effect. You never even noticed?"

Marx was better at setting and locating traps than anyone else in the game. That was why he alone had noticed the fires here.

The flames were applying a fire effect to the weapons of the players below.

That it could be centered on Mii and still affect this many of them was truly a testament to the sheer range of the terrain effect.

“Ugh...this is so not fair! You’re all nuts!”

“Ha-ha, you’re one of us, Frederica.”

Time was limited. That was why Flame Empire had chosen the watery nature side—so they could take advantage of these flames while pressing the attack. They’d been on the ropes this whole time, and it had taken a while to actually get here, but if these flames helped them fell the castle, then no one could complain.

“Like I said. Coming through.”

“If this looks bad, go hit Velvet!”

“Got it!”

Letting everyone burn here would just be dumb. They had to take stock of this threat. Putting up barriers, Frederica watched Mii carefully.

“Flame Empress.”

Mii spread her arms out, a ball of fire on either palm.

These merged with the writhing flames, swelling to multiple times their original size—and then blotting out everything in sight.

“Ultra Multi-Barrier! Notes, Amplify, Round!”

It was Frederica’s job to stop Mii. The two giant spheres descended like meteors through her barrier barrage, shattering one after another.

“Blue Fire.”

Blue and red flames mingled together, chasing after the spheres.

“Uh, sorry, cover me!”

“Spirit Light! Cover!”

“Charge!”

It was too much for Frederica. The spheres blanketed the vicinity in fire.

And Flame Empire charged in after them, wielding flaming weapons that were

all aiming for Frederica's head.

"Cover!"

"Flash Spear!"

Protecting Frederica, the players around her fought back. But the fire enchantment overturned Frederica's buffs, and their efforts quickly began to falter.

"Ultra Multi-Firebolt!"

"Scorcher."

Not to be outdone, Frederica used fires of her own, but Mii's inferno swallowed them up.

Flames billowed like the heart of the volcano itself, turning the battlefield into a disaster area.

"She is way too much!"

"Any ideas, Frederica?"

"Nope, none, no way. This is insane!"

Staying here and trying to pin them down would not buy nearly enough time to matter. A few more exchanges, and Flame Empire's fire enchantments would consume Frederica's forces.

Following Maple's lead, the great shielders used Cover Move to speed themselves up. Those who could run to begin with used Superspeed or anything else they had up their sleeves, grabbing Frederica and hauling her out of harm's way.

"Run! All the way back to town! Velvet's gonna be a headache, too!"

"We know!"

The enemy attack was far more ferocious than anticipated. This was no long-shot gamble or a futile assault. They had to get back to town fast.

The final victor hung on the outcome of this fight.

By the time they reached town, Mana Ocean would be gone and their

defenses would be worryingly thin. But there was no use crying about that.

“I’ll keep you buffed, so do what you can! That’s all we can do!”

“We’ve got loads more work ahead!”

“Keep covering until the last great shielder’s dead!”

Wreathed in fire and looking down upon them, Mii resembled the sun itself—and was just as impossible to defeat. Still, Frederica’s buffs were strong enough to handle the rest of Flame Empire, even with the enchantment.

“Ultra Multi-Firebolt! Ultra Multi-Wind Blade!”

As she was carried to safety, Frederica turned around, spraying as many spells as she could while Mana Ocean was still active.

The flames Mii had tamed were purely offensive and added nothing to their defenses. There was value in fending them off.

“Damn, this is a huge responsibility!”





“If we hold the line, they’d better thank us properly.”

“And they’d better clinch this thing on the other end!”

Flames scorched the sky behind them as they ran. No matter what happened, their enemy would not retreat. As long as they kept them from the throne, nothing else mattered.



Velvet had snatched up the players around her and vanished, with Lily’s troops swarming to fill the space they’d vacated.

No matter how many they slew, more took their place. They were a mechanical meat shield that blocked all progress.

The greatest barrier of all, though, was the walls surrounding the town. Not every player could just jump over them, which forced the attacking army to focus on its weak points: the gates. But with endless toy soldiers surrounding them, taking the gates down was easier said than done.

“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

“Retainer Rampart!”

Pain aimed for the soldiers *and* the wall, but more soldiers appeared to soak the blow.

He shattered the heap of summons but did no damage to the town wall beyond.

Trying to reduce the incoming damage, the enemy back line were sticking their necks out, attacking till the last possible second. Keeping his guildmates safe, Chrome waited for the right moment. He wasn’t sure how, but he wanted to get Yui to that wall.

As tensions started to rise, an insane column of fire rose from the rear. No one even needed to look over their shoulders.

That was *obviously* Mii.

“Sally, thoughts?”

“Not looking good.”



They knew Frederica's crew was standing guard, but Mii had never used flames of this scale before—if Velvet hit them too, they were unlikely to hold the line.

“What now? Should I go back?”

Maple could use her Machine God to fly back and make it in time. But— “We need you here on offense. Your artillery and damage reduction are vital.”

“Kanade...”

There was a huge black cylinder over Maple's head. Ancient Weapon's regular laser blasters were critical to breaking through the summoned soldiers.

“But...can they hold them off?”

“Then let me put it this way.”

Kanade pulled a book from his shelves with a blank white cover.

“I can make it there alone. But I can't come back here after.”

He was asking her as Maple Tree's guild master.

Asking her to win this event in the time he bought.

“Got it! I'll do everything I can!”

“All right, then I'll do the same. I *am* worried about them, after all.”

Sally knew every skill Kanade had—and knew what this meant.

“If we get this wall down, we're good,” she said.

Once they flooded into town, they would have any number of routes to choose from. Lily's delaying tactics would no longer be as effective.

“Then I'll come with. We've got options there, right?” Chrome said.

He wasn't adding that much to this assault; if he could defend their base, that would be far more useful.

And if they weren't picky about the means, there was always a way.

“Are you saying what I think you're saying?”

“I'm ready anytime!”

They quickly went over the plan and called out to the great shielders around them.

How much risk was allowable? What was the end goal of this plan? Once they'd agreed, they sprang into motion.

There was no time left for hesitation.

Watching the battle from above, Lily spotted suspicious activity at the back—the familiar faces of Maple Tree among them.

A white magic circle surrounded Kanade's feet as players clambered into a giant black sphere Iz had provided.

"What in the...?"

Lily couldn't be sure just what the plan was, but they were clearly up to something.

She sent her troops in, and the players around joined the charge.

"Stop them, Maple!"

"Right! Predators!"

Iz hid behind the crowd, and Maple and Sally moved to protect the others. Kanade was still chanting, Chrome was climbing into the sphere with the others, and Yui was standing in front of them all.

"Commence Assault!"

"Oboro, Shadow Clone!"

"Gah...!"

"Don't falter!"

Rapid Fire members ducked under Maple's barrage and were hit by the Predators.

Trying to bail would not lead to victory. Survival was not their goal.

Players soaked the damage, summons went down, and both shielded the players charging at Kanade and Yui from all directions.

Piercing attacks meant that if she used Martyr's Devotion, they'd take Maple

out instead.

But before that happened, Kanade and Yui were done.

“Okay, win this for us, Maple!”

“I will!”

“Teleport.”

There was a sudden puff of light, and then Kanade was gone.

Meanwhile, Yui raised her hammer.

“Chrome, defend the throne!”

She swung her hammer, slamming it into Iz’s sphere.

A boom rang out, followed instantly by the blast of air from the impact. The rescue sphere stuffed with great shielders hurtled into the air and, shedding all the buffs they’d cast beforehand, it and its occupants went flying off across the sky.

Only Yui could launch them, which mean she was left behind, swarmed by enemies.

She could not handle them all alone. If nothing was done, she’d die.

But Yui had one last vital task before her. Gripping hammers in both hands, she turned to face the looming walls. Maple and Sally were here to defend her. Weighing her remaining time on the scales, they flipped that notion, and made their choice.

“Ancient Weapon!”

“Flash Spout!”

With a clang, Maple’s weapons changed shape. She unleashed her maximum firepower, matching the energy consumption and blowing away the soldiers before her. Sally followed that with a gush of water that knocked the summons off balance, sweeping them away.

It would only be moments before they were summoned again, but for that brief moment, there was a path.

“Weapon Hurl!”

Yui didn’t miss her chance. Both wrists had a Helping Hands equipped, so she had eight hammers to fling.

Leaving light trails in their wake, her weapons slammed into the town walls—and since Yui had chosen not to evade or engage, the enemy weapons found their mark.

But the noise was far louder than when she launched Chrome.

Yui’s flung weapons did so much damage it was hard to believe this was truly the work of one player. The towering walls burst, and through the dust they could see the streets beyond.

Now their armies had a way in.

“The rest is up to you!”

It was a huge step closer to victory. Players slaughtered the summons, maintaining their momentum as they crossed the shattered walls into the town beyond. Seeing that, Yui faded away, content with the part she had played.

With the walls down, it wasn’t just players who could get in—monsters could, too.

At last, they were inside. The long path up to the hilltop castle was filled with Lily’s troops. She’s set the spawn point for All Armies Attack inside the city.

It was a rational choice. Looking at their forces, she’d known they were fighting a losing battle and done what she could to delay that defeat.

But the monster army was under no one’s control. They pushed past the players on Maple’s side, racing through the streets, bounding across the rooftops, and heading to the castle by any means necessary.

Here and there they were stunned, stabbed, and shattered into light.

“Hidden troops!”

“And traps everywhere! Careful!”

Voices rang out from every direction, issuing warnings. Whether it was traps in chokepoints or ambushes in the shadows, the streets of the town were far

better domain for a limited fighting force than the field outside. To proceed smoothly, they'd have to clear things thoroughly—eating up time they didn't have.

“Iz!”

“Let's bulldoze this place!”

“Very well. I've got a doozy up my sleeve.”

Iz pulled an item from her inventory: a cannon with a gaping barrel, fixed to the ground on multiple pillars, and aimed at the sky.

“Three...two...one...!”

With a massive *boom*, the cannon belched fire, launching glittering munitions skyward—and then it burst into light. The cannon itself could only fire once. Despite that, it had taken ages to craft, and required a ton of materials.

It might have broken, but only an item could provide that light. A moment later, the munitions it launched burst in the air, raining red glowing particles on the ground below and indiscriminately blanketing a massive area. Iz's attacks never did allow for fine control.

“Defend yourselves!”

“““Mass Spell Barrier!”””

Item attacks did not distinguish friend from foe. If their allies failed to defend, the casualties would be overwhelming. A moment after the barrier went up to defend them, explosive flames and shockwaves slammed against it.

The impact of this activated traps all over, dealing fatal damage to players who'd been too focused on hiding to notice. It also, rather unfortunately, decimated the monsters. But with flames going up all over town, they'd dramatically reduced Lily's army.

“Damn, Iz!”

“Very nice.”

“Go on, follow Pain. This was the last thing I could really do.”

Their time would be better spent getting to the castle than worrying about

her. Maple and Sally ran up the burning streets toward their goal.



As the main army flooded into town, Kanade opened the guild home door, stepping outside.

“The town’s still in one piece!”

Teleport was a skill that warped the user back to their guild home. In other words, it was a one-way trip with only one destination, but that worked just fine this time.

It had let Kanade return quickly, and judging by the lack of fighting, he'd beaten Mii and Velvet there.

Maple Tree's home was near the outer walls. He headed toward the wall near the gate to take stock of the situation and found players tumbling through, Frederica in tow. Even counting the stragglers in the rear, there were clearly far fewer of them now. Only a third of the players posted to her defensive formation had survived.

“Frederica, any news?” Kanade asked, running up.

She looked surprised to see him.

“Urkk? K-Kanade, how...no, shit’s about to go down!”

Before Frederica could say another word, a red glow shone through the gate, and billowing flames melted the walls like butter.

"I made it in time!"

Mii appeared through the huge gap in the wall. The fires enveloping her had finally started dying down, with the wall incineration serving as their last gasp. Still, Maple's group had struggled to accomplish a feat she managed like it was nothing.

Players were pouring in.

"Now we just gotta hit the castle!"

“Indeed.”

It seemed to be squads from both Thunder Storm and Flame Empire. There



were far fewer of them than the forces stationed in the other town, but more than enough to capture the throne.

“Frederica, prepare for siege.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Buy all the time I can. And...you’d just get caught up in it.”

Kanade pulled a black-spined grimoire from his stacks.

“Then I’ll grab anyone I see on the way. Feel free to just win this!”

“Ha-ha, we’ll see.”

Frederica ran off, and the enemy were headed toward him.

Kanade opened a book he’d kept around since the day he first obtained Sorcerer’s Stacks.

“Forbidden Spell: Catastrophe Storm.”

The sky grew dark as newly formed clouds swirled overhead. Allies raced past him, as pitch-black sparks shattered the roofs all around, black flames billowing in their wake.

It was a skill no one had ever seen, and the enemy could not afford to blow this here. If they tried to plunge into this obvious threat, victory would slip through their fingers.

“This is a really neat spell. The more skills and spells you’ve used, the stronger it gets.”

““ .....!””

They weren’t sure if that was true. They’d just have to find that out the hard way. And to emphasize that point, Kanade made his bookshelves—and all the grimoires on them—manifest behind him.

“I’m not holding anything back.”

With that, all manner of tomes flew off his shelves, activating even more magic circles.

“God, Maple Tree...”

“...are all monsters!”

Raging winds, surging waters, death-inducing black mist, and writhing curses inflicting status effects all surged out across the town.

All of them would be the ace up any mage’s sleeve, but here they were mere fodder for the winds swirling overhead. The skill count rose at a furious pace. The black fires flared more and more violently, now every bit as powerful as the elements Mii and Velvet wielded.

“Now that’s what I call exciting!”

“Retreat is not an option! Win this thing!”

““““Rahhhhh!””””

They’d come here prepared to push through anything.

And so they threw themselves into the threat that lay before them, trying to take Kanade down.

Sparing no thought to those defenses, Maple’s side was charging through the enemy camp.

“Waterway!”

“Ancient Weapon! Commence Assault! Saturating Chaos! Hydra!”

Blowing herself up would hit everyone around her, so Sally was helping by pulling her into paths made of water that gave her the height she needed. Using these vantage points, she sprayed attacks in all directions.

Maple was great at area attacks. After coating both sides of the main road in poison, she fired two types of guns to the fore, scorching the earth.

The damage reduction from Glow of Deliverance kept them safe, but they were still deep in enemy territory. The spells raining down claimed one life after another.

Still, their invasion continued undaunted. As long as one survivor made it to the throne room, victory would be theirs.

“Ray!”

“We’ll fly too! Anyone who can, join us!”

The one path to the castle was a long, long staircase. That stretched their formation thin, so players that could take to the skies did.

The flying contingent peered down at the square outside the castle entrance and found it bristling with soldiers carrying guns—as well as Lily, her flag planted firmly in the ground.

“Sorry, but this is a no-fly zone. Ancillary Draft!”

Pain tensed up, and the staircase began to glow.

“Aughhh?!”

“Eek!”



Even as players ran up the stairs, troops were summoned below their feet.

“Whoa!”

“Maple!”

Sally quickly snagged Maple with her webs, pulling her to an invisible platform in the air. But she couldn’t save everyone. The troops knocked the players into the air, forcing them off-balance and sending them tumbling down.

Lily had made great use of the terrain through her unexpected summons, catching everyone off guard.

As one, every summoned soldier shouldered their rifle.

“Load Armor Piercers!”

“Maple, pierce damage coming!”

Maple had been about to activate Martyr’s Devotion to prevent the fall damage from killing anyone, but Pain heard Lily’s order, and barked a warning.

If every one of these soldiers fired, that was a lot of piercing damage. She’d have to time Pierce Guard perfectly while also activating Martyr’s Devotion, but that was a Sally stunt, not something Maple could do. There was too much going on for her to be that precise.

Heedless of her hesitation, the players falling yelled up at her.

“Forget about us!”

“Not like we’d catch up in time!”

“In which case...”

If the fall was gonna kill them anyway, then their best bet was to sacrifice themselves for the cause.

“““Swallow us all!””””

“.....! Sally!”

“Flash Spout. Subzero Domain.”

Maple caught their drift, and Sally caught hers.

She froze the surge of water, giving players who'd not yet fallen a place to stand, and in lieu of Martyr's Devotion, Maple used a very different skill.

"Dark Rebirth!"

Then there was black. Black muck spread out from Maple's position, ignoring even elevation changes as it stained the ground far below.

Players in free fall had nowhere to go. Even if they avoided death at the hands of Lily's projectiles, they were all headed straight to the surface below.

But when they hit, they felt not the impact of landing, but the gentle embrace of the bog—a bottomless pit of darkness.

How many fell? One hundred? Two? It was impossible to tell—especially when an equal number of grotesqueries clawed back out.

"Hi! Help us out!"

These creatures born from man heard Maple's plea, put their claws to the cliff face, and began scaling their way to the castle proper.

In due time, the first of these fallen players appeared before Lily.

"Ha-ha, didn't think I'd get to be part of a kingdom overrun by monsters in my lifetime. This is the last plot I had in mind."

The grotesqueries shattered everything in their path, from fences to fountains, forcing Lily back into the castle halls.

She headed to the throne room, bent on buying every last second she could.

Given their sheer bulk, some creatures were squeezed out and fell, but others broke through the castle walls and shattered windowpanes, demolishing the castle from the outside in.

Plumes of fire and smoke emerged from the palace. The end was nigh.

In the clearing Kanade guarded, his black sparks were demolishing buildings all around, turning the town into a heap of rubble.

"Scorcher."

"Purple Bolt!"

“Superspeed, Slow Field, Calamity Cannon.”

Thanks to his speed boost and the speed debuff, Kanade gained a velocity advantage, dodging Mii and Velvet’s attacks. Maintaining distance from the enemy racing through the catastrophe storm, he buried some stragglers with a white laser beam.

“You’ve got one of everything!”

“Well, not *everything*. Death’s Reaper.”

At Kanade’s call, a bloodstained scythe appeared at Velvet’s throat.

“—!”

“Good reflexes.”

Just before the scythe slit her throat, Velvet managed to lean back, out of the way.

Pure reflexes were the only way to dodge something that unpredictable.

“Mii, this ain’t getting us anywhere!”

“Velvet, if you go all out, that’ll give us an opening.”

Both guild’s members offered suggestions, and they decided the attack was worth the risk.

There was no telling how long Kanade would be generating these black sparks, and they didn’t have time to wait for the skill to run out. They needed to end this fight, here and now.

“Spark Impetus!”

Velvet sped up all the allies around her, and the whole group charged at Kanade.

Mii hopped on Ignis, flying higher.

“Mother Nature! Tornado!”

Kanade summoned giant vines to block their paths, then followed up with a literal tornado. Once they were immobilized, they’d fall prey to the sparks. But this went for Kanade, too—the girl he was facing was all about electric storms.

And he had no desire to be caught within range of her attacks.

“Cover Move! Cover!”

As she charged in, other players shielded her, the sparks on the wind scorching their bodies.

“Thanks!” she said, not breaking stride. Taking Kanade down was the one way she could repay the favor. “Dart! Superspeed!”

Velvet sped up and found Kanade in range of her bolts.

“Mass Spell Barrier! Ground Lance!”

“Parry!”

His barriers blocked the lightning, and a spear made of rock shot from the ground, making her flinch.

But Velvet used a skill to null Kanade’s attack, and make that last step in.

“Mighty Blow!”

“Blink.”

“Hnggg?!”

Leaving an afterimage behind, Kanade moved to the rear.

Velvet’s fist swept through empty air, but a volley of spells chased after him.

“““Crimson Wave!”””

A wave of fire—a Flame Empire trademark. Maybe a third of the total force had been eliminated, but plenty of players remained with access to powerful magic.

But as powerful as these spells might be, at this distance evasion was possible.

Kanade dodged easily, refocusing on Velvet’s lightning rain before the flames died down.

“Thunderclap!”

A column of lightning spread out around Velvet. Black sparks shot in, aiming for the post-skill lag and scorching the players who’d stepped in to defend her.



They knew they weren't winning this fight without losses, and were all prepared to sacrifice themselves to earn the ultimate victory.

"Inferno Cage!"

".....!"

With multiple AOE's giving him no room to maneuver, and Mii not attacking at all, he'd momentarily lost track of her. And the moment he did, a massive fiery prison surrounded him.

"Invulnerability won't work."

Kanade's memories told no lies. He knew he had no skills to escape this predicament. He was trapped inside this burning cage.

"Hmm, if I could move like Sally, I'd have won."

"If there were two of her, that would suck!"

"Heh-heh, true enough."

Still, he'd bought a solid chunk of time. And so, placing his faith in Maple, Kanade vanished.

"Let's go!"

Velvet led the charge toward the castle.

Kanade had laid down a zone at the entrance that no one could enter, so naturally, there was no one around.

"Mii! I wanna hit 'em first!"

"Agreed. I'll burn the players in the castle interior."

"And I'll hit the ones out front!"

Realizing Kanade was eliminated, players at the castle began preparing spells, hoping to fend them off.

"Overcharge!"

This would run her out of lightning, but by then, this event would be over. With Velvet at full strength, the sky above her lit up, waiting for her to wield the power of the thunder god.

“Electromagnetic Leap!”

She threw herself forward, not about to let anyone escape.

“Thor’s Hammer!”

A column of lightning connected heaven and earth. Players used every skill at their disposal in a desperate bid to defend against it, even as Thunder Storm’s rank and file charged right in without a moment’s pause.

They knew Velvet’s strengths and how to take advantage of them.

“Raaaugh!”

“Over there, get ‘em!”

“Gah...!”

“Dammit...!”

Players caught in the lightning were blinded even if they survived it. Teamwork with Velvet involved closing in swiftly and hitting those players the moment their invulnerability skills ran out.

When the light died down, none lived to tell the tale. That was how their guild fought. Only the exceptional could dodge this combo at first sight.

And if they’d backed off out of range, they wouldn’t catch up to Velvet before she reached the throne room. They didn’t have to care about escape routes—any players giving chase were as good as defeated already.

“Noice! You’re all the best!”

“No time for talk! Move!”

“I know!”

They raced up the stairs toward the castle. Ignis had swooped up ahead to the plaza outside, wreathing Mii in phoenix fire.

“Fire Unto Me! Raging Inferno!”

Her flames cleansed the entrance, burning through the doors and racing down the corridors. Lighting up all the rooms nearby, Mii’s attack provided no escape. Anything in range was incinerated.

They had no time to waste clearing corners.

“Mii, I’m going in!”

“Remember the shortest route!”

They knew the layout. Down this hall, up those stairs, round that corner.

Then—

“Multi-Firebolt!”

“Cover Move! Cover!”

“Augh, if only that had downed ’em...”

Frederica was waiting outside the throne room proper, in a wide area with many branching passages. And not *just* waiting.

Chrome and a whole row of great shielders were lined up in front of her.

“How are you here?!” Velvet yelped.

“Ha-ha...we had a pleasant flight.”

The Yui Express Sphere had landed right outside the castle. While Kanade bought time, they’d been running down the halls.

Kanade had hung on just long enough for them to slide into the final fight.

“Time to make one last stand! Necro, Burst Flame!”

“Multi-Firebolt! Notes, Amplify, Round!”

““Cover!””

The enemy great shielders soaked Chrome and Frederica’s fires.

There was no room to dodge here, but that went both ways.

“Purple Bolt!”

“Pyre!”

“““Cover!”””

Fire and lightning filled the hall. No one could soak that and live. Each second counted; each player sacrificed meant another lived a little longer. Each attack halved the number of defenders still standing, but until they hit their limit,

they'd make sure Frederica could dish out damage.

"Electromagnetic Leap!"

""Superspeed!""

"Don't let 'em slip by you!"

Players put their bodies on the line, pushing back.

Chrome planted himself in Velvet's path, shield raised, short sword swinging.

"Double Whammy! Chained Strike!"

"Gah...!"

Two hard hits to his shield, and the lightning shattered his HP.

""Crimson Wave!""

"Pyre!"

"Chrome!"

"Spirit Light! Cover!"

Nulling the damage and guarding Frederica, he weathered the flames. But Velvet shot through the inferno, slamming her fists home just as his invulnerability ran out.

"Multi-Heal!"

"Ack, I got no luck," Chrome swore, knocking Velvet away with his shield. Dead or Alive had failed to kick in on the first strike, and he'd used up Indomitable Guardian.

"Push through!"

"Necro, Dead Weight!"

"Multi-Firebolt! Multi-Wind Blade!"

"No matter!"

Frederica's spells claimed many a life. Paying that no heed, they cast spell after spell, downing her defenders one after another.

"Mighty Blow! Discharge!"

If they got through here, it was all over. Velvet sidestepped Chrome's shield, landing her fist on his side and sending him flying. A barrage of spells followed, robbing him of health.

Chrome slammed against the wall, drubbed by a multi-hit lightning combo.

Dead or Alive had let him persist through several decisive hits, but he could feel his vision going black.

"Damn, that was a good strat."

As he vanished, Mii's fireballs bore down on Frederica.

"Flame Empress!"

"M-Multi-Barrier!"

"Gotcha!"

"Augh...!"

Frederica had put up barriers against Mii's attack, and Velvet slid under them. A punch from one side sent her flying away.

She was a pure mage build and could not withstand a blow like that. She went crashing into a suit of armor.

The throne room was exposed, and Velvet burst in.

Back at the watery nature kingdom, the heart of the collapsing castle bore its own battle. Lily had her troops filling the throne room, making this their side's last stand.

Crack. Snap. Sounds that should not be shuddered through the air as a grotesque face peered through a hole in the wall.

Pain and Sally led the wave, followed by monsters Lily could not defeat.

"Holy Condemnation!"

"Superspeed!"

No need for detailed strategies. Pain blew aside the summons, and Sally ran through the gap.

"Reproduce. Retainer Rampart."

Making physical walls, Lily tried to buy every second she could.

“Oboro, Spirited Away.”

Sally burned another of her pet’s skills, slipping right through the wall.

If only her flag could land but a single hit—Lily’s hands clenched on the pole, already certain that was impossible.

“Awaken. Mandate: Apocalypse Fire.”

Lily staggered from the strain, as flames filled the room. Even Sally could not dodge without the space to do so.

“Leap!”

Before the flames caught her, Sally jumped.

She soared right over Lily’s head, toward the throne.

“That, I can...”

The flames were everywhere. If the Sally overhead was false, they’d have killed her.

Summoning the last of her strength, she thrust her spear upward.

“Substitute!”

“Wha.....!”

Sally was replaced by a girl in black armor as Lily’s spear struck its mark right in the chest.

And did no damage.

The ultimate defensive build sailed right on overhead, rolling to a stop against the throne.

An instant later, fanfare rang out—proof that Maple’s side had won.

“We were one step away!” Velvet wailed.

She was pounding on the barrier just before the throne.

This wall had stopped her short even as she leapt toward her goal.

She turned back to find Frederica rolling across the ground, wand aimed at

her—one HP remaining.

“How are you still alive?!”

“Hahh...hahh...I’ve got good luck...and you can blame Chrome, too.”

“Grr, that dude is so tenacious!”

At the moment of his death, he’d used Pigeon Post to send a skill to Frederica: Dead or Alive. This let Frederica survive a blow she should not have. Knowing she had that skill, Frederica had intentionally jumped into that suit of armor to hide the effect of it activating.

She’d counted on her luck, summoned the last of her strength, and bought one further moment that had changed the final outcome.

The event was over, and all players were surrounded by light that would take them back to the regular map.





“It’s a pity, but it was a good match. We’ll just have to win the next one.”

“Hopefully Dread and Drag do more next time...”

“I had a blast! But I *did* wanna win...”

They’d have to share more thoughts later. For now, the lights took hold, and all players vanished.

On the other side, Maple wearily picked herself up from the throne.

“That was close! You were very good. But I think knocking our side down backfired...”

Watching the grotesqueries fade away, Lily was still reeling from the effects of the mandate.

“I was about to use Martyr’s Devotion, but they all said to do this instead!”

“Right...if you’d done that, we might have won.”

“Maple, you did it!”

“Great offense. Nice play.”

“Oh, Sally! Pain!”

“It worked out, Maple!”

“Iz! Eh-heh-heh, I did what I could!”

They, too, were surrounded by light. They’d have to hold a post-mortem another day.

“I’ll have to train up so I can use Mandates better...”

“Then...can you be on our side next time?”

“Ha-ha, perhaps. I’ll consider it.”

With Lily’s last words, the light filled Maple’s vision.



## AFTERWORD

Hello to anyone who just stumbled across Volume 15. A heartfelt thanks to anyone who's been reading the series all along. My name is Yuumikan.

I only have one other thing to say: The second season of the *Bofuri* anime is here!

It felt like ages—and yet no time at all—since the first season aired. I had no idea I'd get to see them running around again.

Your support is what allowed this dream to come true a second time, so I'm going to enjoy every second of it. Maple's grown a lot since season one, and there are so many scenes I'm dying to see.

Heh-heh...I can't go into detail here, so you'll have to see it with your own eyes.

If you enjoy the anime, I could ask for nothing more.

And please, tell me what you think!

Until then, I look forward to seeing you all in Volume 16.

*Yuumikan*

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