

14

HINATA'S STATUS

Hinata

Lv76  
HP 180/180  
MP 450/450  
[STR 20]  
[VIT 40]  
[AGI 40]  
[DEX 65]  
[INT 120]

Skills

Magic Master (L) / Magic  
Affliction V  
Presence Lock III / Presence  
Sneaky Steps I / HP  
MP Cost Down (L) / MP  
MP Cost / Fast

Skills

Fire Magic V  
Water Magic VIII  
Wind Magic VIII  
Earth Magic VIII  
Dark Magic IX  
Light Magic V  
Nullification  
Nullification  
Nullification

Bofuri

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

YUUMIKAN

Illustration by KOIN

Skills

Sleep Resist (L)



# Bofuri

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



## HINATA

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Lv76  
HP 180/180  
MP 450/450  
[STR 20]  
[VIT 40]  
[AGI 40]  
[DEX 65]  
[INT 120]

Welcome  
NewWorld





"Ready  
when you  
are!"

"Down the  
center!"

The attack commences









## Skills

Magic Mastery X / Magic Secrets V / Affliction VIII  
Presence Block III / Presence Detect II / Sneaky Steps I  
HP Boost (L) / MP Boost (L) / MP Cost Down (L)  
MP Recovery Speed Boost (L) / Spell Boost / Fast Chant  
Fire Magic V / Water Magic VIII / Wind Magic VIII / Earth Magic VIII  
Dark Magic IX / Light Magic V / Poison Nullification  
Paralyze Nullification / Stun Nullification / Sleep Resist (L)  
Freeze Resist (L) / Burn Resist (L) / Throw / Mind's Eye  
Diving VI / Swimming VI / Shearing  
Zone Freeze / Ice Pillar / Subzero Domain

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

14

**YUUMIKAN**

Illustration by **KOIN**

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

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### Hinata

Lv76	HP 180/180	MP 450/450
[STR 20]	[VIT 40]	[AGI 40]
[DEX 65]	[INT 120]	

**Welcome to**  
**NewWorld Online.**



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Bofuri I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense., Vol. 14

YUUMIKAN

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ITAINO WA IYA NANODE BOGYORYOKU NI KYOKUFURI SHITAITO OMOIMASU. Vol. 14

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## 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.

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

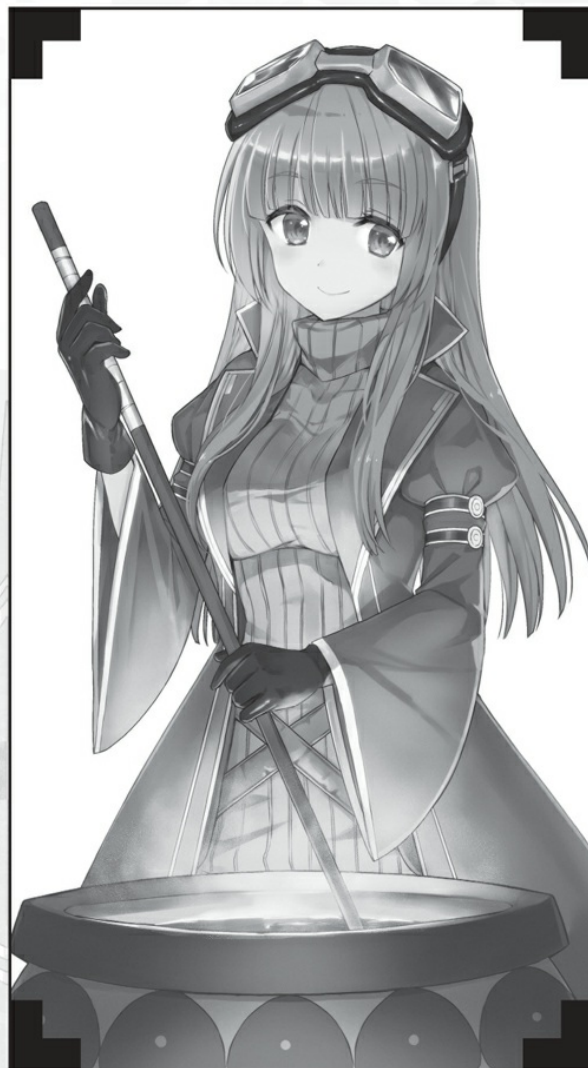
Blacksmith Leggings X

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

## Conqueror Twin

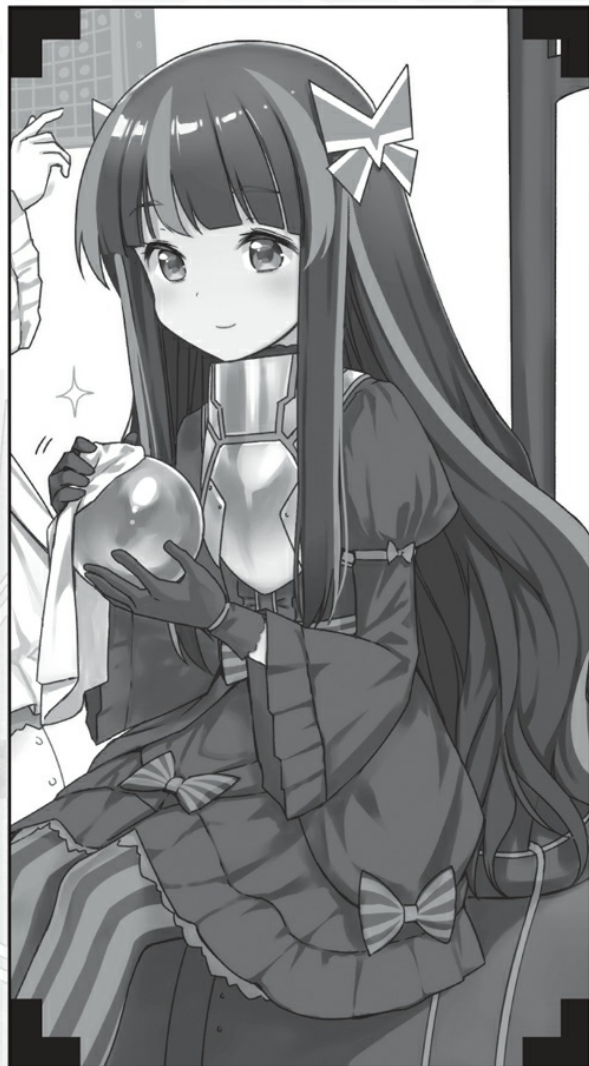
A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her younger twin sister, Yui, were scouted by Maple. She does her best to help everyone out. The twins have the highest DPS in the game, and their dual-wielding hammers vaporize anything that gets close.

## 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. Throwing Iz's custom-made iron balls lets them take out enemies at range.

## 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.

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

For quite some time, the players had been anticipating a PvP event, and it was finally here—ending a lengthy preparation phase.

The upcoming event would be a full-scale war, with the entire player base split between two camps.

The majority of players had grown far stronger since the fourth event, which had been the last true PvP experience. This was certainly the case for the members of Maple Tree.

They'd made powerful allies in the Order of the Holy Sword and had spent time strategizing together, plotting out a path to victory. These schemes took into account who they were going to face. They'd known from the start that Thunder Storm would be against them—and that Rapid Fire had gone with the enemy camp as well. Velvet and Hinata of Thunder Storm both excelled in large-scale combat scenarios. Meanwhile, Rapid Fire's Lily and Wilbert were great at locating foes in smaller-scale battles, and brought scores of summoned creatures to bear in larger-scale fights. The four of them were a major threat by any guild's standards.

As if that weren't enough, Flame Empire had ultimately decided not to take Maple's side. They'd kept their options open until the last minute, and now, in this war, they'd be every bit as big a threat as the two guilds they'd allied with.

For that reason, the Order-Maple Tree alliance's strategy relied on avoiding large-scale fights, where Maple Tree's numbers would work against them. They knew they could maintain the advantage in small clashes.

However, there was a limit to how much could be accomplished beforehand. Their camp included far more guilds than just the Order, and this war would require spur-of-the-moment teamwork.

Maple Tree and the Order of the Holy Sword would do everything they could to achieve their goal—reaching the enemy's throne.





## Defense Build and the Rain of Arrows

As the light around them faded, Maple Tree found themselves not in their Guild Home, but in the town's central square. Not the *actual* ninth-stratum town, though. Instead, this was an exact replica of that town, created specifically for this event. They were surrounded by other players who were taking in their surroundings, scoping out who had wound up on their side. Cries of glee and chagrin went up in all directions.

Maple Tree had chosen the fiery wastelands. Decorative flames danced in every corner of the town. Suddenly, a figure flew in while spurting flames.

"An impressive turnout! Welcome, one and all!"

Floating above them on dragon wings—and sporting a tail, too—was the indomitable ruler of the kingdom.

"Does everyone know the rules? The town is filled with my soldiers. Make use of whatever you deem necessary. You may be mere travelers, but I expect you to fight with valor."

The distance between the two cities was not substantial. Players with speed builds could cover that ground in no time. Failing to erect defenses quickly could result in infiltration.

"I shall be joining the fray myself, of course! Watch the skies, lest you get caught in the line of fire."

With that, the king flew higher, and a black aura enveloped her. The energy soon burst outward—and a black dragon soared off across the skies.

That was the signal. Text unfurled in the air above the players' heads, declaring the start of the event. They were now free to act.

Each guild had a strategy of their own. Some players made a beeline for the field outside the walls, while others headed for the castle proper. Those with goals in mind were clearly disinclined to waste even a second.

“Hard to think straight here—let’s go off to the side a bit,” Sally suggested.

“Good idea!”

Maple Tree moved away from the square, looking for a place to talk. But before they began to discuss plans, Maple scanned their surroundings for one player in particular.

Specifically, she was looking for Pain—and he’d been doing the same thing, so their eyes swiftly met.

He was giving orders to his guild, but he broke away to whisper something to Frederica, who came dashing toward Maple Tree.

“Cool, we’re successfully in the same camp! I’ll be our go-between.”

“Nice! Thanks!”

“And per the event rules, I’ll be protected by Martyr’s Devotion even though I’m not in your party! Such a relief.”

Frederica’s pet monster, Notes, had a lot of messenger skills—for that reason, she’d been tasked with keeping the two guilds in touch.

She joined Maple Tree now as they left the square.

Once they found a quiet location, Frederica kicked things off.

“So what’s your plan, Maple Tree?”

“We’re gonna wait and see! Right?”

“That’s the gist of it, Maple, yeah.”

“Ohhh. So you’re not gonna lead the charge?”

“Maple’s always better off letting foes come to her, and with these rules, she’s gonna have the greatest impact in crowds.”

Martyr’s Devotion worked on anyone in their camp, and to take advantage of that, they’d want her wherever players congregated.

“And early on, I wanna know what the other side’s up to. Is Pain thinking the same thing?” Chrome asked.

Frederica nodded.



There were two ways to win this event.

Reaching the enemy's throne was the first method—and the biggest threat they had to guard against.

“Lots of pets can fly now, and those taming items could really make a difference.”

Said items allowed players to temporarily issue orders to monsters. Used correctly, anyone could soar over the town walls and head right for the castle proper. If the fighting was focused there, one lapse in their defense could spell instant doom.

“From what I saw in the square, it seems the guilds we were most worried about sided against us.”

“I didn't see Flame Empire anywhere!”

“They must be in the other camp.”

Flame Empire—and their leader, Mii—weren't a great match for the watery nature kingdom or the monsters they could expect to face while fighting for that camp. For that reason, Maple Tree had assumed they'd be on this side, and that had been a factor when Maple Tree had made their own selection. This gamble had clearly backfired.

“Thunder Storm and Rapid Fire were also nowhere to be found.”

“If Kanade says so, it's a fact.”

Kanade had a keen eye and an exceptional memory—he remembered the faces of many players, and if he'd failed to spot anyone from a certain guild, then they were almost certainly an enemy in this event.

If Mii's Ignis flew in with a squad of those top players, would Maple Tree's side be capable of stopping them? It was hard to say for sure, and that was why they planned to start this war off defensively.

“Still, it'll be hard for them to make bold moves.”

“Yup. Then I guess we kick back, and pitch in when it seems like an extra push'll help, or someone needs a bailout?”

“Yeah! Let’s do that!”

Maple Tree was a small guild, but every member had outstanding skills. Guerrilla tactics would play to their strengths and could change the tide of battle.

Dying in this event meant elimination—so every little victory would make a world of difference.

While they waited, they could busy themselves examining maps filled with the data Sally had gathered and keeping one eye on the skies in case the enemy came to them.

To that end, they needed to lock down a good position, so they headed to the top of the walls.

At that range, Maple could blow up her weapons and rocket herself to the castle.

Not many tamable monsters were faster than her self-destruct flight, so if the players guarding the castle managed to buy her a modicum of time, she could easily get there.

“Notes, you’re up,” Frederica said, scanning the view from the castle walls.

There were no signs of the enemy army yet. The only things moving on the field outside were monsters and players with Great Shields forming the first line of defense.

“Notes, Sonar.” Resting on Frederica’s head, the little bird cried out, and a wavelike effect spread out around it. “No enemies detected! Well, it *is* early.”

“Oh, nice. That finds enemies for you?”

“Heh-heh-heh... It can detect ’em if they’re invisible, too. It can even see through Sally’s Mirage!”

“Learned that the hard way in our last duel.”

“Still, it has a cooldown, so I’ll hold back on it till we spot something sus.”

Frederica turned her gaze to the players forming ranks below and called out to them.



She could apply buffs from up where she was, so it was best to have players in range aware of that. If they knew buffs were coming, they could be more aggressive in a fight.

“We’ll stand guard here a while, and strike out later as planned,” Sally said.

Chrome and Kasumi nodded. Like in the fourth event, the other five were great on defense, so the three of them would focus on thinning the enemy numbers. Kasumi and Sally provided more than enough offense, and Chrome could easily keep them both safe.

Since Maple’s explosive flight could take her anywhere, regardless of terrain or battle conditions, their plans had her on standby where the situation was stable. From the castle walls, she could easily get ready to launch, whereas her takeoff might be hindered mid-combat on the battlefield.

Maple was a powerful asset, and they would’ve loved to have her in every fight, but that wasn’t realistic. Which meant they had to focus on where it was best to put her instead.

“Okay, time to head out.”

“Take care! If you go down, that’s all she wrote!”

“Yes, we’ll try not to overdo it.”

“Don’t push yourself, Sally!”

“Yeah, I know.” Sally nodded, determined not to make the same mistake twice. “Keep your wits about you, everyone. We’re up against players this time, so they’ll be gunning for Maple’s weaknesses.”

“Got it! Will do!”

With those words, Sally, Chrome, and Kasumi headed toward the enemy camp.

Outside town, they donned robes and avoided the open field, sticking instead to the sides along the woods, which were filled with natural obstacles.

Comparatively speaking, this increased their odds of getting ambushed—but the same was true for their foes as well.

In which case, a party of this size and makeup would fare better in a skirmish than in a pitched main battle.

And if both sides were at risk of ambush, then the advantage lay with whoever had the edge in detecting enemies.

Sally's gaming experience allowed her to surpass the average in-game skill—she didn't need to call out a skill name, nor was there an accompanying visual effect. This meant their ambushes would likely go completely undetected.

Chrome and Kasumi both trusted her implicitly. Thus, they'd backed the plan to invade via the forest.

And even if they did find themselves in a disadvantageous encounter, they had combat strategies to deal with that.

".....Found some. Careful."

"Roger."

"Got it."

Chrome and Kasumi couldn't see a thing, but took Sally's word for it, creeping forward soundlessly.

Not much further in, they found a party of five advancing through the trees.

The five of them were at the edge of the map, and there were no other enemies in sight. Their opponents likely didn't see this forest as a primary battleground, either.

Their foes might have had a numbers advantage, but surprise could easily overturn that.

Still, Sally's assessment of the players put a frown on her face.

"They're very tanky."

The enemy party had two dagger wielders—likely scouts—but the other three all carried Great Shields. They had those raised, facing outward, ready to defend against any ambush.

Even if Maple Tree's approach was undetected and they managed to strike first, it would be tough to deal with their opponents quickly.



“Well? It’s not out of the question.”

“Yeah, I think I can protect you both here.”

“.....Let’s stick to the plan. Our enemies are fairly guarded, and there’s no telling when we’ll next come across someone.”

“Got it. Then I’ll take the lead. Gimme a minute.”

“Okay. Make sure they don’t spot you.”

The team moved stealthily into position.

Unaware they were about to be ambushed, the enemy party continued their advance. All five were mindful of the fact that they were not on their own side of the map. As such, they could encounter the enemy at any time, and they were appropriately wary. With their Great Shielders defending them, they were pretty confident they could withstand ranged magic attacks, so they were focused on preventing anyone from getting too close.

The forest was quiet. No enemies were in sight. Yet the air felt tense.

Then a voice broke the silence.

“Holy Condemnation!”

The distinctive skill name made all five enemy players freak out and spin in the direction the voice had come from.

A torrent of light flew toward them. Contact with it would hurt, so even the Great Shielders took evasive action. Fortunately, the skill was slightly off target, and all five players managed to move out of its path.

When the light died down, they located their foes—four cloaked figures in the distance.

One of them had clearly just swung a big sword with a blue hilt—he must have been the source of the attack.

“That sword! That skill!”

Before any of the five could suggest retreating, another one of the cloaked figures moved.

“Godspeed.”

The speaker *vanished*. And that was all the convincing they needed.

“It’s the Order! Run!”

They were clearly outmatched. It was best to flee before the Order got any closer.

The enemy players darted off between the trees, and no attacks followed them—they’d been let off with a warning.

“Whew...they never suspected a thing.”

“Not at this distance. And the robes help hide our faces.”

Chrome had been wielding a sword modeled after Pain’s. Iz had made it for him, and it was pretty convincing. He put it back into his inventory.

“That went well!”

“Yeah, better than I figured it would. So that was your Guise skill?”

Sally had actually used Flash Spout on the enemy, but applied Guise to change the visual effect from water to light to mimic Holy Condemnation. Chrome had merely posed as if he’d delivered the attack.

The fourth member of their party had actually been Water Wall disguised as a human via Oboro’s Shadow Clone skill. She’d then called Superspeed “Godspeed,” and activated Oboro’s Fleeting Shadow to sell the effect.

“Iz’s voice changers also helped. If they’d listened carefully, we wouldn’t have sounded quite right—nor are we the right heights.”

“It helps that every player in the game knows both Holy Condemnation and Godspeed.”

Even if the finer details seemed off, the skill names were distinctive enough to obfuscate that. Some skills were unique to a single player, and if one of those was used nearby, no one would stop to play a round of spot the difference. Everyone knew that if they saw Hydra, it was Maple’s, Flame Empress was Mii’s, and Holy Condemnation was Pain’s.

A party of four, using those two skills? How could that have been anyone other than the Order?



“Now we’ve convinced them Pain’s group is in this area.”

“In which case, we should pull out before they bring backup.”

“Let the real Order handle things.”

““““On the other front.””””

This area would soon be deemed a danger zone, so they got out of Dodge before the enemy moved in.

Back on the castle walls, Frederica was still on the lookout for threats. That changed when word from Sally arrived.

“Maple, the rest is up to you.”

“Okay! I’ll guard this spot!”

Leaving Maple in charge, Frederica buffed herself, and then dashed toward the far side of town.

That was where Pain, Drag, Dread, and the other Order leaders were assembled.

“Oh, there you are, Frederica.”

“Got a message from Sally. Not sure how she did it, but...”

If she took Sally at her word, it seemed the enemy would be attacking from the far side of the map.

“We’re on the same side. No reason to doubt her. Sounds like our plans are proceeding accordingly.”

“How does she do it? This just more of her Shadow Clone trickery?”

“She’s never done anything like this fighting me. I bet it’s a new skill.”

“No use discussing it. Let’s move out. The enemy will be focused on our alleged location. While their forces move to that area, their defensive line nearest here will be short-staffed—and we’ll hit them hard.”

Pain knew his group’s strengths and the threat they posed to the enemy. The more the other camp coordinated their efforts, the more their forces would be split—Sally’s trap would be most effective against enemies trying to play smart.

“As planned, let’s advance without drawing attention to ourselves. Defeat all enemies we encounter. Do not allow our real location to be discovered.”

All the guild members nodded. While the rest of the base were engaged in small scraps, afraid of dying too soon—the Order left town to strike the first blow.

The Order of the Holy Sword was likely the most powerful force in Maple Tree’s camp. With them away from town, the players protecting their base were significantly impacted.

“So it’s on us to protect things!”

““Right!””

Maple and the guild members with her kept their eyes on the forest, scouring the field before them with the high-powered binoculars Iz had made for them. There were no signs of any enemies.

“I guess they’re not gonna start with a frontal assault.”

“No. We’re still in the waiting phase.”

This event didn’t allow respawns, so like the players Sally had encountered, no one wanted to stick their neck out.

As of yet, no one was willing to try a fast route to victory via an aerial assault on the throne. Everyone knew that even if they managed to avoid the players on the ground, there were so many eyes on the skies that they’d be shot down.

“If neither side makes a move, we won’t see any large-scale fighting.”

“Yeah...”

If both sides kept up the waiting game, the Order’s attack would likely lead to the first big battle.

“But there’s no way *everyone’s* just twiddling their thumbs,” Kanade said, peering over the wall. Below them, players were gathering forces to advance.

“That is a lot of people.”

“I guess they’re going on the offensive?”

It was clearly an army consisting of multiple guilds working together, their



numbers far greater than the Order's squad. With so many people, they would hardly be stealthy—wherever they attacked, the fighting would be fierce, and the casualties numerous.

“Hmm. Maple, it might be good for you to tag along with them. Traveling with those numbers might prove more effective than biding our time.”

Kanade's suggestion made sense. Maple was only on standby there because they'd wanted to see how their opponents would play things—and because she'd be their ultimate defense if there was an immediate attack.

But since the entire camp wasn't exactly on the same page, her position was flexible.

If their side racked up a lot of player deaths early on, then they'd quickly be at a disadvantage.

“Sally did say to go with the crowd and keep them safe.”

“But will the town be all right without me?”

“Ha-ha, don't worry about that,” Kanade said. “I'm ready to do my part. As long as you can come rocketing back in a pinch, I can buy you that much time.”

He pulled a black tome from his floating shelves and flashed a confident grin.

“And as long as someone can stop them in their tracks, Mai and Yui can handle anything.”

“Go help them, Maple!”

“Just be careful!”

“Don't worry about a thing. This is a chance to show how strong my items are.”

“Okay! Then I'll tag along with them.”

Encouraged by her guildmates, Maple made up her mind to join the assault. She exhaled, then flung herself off the wall.

“That should make things even easier on the Order.”

“Yeah.”

With powerful players scattered across several locations, defending would be harder.

Attacking was a gamble, but it was also a fact that defense alone could not win this war. Offensive strategies revolved around making the most of each attack, and minimizing the amount of risk taken.

“Now, then. Let’s check out the defensive facilities and help Iz place her items.”

““Good idea!””

The four of them saw Maple off, then set about their own preparations.



A moment later...

Maple came hurtling off the wall, kicking up a plume of dust where she landed. The players below feared an enemy attack, and everyone preparing for the offensive spun around to look at her.

“You heading out?” Maple asked.

“Uh, yeah. That’s the idea.”

“Mind if I come along? I know I can defend you!”

A stir rippled through the crowd. Anyone with decent levels, or who’d been tracking previous events, was well aware of what Maple could do.

If she was up for joining them, that would be huge.

“Then...yeah. Try and stay near the center. You got that Martyr’s Devotion thing?”

“I do! Should I brief you on the skill?”

“Uh...yeah, if you don’t mind.”

They were all on the same side now, but they might not be in the future. The dude she was talking to wasn’t about to force the point, but Maple figured it would help, so she cheerily explained the skill’s drawbacks.

“Ah-ha. So that’s how it works... Everyone, watch out for knockback and armor-piercing attacks. Spread the word! Maple, you stay near the center so it

can cover all of us.”

“Will do!”

“.....What’s that black box?”

There was a black cube floating around Maple, and everyone was giving it the side-eye. More strange Maple things.

“That’s my new weapon!” she said.

“Cool, got it. Use it if you need it.”

These days it was hard to find players who *didn’t* know the names and effects of Maple’s famous skills, but there were several skills only known to a select few. Keeping her new allies informed would make it easier for her to do her part.

The man she’d been talking to was clearly the leader there. She did as he suggested, and moved to the center of the army, bobbing her head in greeting to the players all around.

“Let’s make this count!”

They answered her but were clearly still nervous about fighting alongside *the* Maple.

“We’ve got even more support! Move out!”

““““Rahhhhhh!””””

Several players took the lead—likely the masters of each guild—brandishing their weapons to raise morale.

Everyone roared in response, and the army set out.

“Whoa...!”

“S-sorry!”

Naturally, the moment they set out, Maple started to fall behind, bumping into the players behind her. The AGI stat affected basic movement speed, so very few players ignored it completely.

“You really *are* slow!”



“Should we grab a cart? She’s worth bringing along even if it ties up a few hands.”

“Yeah...lemme go grab one real quick.”

“Thanks...!”

Maple climbed into the cart, and a few players volunteered to pull her along.

“Okay... Now we just gotta make sure we don’t pull too far ahead.”

“Yeah...if we accidentally leave people behind, it’ll throw a wrench in our plans.”

Keeping in mind Maple’s weaknesses, the army moved forward at a steady pace.

The group she’d joined was large compared to Maple Tree, but the event had only just begun.

This was hardly a full-scale assault involving all the players in the camp—marching straight out across the empty plain was a tad too risky. These numbers could easily vanquish small parties sent on scouting missions, but if they ran afoul of an ambush, a lot of players would be in danger.

“I’ll signal you if we anticipate combat so you can put up Martyr’s Devotion.”

“Sounds good!”

Maple remained in the cart at the center of the group. Her skill’s effect was flashy, and an army this size was not exactly stealthy to begin with—if everyone around her was also glowing, literally anyone could see them coming. For that reason, she left the skill off until the threat was nigh.

Right now, they were crossing a wasteland without notable terrain effects. Ahead, the landscape was starting to blend with the geographical features of the other side—patches of green peeking out between the wasteland’s boulders, and ice pillars standing right next to lava pools. It was a rather uncanny sight. Beyond that was a verdant forest which was the enemy camp’s domain.

Tensions mounted. They hid behind a rocky outcropping that had been scouted ahead of time and examined the forest.

This was the last bit of cover between Maple's teammates and the trees. With this many people in their group, if there was anyone from the other side guarding that forest, Maple's group would be spotted before they got close. That would likely not go well, so those on Maple's side were being extra cautious.

".....Enemy sighted!" a man with binoculars warned. The mood changed swiftly.

"In the woods? How many?"

"Not sure...They clearly just got here, and it doesn't look like a large contingent."

Maple's group had reached this position first, which meant only their side was aware of their enemy's presence—but that didn't give them much to work with. The more they tried to learn about the situation, the more likely it was that the enemy would spot them in turn, so they had to keep their heads down.

If they had the numbers advantage, it might be worth the risk of a charge. But the enemy might have a larger force following close behind. With no chance of respawning, everyone wanted to fight with the guarantee of verified information.

Given the length of the event, it was ideal to win this skirmish without losing anyone.

"What do we do...hmm?"

An idea struck the leader of the assault—but it wasn't one of the strategies they'd originally come up with. They had a monster in their midst. He glanced back, and his eyes met hers. Having Maple around changed everything.

".....We move in. Strike while we've got the strongest tank on our side."

Bristling, the players readied their weapons, their spirits braced for combat.

"Here's the plan! Listen up!"

"Aye, aye!"

Once everyone was briefed and in formation, they charged out from behind the rocks.

In the forest, at the watery nature kingdom's camp, the squads scoping out the fore saw a horde of players charging out from behind the rocks. The leaders on the defending side scowled, barking orders to the rear.

"Enemy incoming! There's a lot of them—call for backup!"

Seeing that Great Shielders were taking point for the invaders, the defenders chose to take advantage of the forest's cover, and fire a volley of spells.

But the invaders had predicted as much, and a plume of white smoke gushed out, blanketing the area.

"Drat... Everyone, brace yourselves!"

The defenders fired their spells anyway, but that failed to stop the charge. Great Shielders burst through the smoke, hit the front line, and mowed down the advance guard.

But the defensive formations were solid—fire and wind flew in all directions, only intensifying.

"Defenses!"

""""Mass Spell Barrier!""""

That skill protected the defending side moments before an inferno of magic flames scorched the incoming forces. Carried by the winds, it formed a firenado that swept across the invaders' front lines and into the heart of their army.

"How'd you like...that—?!" One of the defenders yelled, but was suddenly cut off.

A sword had burst through the wall of fire, sinking deep into the speaker's body. However, the HP bar above his assailant's head remained completely full. Somehow, the enemy had managed to nullify that firestorm of damage.

Even as he burst into light, he was baffled by the total failure of his side's strategies. And the last thing he'd seen was the entire enemy company emerging from the fires. Between the smoke and the flames, he saw that the ground was glittering and a player with angel wings warped through the blaze.

"M-Maple.....!"



His death rattle was lost among the clash of blades and the roar of spells.

Maple's army mowed down the front line, and momentum carried them right through to the back.

"Keep going! Don't let any escape!"

The enemy's strategy and Maple's group's advance had played into each other, and the flames and smoke had helped to hide Maple—this had been an opportunity.

But the brief window the enemy defenses had provided, and their foresight in securing a retreat route, meant Maple's side couldn't quite close the deal.

"Tch! AGI buffs?"

"We can push ourselves a bit. Maple *did* block all of that!"

If they left the range of Maple's protection, they could press their advantage, and the kills they made here would give them an advantage in numbers in future encounters. Maple's presence had ensured they still had full health even after their initial foray, so pursuit was an option.

That call paid off. They carved their way through the retreating forces, and by the time they'd reached the far side of the woods, the results they'd achieved were more than sufficient.

Beyond the trees, they advanced a ways through an area with ice pillars, in which players received AGI debuffs. Certain there were no enemy players in sight, those in pursuit sheathed their weapons.

"No use chasing them any further."

"Fair."

".....Hey, is everyone okay?"

A voice called to them from the rear. They turned to find Maple and the mages catching up.

"No problemo!"

"You were a huge help."

"That crazy tankiness is legit! Turned their trap into nothing!"

The glowing circle of Martyr's Devotion was still at their feet. Stripped of the "party only" restriction, it was keeping all of them safe.

That meant the front line hadn't needed to utilize their own invincibility skills, and the back line had been saved from those fires. Everyone gathered round, heaping praise on Maple. It had been a long time since Maple Tree had expressed this much excitement over Maple's abilities, so this felt novel to her. The group soon had Maple's tiny frame hefted up onto their shoulders and was tossing her in the air while she smiled sheepishly.

As they were about to turn back, however, Maple spotted red lights in the sky, like rain falling.

".....Incoming!" she cried.

All eyes turned to the sky.

Descending upon them were a large number of arrows, wreathed in a red glow. The arrows covered a broad-enough area that the players could not readily leap out of range—so the mages began throwing up barriers. But when the arrows struck the barriers, the latter shattered, and the former's descent continued.

"Gather around Maple!"

As everyone hustled back into range of Martyr's Devotion, Maple remembered something Sally had told her.

She was up against a player. An informed player. They were attacking knowing full well that Maple was there, with Martyr's Devotion active. Normally, an attack like this would just bounce off her—so there must have been a reason the enemy was making this maneuver now.

"P-Pierce Guard!"

If there was a risk of pierce damage, it was best to use the counter skill. That was how Sally had trained her.

As he watched his arrows rain down upon the distant ice pillars, Wilbert reported the results of his attack to Lily.

".....They bounced off."

“Pierce Guard? How unexpected. I thought that would eliminate her. Sally must have put the idea in her head.”

Pierce Guard was an unconditional AOE that made up for the primary drawback of Martyr’s Devotion. If Maple had not taken any precautions against a direct hit from an AOE pierce skill, she would have soaked all that damage, and her HP would have vanished in no time.

Still, Wilbert was far from done. He had a huge advantage at this range.

“Will, finish Maple here. While her partner’s not around.”

“You’ve got it.”

“Maple Tree’s members know her strengths and weaknesses inside out, but this makeshift squad will hardly have a complete grasp of them.”

“.....Fortress Feller!”

Wilbert drew his bow, and an arrow with a dark-red glow sped off into the distance, to where Maple stood with her shield raised high.

“.....Tch!”

A red bolt, moving too fast for the eye to see, grazed the side of Maple’s cheek just as she peeped around the edge of her shield, searching for foes.

A torrent of red sparks flew as the attack tore through her HP—that single shot had done enough damage to activate Indomitable Guardian. Maple didn’t exactly have a lot of HP, so if anything *did* manage to hurt her, she was pretty fragile. Wilbert had waited just long enough for Pierce Guard to run out, leaving her defenseless.

“Retreat! We can’t tell where the enemy is! Keep those barriers up! Maple, drop your skill!”

“R-right!”

Maple turned off Martyr’s Devotion, and the rest of the squad used spells and skills to shore up their defenses.

““““Magic Barrier!””””

““““Multi-Cover!””””



They hustled toward the forest, trying to get Maple out of there as Wilbert's arrows rained down on them. There was no need to use pierce damage on anyone but her—however, the parade of AOE skills was steadily chewing through everyone's HP. Taking turns to defend, they ran for the woods, but with no way to fight back, the situation was dire.

"I've gotta help...!"

To protect the squadron, Maple resorted to using her new skill.

"Ancient Weapon!"

The rain of arrows and that single powerful shot she'd taken had filled up her energy bar, and she spent the whole thing at once, splitting the black cube into eight pieces that spread out around her. Each was lined with blue light and deployed a barrier that shone brightly. The next rain of arrows struck them and was blocked with a shower of furious sparks.

"Whoa...!"

"Keep running! Carry Maple! If you've got Indomitable Guardian, make a wall around her!"

Not wanting to lose one of their camp's best, they kept Maple safe long enough to reach the cover of the forest.

From a distance, Wilbert lowered his bow, eyes locked on those trees.

"I can't exactly shoot through that terrain. This is as far as I go."

"Hmm. That energy barrier was not in our calculations. I suppose it's no surprise she's acquired some new skills."

Neither of them had ever seen it before, but Wilbert's sharp eyes had not missed its source.

"She transformed the black cube that was hovering next to her, so it's likely equipment."

"Interesting. We'll have to watch for whether she's got that equipped. It's time we head back. Shame we didn't arrive in time to back up our own forces... I suppose we'll have to work on mobility."

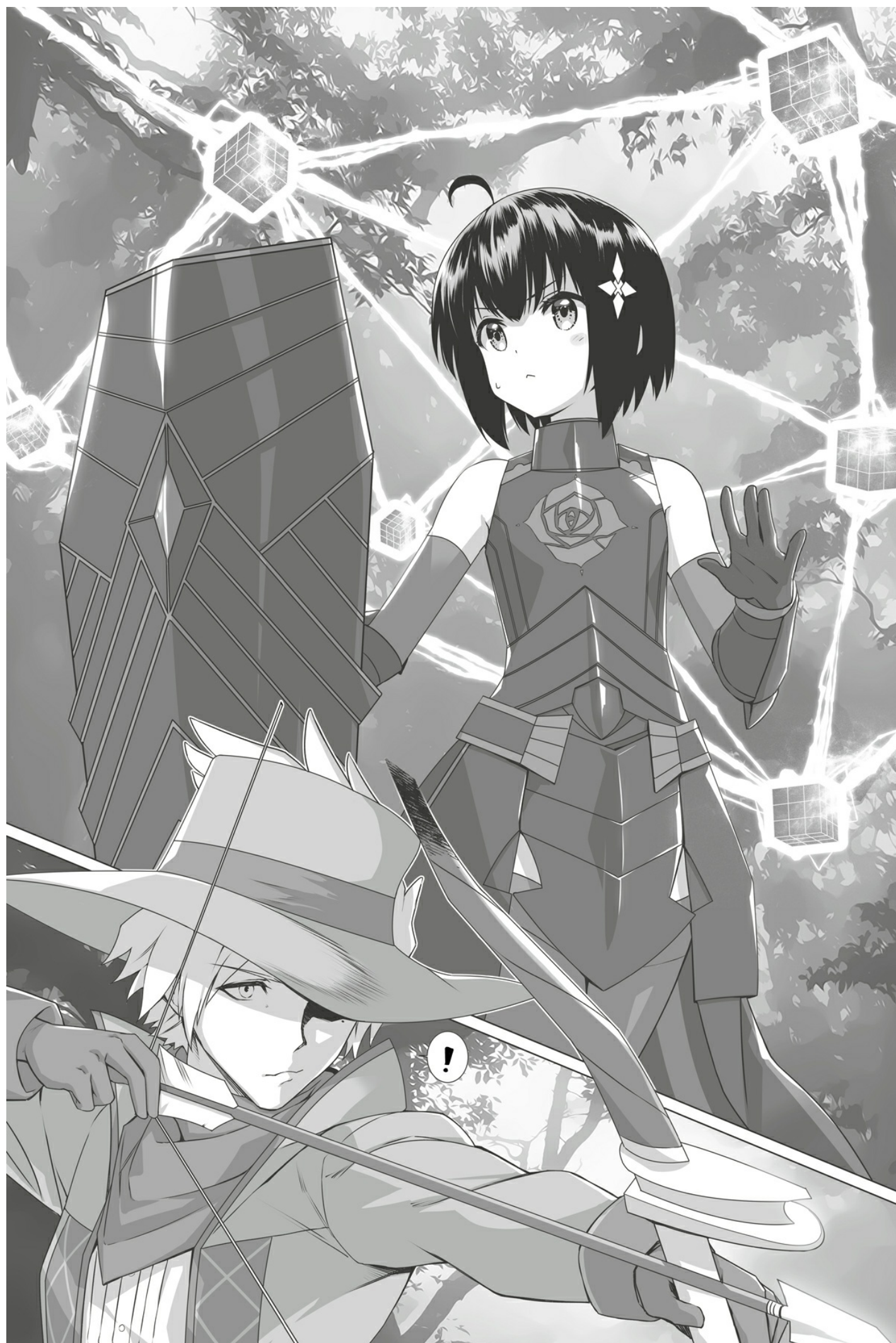
They'd driven off Maple and her squadron, but not before Maple's group had killed a lot of their players. Lily and Wilbert's camp would have to chalk this one up as a loss.

"True, but if we'd been any closer, we'd have been forced to fight at suboptimal range. A tricky issue."

Still, their counterattack had been powerful, and it was not likely their enemy would return anytime soon. For that reason, they left the ice pillar zone behind.

Rapid Fire's leaders had stopped the invasion and made it less likely that anyone would approach from the same direction. But it remained true their side had lost a considerable number of players.

If only they'd been able to take advantage of that opportunity to remove Maple from the board. With that regret on their minds, they headed back to their original positions.







A short time after that...

Sally's trio was briefly back at the city walls. Iz was using items to erect a fortress outside the gate through which foot traffic entered the town.

"That sure is something."

"Yeah..."

"Our final line of defense on the field."

It was a barricade lined with cannons. Ordinarily, items would not allow for such substantial defenses, but Iz was different like that. Even a tanky front-liner would find themselves in trouble if they charged into defenses like these without a plan.

"Oh, you're back!" Iz said, spotting their approach. "Glad you're still with us."

"We're just getting started. Still mostly playing wait and see."

"We can help you set up for a bit. No telling when they'll try an assault."

For that reason, it was better to prepare early. And indeed, as they assisted Iz, they saw a crowd of players headed their way.

"Oh, enemies...?" Chrome said, drawing his short sword.

Iz pulled some binoculars from her pouch, scanned the faces of the approaching group, and shook her head.

"No, that's a group from our side that left earlier. Maple went with them..."

"She did? Ah, yeah, with those numbers she'd be pretty useful."

Not long after, Maple emerged from the crowd, bowed and said her good-byes, then came jogging over to her friends.

"I'm back!"

"Were you keeping busy, Maple? How'd it go?"

"They took out a bunch of enemies, I think? There was lots of smoke and fire, so it was hard to get a proper count."

"Ha-ha, sounds like a spectacle."

“Still...we didn’t lose anyone, but I already used up Indomitable Guardian.”

“For good reason, I imagine?”

“Yeah, um...”

Maple explained what had happened, and from her description, everyone knew who was responsible.

“Okay, that was *definitely* Wilbert’s doing.”

“Agreed. But if he can aim at us from outside our visual range, it’s worse than we thought.”

“You can’t even see him coming, but he can one-shot you. Makes it hard for us to go anywhere near their side.”

Wilbert was an archer, but with that kind of range, he was truly a threat—an assassin who never missed his mark and who never revealed himself. And with the ability to use AOE’s and piercing attacks as well, he had his bases covered.

Maple didn’t have the stats or gaming ability to react to those arrows in time. Without Indomitable Guardian, she’d have died before she could do anything.

“Sorry, Sally. I used Pierce Guard on the first volley.”

“That’s a good thing! I bet you made the right call there. If that rain of arrows was piercing, you wouldn’t be here now.”

“And it’s good you went with our forces, too. If that many players had wound up sitting ducks for Wilbert, the losses would’ve been considerable.”

It was terrifying to think about what would have happened if Martyr’s Devotion hadn’t soaked that first volley for everyone.

“The upside is, everyone lived. I call that a big win.”

“Okay! Good! Next time, I’ll make sure to block with my shield.”

Feeling better, Maple started helping Iz with item placement. With one eye on that, Sally’s group conferred among themselves.

“That is pretty rough. He’s likely capable of one-shotting most of the Great Shielders.”

“With a range that nuts, players with low AGI are sitting ducks. If they survive the hit, the subsequent attacks won’t do as much damage...but that first strike would kill most players.”

The guilds in the army Maple had joined consisted mostly of higher-level players. The fact that even they would have been in trouble proved just how high Wilbert’s DPS was.

“I’m not especially tanky myself. Depends on if Dead or Alive is feeling generous.”

“I’d fare no better. And if Chrome and Maple can’t handle it, nobody can.”

“Shooting from outside the range of our detection is just nasty. He’ll always get the drop on us.”

An instakill attack they couldn’t see coming. They’d have to be sure of Wilbert’s location before they could ever launch an assault on the other camp.

“Guess we’ll just have to consider whether he has line of sight. From what Maple told us, he can’t exactly shoot through terrain.”

“I’ll try and think of a plan. For now, just be careful the next time you head that way.”

If they wanted to win this war, they couldn’t afford an early loss of forces.

They had powerful allies *and* powerful foes. PvP was challenging in its own way, and they savored that as they helped Iz set up.



Meanwhile, the Order of the Holy Sword was moving through the woods, making short work of any enemies they found—whittling away their opponent’s numbers.

“Notes, Sonar. Not many... Six to the left; three to the right.”

“Head for the six, quick and quiet.”

Notes’s skill allowed Frederica to detect enemies from a distance, with their foes none the wiser.

And if Frederica knew where her foes were, she could hit them hard with spells from the shadows. The sheer strength and quantity of her attacks were

enough to crumple most players.

If any enemies did survive, Pain, Dread, and Drag would cut off their escape, give chase, and bring them down.

Sally's trap had worked wonders, and there were far fewer players in this area than they'd anticipated. They were advancing without any real difficulty.

"They really have taken the bait. Definitely fewer players than you'd expect if there was an even distribution."

"They're clearly focused on other areas. Still, I'm forced to use a cooldown-reduction spell on Notes every time!"

Each time Notes's skill was ready, another group of players vanished from the event.

"We did warn them to watch the other side...but this is worrying."

If there were so few enemy players here, that meant there were that many more concentrated on the far side of the map, where the enemy *believed* the Order to be.

In which case, the people on the Order's side who were defending that area would be at a disadvantage.

"We must stay the course. If we turn back here, all of this will be for naught."

"Yeah, and the Maple Tree guys are hanging out in town. They won't go down easy."

".....True. We'll just have to press the advantage we've got on this end."

"Notes is ready!"

They moved on, ready to locate their next target.

But Pain's concern was genuine. Even if their opponents had taken Sally's bait and gone after the supposed location of the Order, there were still far too few players over here.

"Do they have a major force gathered somewhere else?"

Their enemies had schemes of their own. This event could not be won without attacking, so their enemy would make a play in due time.



“Frederica, while we fight, cast minimal buffs, and prioritize contact with the guild members we left behind. It’s possible there’s a large army on the move somewhere.”

“...! On it.”

“Even more reason not to turn back. The moment we get word they’ve spotted the enemy, that’s our cue to go all out.”

“...So we leave them to it?”

“Gotcha. No point in freaking out!”

“Rampage as long as we can,” Pain said. “The more casualties we rack up, the better.”

Everyone nodded. Heightening their focus, the Order continued their advance.



## Defense Build and Delivery

Once all of Iz's items were in place, they had a solid defensive line outside the walls—barricades lined with cannons.

"Thanks for helping! These are built to last, so they'll stay put for the whole event...until the enemy knocks them down, at least."

"That's amazing. How do they work?"

"Heh-heh-heh. No need to man them. No need for ammo. They'll fire automatically when the enemy approaches."

Auto-turrets! The harder the assault, the better. No telling when the enemy would come, so having that many cannons ready to intercept them was a real asset.

"But if they get this far, then things aren't exactly going well. Ideally, the cannons will never see use at all."

If war was raging right outside their gates, any players they couldn't stop would soon breach the town. And other players would take advantage of the chaos to fly in overhead.

However high the town's defenses were, battles this close by would carry a risk of losing the war. But battles far from town might leave them unable to retreat and cause them to suffer substantial casualties.

It was critical they maintain the right balance.

As they were talking, another group of players started filing out.

The same guilds Maple had gone with earlier were at the core of this army. They'd swapped out some players—anyone whose powerful skills were on cooldown now—and reformed their ranks.

"They're trying again?"

"Maple kept them safe, so they took no real losses. They're ready to go."

Since Maple would now die instantly if she took a piecing attack, whether she should join the front lines was no longer so simple a decision.

The odds were high that the enemy was also moving in numbers. The Order had said they'd maintain their assault until they'd pulled the enemy's focus back to them.

"Guess we'd better change our plans," Sally said, sharing that info about the Order's movements. "Can't just hang out waiting for something to happen."

Everyone knew what to do.

"If they're bringing an army, there's only so many places they can go. The map might help us narrow that down."

Kasumi opened the map they'd made, expanding it in the air in front of them.

There was a wide variety of terrain out there, and much of it was hard to move large armies through.

Some areas caused damage; others were just too narrow—Maple Tree had mapped that terrain thoroughly and could use that information to make accurate predictions.

"Right down the center is easiest."

"Yeah—nice and open, no weird terrain effects."

The army that had just left was going that way.

That meant the two forces might run into each other.

"Should we join them? With Maple absent, I'd rather not do anything dramatic..."

"At the front lines, we can back the Order's play, and move where we're needed. Slip through the gaps."

That made sense, so they settled on the plan and set about choosing a lineup.

Maple, Mai, and Yui weren't agile, even on a good day. This mission would require guerrilla tactics and a good deal of stealth, so their oversized rides might fix the speed issue but were hard to miss. For the same reason, Atrocity was not an option.

“Let’s rope Kanade in and run it with the five of us. I’d planned on secreting Iz behind enemy lines eventually, anyway.”

“Fair enough. Chrome, you be my guard.”

“You got it.”

“I’ll shoot Kanade a message. He should still be in town.”

“Then I’m hanging back with the twins!”

“Yup. If anything happens, go to the allies around you. Or message us, and we’ll head straight back.”

“Mm-hmm! Will do!”

Maple and Kanade switched places, and Maple headed off to the defensive lines.

“Okay, shall we?”

“Let’s hope it stays quiet here...but it likely won’t.”

“If it comes to that, we’ll just have to strut our stuff.”

“I’m ready anytime. My item stocks are full.”

They checked their inventories once more. Sally and Kanade—who both had the map memorized—led the way, and they set out after the army.

Maple moved to the top of the town walls, using her map to regroup with Mai and Yui.

“Maple!”

“I’m glad you’re safe!”

“I used up Indomitable Guardian, so I’m stuck here for a while!”

“Oh dear...”

“Yeah. Our enemies are very strong!”

“Let’s hope the others come back in one piece.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine!”

“Yes...all we can do is believe in them.”



“Exactly!”

Their five guildmates were among the best players in the game. That was worth putting their faith in. Those who remained behind just had to believe in their allies.

“How was it back here? Anyone attack while I was gone?”

“Nobody came.”

“Still seems like most fighting is on the border.”

The castle town was the furthest place from the enemy camp. A considerable number of allied players were on guard here, and even if they weren’t working in perfect sync, it would be tough to slip past them all.

“There’s a number of camping spots out on the field, and some guilds are using that to stay on the front lines!”

“Oh? Wow! How’d you find that out?”

“We heard them making plans before they left town.”

“I guess everyone’s fighting in their own way.”

“Moving around, jockeying for position...making plans of their own.”

With a map this big, mobility was critical. Swift strikes, rapid retreats, regrouping in new locations—speed helped with all of those things.

As they chatted, a new group of players gathered outside the gates. Another assault force was preparing to move out. They were messaging players on the walls, getting them to scope out the distance with binoculars.

“C’mon, they need backup now,” a player in the new assault wave announced.

“Yeah, let’s hurry!” their teammate responded right away.

It sounded like their allies were in trouble. Several players were rushing down the steps.

Skirmishes were breaking out everywhere, and the war was really heating up.

“I hope they make it in time...”

“Will they be all right?”

The twins looked worried. Maple thumped a fist on her palm, an idea coming to her.

“I know! Mai, Yui! Just standing around isn’t very useful. What if we...”

She whispered her idea in their ears.

“Huh?!”

“W-well...I *think* we can pull it off.”

“Then let’s do it!”

““O-okay!””

The twins answered enthusiastically, but they were visibly nervous. Still, they’d made their choice, and set about getting ready.

Not long after, another call for backup arrived, and a new group of players hastily assembled outside the walls.

“Hmmm, that’s a solid twenty...,” one of the players said.

“The faster people got here first. Give the slower ones a minute, then we head out,” someone advised.

They’d have rather formed a balanced party, but getting to the scene promptly was the priority. Time was a luxury.

“.....Hmm?”

“What the...?”

The speakers had spotted Mai and Yui holding up large signs.

IN A HURRY? WE CAN CARRY YOU TO THE FRONT LINES! \*ONLY IF YOU’RE *REALLY* DESPERATE!

Those words were exactly what the players gathering outside the walls needed most, but that phrasing—plus the knowledge that the twins were part of Maple Tree—made them rather uneasy. They made up their minds to accept the offer anyway.

“Uh, do you mind?”

“We’d like to take you up on that.”

“Please do!”

“Um, where to, and how many?” one of the twins asked.

“There’s twenty of us. As for the location...lemme pull up a map...”

Mai and Yui took a look and confirmed their idea was possible.

“We’re ready when you are!”

“Gather at the top of the wall!”

The twins led the way, racing up the stairs inside the walls.

“That turtle’s too slow... It can’t be that,” one of those twenty players mumbled.

“It could be their bears? They might have a skill,” another suggested.

The players following weren’t sure how this would work, but figured the girls weren’t lying. Certain all twenty of them were there, they followed Mai and Yui up the stairs.

““Over here!””

At the top of the wall was a ball of wool, with cannons sticking out of it like smokestacks. When she heard the twins call, Maple stuck her head out from the mass of fiber.



“Climb on in!”

““?????””

That statement was inherently perplexing, but they *were* in a hurry, so everyone uncertainly worked their way into the fluff.

Once the wool ball was packed tight, Maple activated her skills.

“Martyr’s Devotion! Crystallization!”

Angel wings spread out from the fluff, and the surface of the ball hardened like crystal, locking Maple and twenty other players inside.

“Uh, yo...!” one of the players exclaimed.

“Is this real?” someone trapped in the ball asked.

““Here we go!””

Hearing voices outside, the players within parted the wool fibers, peering through the transparent crystal shell at.....the twins outside. The two of them had hammers at the ready.

““One! Two!””

Their hammers swung and struck true at the heart of the Maple ball, blasting it skyward at tremendous speed.

“Aughhhhhh!”

“Th-this is insane!”

This rapid transit service used Martyr’s Devotion to negate damage, and the wool was used to turn Maple into a cushioned projectile.

The twins’ absurd strength made the launch possible, and Maple’s defenses negated the issue of fall damage—all that remained was the audacity to even make the attempt.

“Next, Commence Assault!”

One eye on the map, Maple shifted to flight mode. As they neared the destination, she blew up her cannons, turning them into a meteor bound straight for the ground.



“We’re here! Good luck out there!”

After they landed, Maple dropped Crystallization, and the players squirmed out of her wool. Martyr’s Devotion ensured no one could get the drop on them while they did so. Once she was sure they were all free, she started sprouting more cannons.

“Uh...thanks!” one of the twenty players said.

“Not sure...if we’ll ask again, but...”

It had certainly helped, but the “desperate” disclaimer had been right on the money. They watched Maple blast off back to the castle, and then hurried toward their allies.



Blissfully unaware that Maple was providing airdrops, Sally’s party caught up with the other forces and were entering the watery nature kingdom.

“No signs of hostiles.”

“Sally, what do you make of it?”

“.....At the very least, they aren’t in combat range.”

“Be on the lookout for surprise attacks. They got Maple with that.”

“Yes... If I can see them, I’ve got skills that can handle most things, but...”

Kasumi, Iz, and Kanade did not have any passives that could prevent sudden death. If Wilbert was in the area and aiming for them, they’d likely be shot down before they could even attempt to resist.

For that reason, they were sticking to the cover of the forest, and keeping Chrome in front of them.

“If there are archers waiting, then they’ll have trouble lining up a shot here. But eventually this area gives way to plateaus. We’ll have to be careful.”

Chrome planned to do what he could to keep them safe, but being in enemy territory was an inherent disadvantage.

“We’re about to cross the border. Sally, how’re the Order doing?”

“Steadily progressing, mowing down foes.”

“I wonder which of us will be the first to find this army they mentioned...”

If they kept advancing, eventually the Order would have to deal with the enemy’s large army, too.

“Still, this is getting creepy. We’re both in enemy territory, yet...”

There might have been an ambush waiting. But before Chrome could even finish his sentence, a massive column of fire appeared up ahead. Their allies had encountered the enemy, and everyone knew *who* it was.

“Back ’em up!”

“Tell me when you need Mind’s Eye.”

“Okay, game faces on!”

“Yeah, that is clearly...”

“Flame Empire.”

Sally and the others were far from their own camp. Attempting a retreat now would mean having flames licking at their heels, threatening to engulf them.

But Maple Tree’s allies were here in numbers. An army advancing with every intent of winning this battle and improving their standings in the war.

As another pillar of fire scorched the heavens, Maple Tree’s members joined the fray.

Players from both camps were locked in combat on the burning battlefield.

However, Maple Tree’s allies were being slowly pushed back.

This was not surprising. What had once been an empty field now sported a massive, sturdy fortress, keeping many enemy players safe. The walls were every bit as sturdy as the defenses Iz had laid down outside their town. And the enemy forces were joined by throngs of sand and water summons, armies to which death was of no significance.

And anyone who stopped to deal with these was struck by fireballs, flying swords, or wind blades.

“I knew that was Mii!”

“Kasumi, we could use a reset!”

“Haku, Supergiant!”

One look at the conditions, and Sally saw a need to regroup.

Kasumi nodded once and enlarged her pet snake, sending it out across the battlefield.

Haku attacked the moment it left the woods. The massive snake hit before foes had even spotted it, crushing them before they could react at all. It pulverized the summoned soldiers, and enemy player after enemy player found their HP dropped to zero.

“.....!”

This was not just buying them time to regroup—it was an assault so powerful it instantly turned the battle to Maple Tree’s advantage...yet the dead players were somehow resurrected immediately, and the summons were swiftly replaced. Clearly, this would not be that easy. Sally’s expression grew grim.

“Haku, come back. Sally?”

The snake would soon be a target, so Kasumi brought it back, and looked to Sally for their next move. But all five were already on the same page.

“Gotta take out Misery and Marx!”

“Yeah, we can’t win otherwise! They’re too good!”

“I’ll open a path.”

“I can pin people down!”

The game’s most powerful area healer was covering the entire zone, creating a prodigious amount of unbeatable soldiers. Pillars of fire and flying blades struck any players attempting to resist. If nothing was done, the number of players on Maple Tree’s side would continue to decline.

Leaving the fight between armies to their allies, Maple Tree’s members skirted the field, avoiding fights. They were aiming for the fortress where Flame Empire’s leaders likely stood.

“That fortress is one of Marx’s traps. Dealing damage to it should knock it

down!”

It was likely very durable, but not invulnerable.

“Bombs away, then. Lure ’em out by smashing it!”

“Understood!”

Iz started pulling bomb after bomb out of her inventory, mixing in bombs with timers to help detonate the rest.

“Flash Spout!”

Well aware of how durable Iz’s bombs were, Sally used a torrent of water to sweep them across the field to the base of the enemy fortress.

A moment later, there was an enormous explosion. It did major damage, but not enough to crack the fortress.

But it *did* apply pressure—their foes would have to take action. It proved that, left unchecked, Iz’s bombs would soon bring the fortress down.

“Okay, can’t have you running wild on us.”

“Shin!”

“Yo, Kasumi. And four more of you? Left your wackiest builds at home?”

Shin came flying down to them, standing on his sword. He had used Splinter Sword to make platforms for himself in the eighth event, and he was clearly getting better at it.

“I’m afraid our guild master’s busy prepping something, so you’ll have to settle for me.”

Shin called out his pet monster, Wen, which generated wind blades. Leaving only enough shards to stand on, he had the rest swirl around him.

“Can you handle these without Maple around?”

With that challenge, Shin attacked—his blades allowing him far more hits than the five members of Maple Tree combined.

“Wen, Wind God! Invisible Blades!”

The swirling wind blades turned toward them, and the shards generated by

Splinter Sword were enhanced with a wind effect.

“Haku, Harden!”

Kasumi put Haku in front of them, and had it harden its body to block the wind blades. But Shin himself controlled the shards and didn’t let that stop him.

“You two, handle yourselves! Necro, Polter Bolster! Multi-Cover!”

Well aware that Sally and Kasumi could protect themselves, Chrome shifted Necro to defensive mode, and stuck to covering Iz and Kanade.

“Tenth Blade: Diamond!”

Kasumi used a damage-reduction move, batting down as many shards as she could, while Sally darted out ahead, twisting her body through the wind blade barrage. When the sword shards came after her, she negated their aim with evasion superior to Shin’s control. Blue scarf fluttering behind her, she charged in, barely slowing down—like he was doing nothing at all.

“Ha-ha! You’re a monster!”

“Mind if I take your head?”

“It’s not available!”

As if the real fight was just beginning, Shin’s blades sped up. He’d been honing this skill for a long time and had developed a wild fighting style where he danced across shards, which moved at high speeds.

“Next!”

The deflected shards regained momentum, closing in on Sally from all sides.

Shin’s movements were smooth—as fast as Sally’s were, and hard to catch up with. Sally’s own techniques were beyond belief, and she was still dodging, but some attacks could not be dodged while lunging forward. The more she tried to close in, the more Shin turned his blades into something like a shotgun, forcing her sideways and buying himself precious seconds. Sally couldn’t afford to let a single shard hit her—she *had* to dodge them all.

“Go, Chrome. I’ll guard things here.”

“.....! Okay, it’s all yours.”



Seeing that they were getting nowhere fast, Kanade sent Chrome out to back up Sally.

“Sou, Mass Spell Barrier.”

His pet threw up defenses, and he kept his shelves ready to use for a big move while creating water and sand walls with his own magic skills.

The grimoires in his stocks could only be used once. But if he did use one, he could swiftly throw up defenses just as strong as Chrome’s.

And with this brief lull in the attacks on her and Kanade, Iz took out the same barricades she’d used outside town, firming up their defenses.

“Cover Move! Cover!”

“Blood Blade!”

Those defenses meant Kasumi didn’t have to worry about their back line. She liquefied her blade, knocking even more shards down while Chrome put himself in the way of a blast aimed at Sally.

That let Sally get a step closer, putting her right up on Shin before he could regroup Splinter Sword.

“Water Cowl! Superspeed! Oboro, Blighted Blaze!”

These skills added extra water-element strikes to her attacks, and made flames extend the reach of her daggers.

Her base speed was a good match for Shin’s, but Superspeed made her faster than him, and she closed the remaining gap between them.

“...!”

Splinter Sword’s momentum sped Shin up, but not enough. Realizing he couldn’t escape, Shin raised his shield, throwing the rest of the shards around him at Sally in the hopes of defending himself.

But Sally threaded right through them or batted them aside.

“You make it look easy!” Shin shouted.

“Hyahh!”

With Sword Dance's buff active, his shield couldn't fully block her blow. It struck Shin's body, carving away a huge chunk of HP.

"Oww! Was that really a dagger?!"

Shin called all the shards back, trying to hit her from behind, but if Sally focused on evading, she could easily handle that.

Still, this allowed Shin to regain some distance.

"Sigh...even without Maple, I can't handle all of you at once."

Shin's specs were designed to handle groups, but these players were from Maple Tree, and there were five of them.

"See you later! If we both live that long!" he said as he began his retreat.

"We're not letting you get away, Shin!"

"Yeah, neither are we," he said ominously.

Behind Shin, a massive fireball rocketed skyward.

It had burst through the roof of the fortress, and grew to be even bigger than the fortress itself, lighting up the battlefield like a veritable sun.

"Toodles!"

Shin sent all his shards forward, cutting off their pursuit as he escaped.

Sally's Flash Spout had partially flooded the fortress; Misery and Marx were working on repairing that damage while simultaneously supporting their front lines.

"Sigh... They went ham on my traps... The walls shattered... I hate Haku..."

"Yes, it is a problem. However..."

"Get 'em, Mii."

Their eyes were on the skies, where a small sun hovered over the battlefield, the flames around Mii burning far brighter than those surrounding her pet phoenix.

"Ready to go, Ignis," Mii said to her pet.

With the fires as strong as they could get, Mii unleashed a skill.

“Daybreak!”

White flames mingled with red, and trails of flame ran across the surface of the fireball.

The effect was simple, but the message it conveyed was clear. Her next attack could not be blocked by any damage-negation skills. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Raging Inferno!”

And that was what she’d been building up to.

She dropped that glittering sun on the ground. It incinerated everything it touched. The billowing flames were impossible to block, so they consumed the field, leaving only ash behind.



As Maple Tree’s battle began, the Order was not far away, taking out every player they encountered and getting closer to their opponent’s castle.

“So, like, nobody’s coming to stop us?”

“That’s a good thing! We don’t have to fight much!”

“Someone’s gotta show before we hit the castle, though.”

They’d left the forest and were in a rocky area with very uneven terrain. The area effect meant all players took more damage here. The debuff certainly was not welcome, but it was not something that fundamentally changed their approach.

“Will they really?.....!”

Frederica had been spinning her wand to alleviate boredom, but her expression became grim when white lights suddenly burst in front of them.

“Eyes up front!” Pain yelled, and everyone took cover behind rocks.

“Anti-Arrow Wind Wall!”

This barrier skill negated all projectile attacks, readying them for their foe’s next move. Naturally, the Order’s members had skills to handle surprise ranged attacks.

“Notes, Sonar. Ahead, on that pillar. Hmm? Just t-two?”

Her bird’s skill let Frederica pin down the enemy’s location.

As the skill’s effect radiated outward, she learned they were up against only two players.

“Ha-ha, they think that’s enough?”

“I’m assuming it’s Wilbert and Lily from Rapid Fire?”

“Yup. No one else is here. No pets, none of the monsters you can tame in this event. A whole lot of nada.”

That ruffled the Order’s feathers.

They had a clear advantage in numbers. This seemed less like an attempt to repel their advance and more like an attempt to bait them into a trap.

“Either they really think they can win with just the two of them, or they’re certain they can withdraw if things go wrong.”

The Order were moving in a good-sized group and were always careful to keep an escape route in mind while in enemy territory.

“Let’s see what gives them this confidence. And if they show weakness, strike them down.”

“On it. I’ll make a path. Try our core strat first.” That made it easier to measure their foes’ adaptability. Dread called out to Umbra, “Let’s go. Umbra, Shadow World!”

This skill pulled his party into the ground, letting them move through it. For this event, it worked on any players in their camp within range.

The Order members raced forward, then split up, finding safety within the terrain.

Even Wilbert couldn’t shoot through solid ground. Their formation allowed them to cover multiple angles, making it harder for him to choose which direction to aim. The moment they surfaced, the Order could then cast spells at the enemy from all directions.

“Multi-Smokescreen!”

Frederica's spell generated white smoke, obscuring their foe's vision. Then she leaned out from her cover to scope out their response.

"Yikes!"

White sparks flew. Anti-Arrow Wind Wall had activated just inches from her face. She ducked back behind cover.

"Does that mean they can see us? How?!"

"His eyes are clearly built different. Not sure what skill that is, but gotta assume he knows exactly where we are."

"But it's not all-powerful!"

Wilbert's arrows might have been deadly, but they only went where he aimed. With their current formation, if they all attacked at once, he could not target them all.

"Notes, Pigeon Post! Okay, take it away."

Notes cooed, applying the selected buff to allies outside the standard range. This took longer the further apart they were but ensured they were all under Anti-Arrow Wind Wall.

"Heading out!" Dread yelled. Everyone left cover, charging closer.

In answer, an indiscriminate rain of arrows came from above.

Powerful, to be sure. But if the Order knew an AOE was coming, they'd be ready.

""Mass Spell Barrier!""

"Umbra, Shadow Dive!"

"Earth! Rock Dome!"

This guild's members knew how to work together. They used a powerful barrier spell to diminish the barrage's impact; then Dread and Drag had their well-trained pets drop them into the shadows and cover them with rocks, respectively, negating all the arrows.

"Nice, Earth! You sure know how to defend!"



“Those were *my* orders! Quake!”

Finally in range, Drag struck the ground, and it began to shake. The tremors rippled up the pillar, affecting the two players who were standing above.

“Ha! Get down here!”

Drag’s skill could knock any player back, sending them flying. That was especially true on a narrow perch like this.

“Pain, you’re up!”

Astride a white dragon, their leader sliced through Frederica’s smoke, flying straight at his target.

““Quick Change!””

Midair, Lily and Wilbert swapped to their other sets of gear.

“Flying Machine! Servant’s Seat!”

Lily used a skill that spawned a mass of little drones.

Her second command forcibly joined the drones together but maintained their flight ability—forming a floating platform for her and Wilbert to stand on.

“Ray, Total Mana Release. Light Flux!”

As Pain’s sword began to glow, Lily generated a horde of summons between them.

“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

“Retainer Rampart!”

The sword swung down, and light shot forward, chewing through the wall of soldiers at incredible speed.

“Reproduction! Repair!”

But Lily was regenerating summons every bit as fast, each new soldier throwing its life away on that defensive wall.

A moment later, the light flux broke down that wall and swept toward their two foes.

But the pair had already moved aside. They’d only needed the summons to

buy them time. By the time the light died down, their platform had receded, and other soldiers were aiming their guns at Pain.

“Ah-ha. How cunning.”

“Ha-ha-ha! High praise from Pain himself. Right, Will?”

“Quite. Shall we regroup, Lily?”

Wilbert moved to apply a buff, and the ground began to glow red.

“.....!”

“Uh...Will!”

“Yes, above us!”

Clearly, Rapid Fire had not expected this. Pain glanced upward.

Above them hovered a great quantity of magic circles, and a giant black dragon.

Yes, the kings of both countries were in this fight, too. Their powers went far beyond those of players, capable of altering the very map and attacking indiscriminately across a swath of terrain. The red glow on the ground indicated where the attack would land.

“Royal attack incoming, Dread!”

“Umbra, Release the Pack! Shadow World!”

At Dread’s command, shadows spread out around his pet, and wolves darted away. This reset the cooldown on the skill of his choice.

The second skill pulled him and his allies below the ground, and they darted off toward safer ground.

“Our fun’s been spoiled. Next time we finish this,” Lily declared.

“By all means.”

The Order of the Holy Sword had far too many guild members with them. Sticking around would incur too many losses, and enemy reinforcements would arrive before the two of them settled things.

And if a guild that powerful were willing to retreat, Rapid Fire had no reason

to pursue.

Both camps beat a swift retreat before the spell barrage and dragon's breath touched down.

Lily's Servant's Seat summons gave the pair a footing, carrying them back home and away from the king's dragon breath.

"Whew. Pain will not hesitate to come after anyone he thinks he can take down."

"I had hoped he'd be a bit more intimidated. My apologies."

"Not at all. They work well together. And..."

They continued forward until, ahead of them, they saw a figure framed in lightning.

"Yo, this where the Order at?"

".....our backup arrived a bit too late."

It was Velvet, hauling Hinata in her wake via gravity control. Had these two arrived in time, the battle would have turned out differently—but unfortunately, they'd had to come from a bit too far away.

"These two will have their chance next time."

"V-Velvet! Please run slower! M-my eyes are spinning!"

"H-hang in there!"

"Climb aboard. We're not out of range of the dragon's next breath."

"And remain on guard. If the Order decide to pursue...Velvet, we'll need you in the fray."

"You got it!"

All climbed aboard Lily's mount, and they flew off toward their base.



In the safety of town, players on Maple Tree's side who'd made it back unscathed breathed a sigh of relief.

"Whew, that was close."

“When they sprang the ambush, I thought we were done for.”

No sooner had they engaged the enemy on the front lines than reinforcements had started pouring out from behind every rock and boulder. It had been ideal terrain for an ambush. They’d been aware of the risks and had hoped in vain that their luck would pan out.

In addition, the timing of the ambush had made it tough to retreat. They’d been in deep trouble, but their own backup had arrived in time. They’d suffered losses, but nothing catastrophic.

“Glad we sent that message for help.”

“Yeah, those of us here on the wall never would have noticed otherwise.”

“You really bailed us out. But how’d you make it to the front lines in time?”

The battle had been quite far from their base. Not a distance one could make at a jog whenever they wanted.

“I figured it would be tough even with a pet, so that message was a total Hail Mary.”

They shared a guild and knew each other’s abilities. So everyone knew they had no means of covering that much ground so quickly.

“We, uh, tried something unorthodox.”

“Yeah. That’s one word for it.”

“...?”

These evasive replies earned some puzzled looks, and then another group of players went rushing up the stairs to the castle wall.

“Oh.”

“Ah.”

“Seeing is believing.”

The frontline players had no clue what this meant, but those who’d gone to their rescue were all nodding. Then, concluding that it was best just to show them, the players who’d flown in as emergency backup followed the new victims up the stairs.

They arrived just in time to see a crystal-covered wool ball, which was filled with players banging on those crystal walls, trying unsuccessfully to get out and clearly deeply disturbed.

“Y-yo, I know we said ‘by any means,’ but...”

“Is this real?!”

““One, two!””

Identical girls in doll-like outfits—one black, one white—swung hammers far too big for their tiny frames. There was a sound like a cannon blast, and the crystallized wool shot off across the sky.

“Huh...?”

“See?”

“The player delivery service is the talk of the town.”

“Not a *human* means of transport.”

“A very accurate statement.”

No normal player would ever have done this, and they could confidently argue that monsters wouldn’t have, either. Before the players could recover from what they’d seen, though, the hammer twins turned to face them.

“Oh, you’re back!”

“Whew! You made it?”

“Yeah, thanks. You were a huge help.”

“Thank you.”

Unorthodox as the ride had been, it had also gotten them where they needed to be in time.

““Let us know if you need another!””

“.....We’ll keep it in mind.”

“If we really *have* to.”

With manners minded, they filed back down the stairs.



“So how was the ride?”

“Uh...? Beyond bumpy.”

“No one ever said a human cannonball would be a *smooth* ride.”

It wasn't exactly a relaxing flight. The landing had been safe, and the speeds unnatural. Those factors alone made it *barely* acceptable.

“If we're in trouble, y'all better try it out.”

“.....We'll think about it.”

Not many players were eager to become cannonballs themselves. But sometimes, it could be their only option.

If the need arose, they'd just have to steel themselves. Clinging to that thought, they descended the stairs.



## Defense Build and the Second Offensive

While Pain's party was getting slammed from above, Sally's squad was in the biggest fight around—and subject to more or less the same thing, on a massive, fiery scale.

"Yikes!"

"But it saved our butts."

"Yeah, Flame Empire won't chase us now."

That guild was holed up in their fort, and not really set to pursue anyway. Their presence on the field was formidable, but for now, their use of the fort worked in Maple Tree's favor.

"Not a lot of people survived that, huh?" Sally said, glancing at the retreating players nearby. "Guess we were right to get outta there."

The moment she saw Raging Inferno start, she'd known it would create a zone that did extra damage. A quick Flash Spout had helped them escape its range, but even then, that was only possible because they'd been attacking from the side.

They were now on Haku, quickly slithering away through a spell barrage.

"If Mii creates a ball of fire, you gotta assume it has some side effects."

"Lots of players have damage-canceling skills like I do, and there's plenty of healers around, even if they aren't in Misery's league. If Mii's slaughtered this many, there's more to it than *just* high damage."

"Sealing skills, boosting the damage done..."

"Mm-hmm, and Raging Inferno could increase damage over time."

"So many possibilities! Either way, we don't wanna get hit by it."

"If it works like terrain damage, it'd even get Maple. Gotta warn her."

It absolutely blew away anything it hit, no questions asked.

Next time Maple Tree faced Mii, they knew she would pull that card out again. So for now, anyone who survived had to bring back what intel they had.

“Guess we call this one a loss.”

“We’ll make up for it somewhere.”

“Always.”

“Yeah...we struggled with getting Iz to the enemy encampment, so I definitely want to thin their numbers somehow.”

“Agreed, and I’m up for it whenever you are,” Iz said.

Mii’s unknown skill had incinerated a whole bunch of players, but Maple Tree’s members all had cards up their sleeves, too. If they could find the right conditions, it would be payback time.

When they came across any other fleeing players, they let them ride on Haku and carried them back to the safety of town.

The barricades were still intact, with no loss of durability, so it didn’t look like anyone had attacked in their absence.

They split off from the other survivors. Maple had spotted Haku’s arrival. She was still in wool-ball form, so Mai and Yui came carrying her through the front gates.

“Welcome back, Sally! I saw a ton of magic going off in the distance. Is everyone okay?”

“We are, sure... What...have you been up to?”

“I’ve been giving people rides!”

She explained the process, and it surprised even *her* friends, but they had to admit it was extremely like Maple.

“Bet our foes didn’t anticipate *that*...”

“Heh-heh, I’d be impressed if they had.”

“Maybe we’ve scored more victories than I thought. Hmm, thanks, Maple.

Good thinking.”

“Yeah? But Mai and Yui made it work! I couldn’t have flown that far otherwise!”

“Girls, thanks for sending Maple flying... That is such a weird thing to say...”

“Y-you’re welcome?”

“We’re just glad Maple could land safely!”

Once Maple was launched, the rest was up to her. She might even land right in the middle of the enemy. That meant there was a strong element of luck to this strategy, but so far, it had helped her save a lot of allies.

“Hate to say this after all your efforts, but it didn’t go so hot on our end.”

“Oh?”

Sally gave Maple a quick rundown of what they’d witnessed.

“Hmm...I’ve partied up with Mii before, but never seen that move.”

“Look out for it. I saw a bunch of Great Shielders go down, and I *know* they had Indomitable Guardian. Maybe you can soak it, but...”

“If I can’t, it’s all over!”

“Exactly. Now we need to find a way to strike back...”

That last battle had tipped the balance of the total number of players. Flame Empire and Thunder Storm both excelled against large groups, and Rapid Fire was built to strike first in surprise attacks. They would continue to press those advantages.

And Maple’s side would have to find a way to undermine that.

Maple gave this some thought, then nodded, and explained her idea.

“I think I should probably go fight!”

“But if a piercing attack hits you...”

Indomitable Guardian was still on cooldown. They needed her fighting, but deploying her carried a huge risk.

“You’ll keep me safe, Sally. Like you always do, batting all the attacks aside!”

Maple waved her arms around, miming dagger deflections.

“...!”

She was acting like that was *normal*. Maple’s utter faith in her made Sally blink in surprise, but that was soon replaced with a confident grin.

“You got it. I’ll make sure nothing hits you.”

“Cool! I know you will!”

Maple’s final line of defense was Sally herself. And Sally swore she wouldn’t let anything through.

“Then that changes things. Maple, let’s hit the road.”

“I’m ready!”

The events of this game always moved faster than anyone thought. It was already clear the time for “wait and see” had come and gone.

“That means the whole guild?”

“But of course.”

“Roger that. Heh-heh, let’s win again.”

“I have no intention of being left out.”

“Yeah...and if Mai and Yui are with us, I know the buffs won’t be wasted.”

““We’ll do our best!””

“Just say the word, Sally.”

It was time for all of Maple Tree to lead the second offensive. If they lost, it would be nearly impossible to curb their foe’s momentum.

To prevent that from happening, they reviewed their core strategies, got ready to react at a moment’s notice—and made sure none of them would mess up in a pinch.

Riding Haku and Syrup drew too much attention. Mai and Yui had Tsukimi and Yukimi, but the other six took advantage of event-limited items that let them temporarily tame field monsters, borrowing the strength of random mobs to carry them around.

The maps had no shortage of horses, cows, and other mountable monsters.

“We’re near the border. Better get off here, Maple.”

“Okay!”

Their long journey was over, so they let the monsters go. Before them stood a zone bordered by cliffs and scoured by icy winds. This area not only debuffed their movement speed, but it also dramatically reduced the range of all attacks save close-quarters weapons. Those were major penalties.

It was one of many areas people didn’t really want to go near.

“Lower odds of an ambush.”

If someone did come right at them, Maple still had Devour left, and could handle it. And the zone debuff meant ranged attacks were moot.

“Then let me start the setup. Fey, Pixie Prank.”





Iz took out some bombs, lined them up in a hollow that looked good for resting in, and added a sensor.

“And now they can’t see them?”

“Exactly. This skill helped me get through the last event.”

“The thing where you blew the whole forest up?”

“Yep. Here, this is all we need...but in the enemy camp, I’ll do a lot more.”

“Then we’ll have to get pretty far in without anyone noticing us.”

The goal now was to slowly and steadily expand the territory they’d booby-trapped.

The items Iz had crafted for this event would stay put a lot longer than before, and she could make them invisible as well. They’d lurk undetected until they went off, making a huge impact.

“Let’s press on. Maple, keep your shield up. Mai, Yui, stay behind Chrome.”

“Got it!”

““Will do!””

Martyr’s Devotion allowed them to move steadily through zones other players feared to tread.

Normally, this place would hurt to just enter, but they navigated it free of harm, slipping past the enemy lookouts.

“The next area does damage over time, so you’re up, Maple.”

“On it!”

Setting more explosives, Maple Tree forged on—unbeknownst to everyone else.

One wrong step meant death. By sticking to those nasty areas, they’d moved deep into enemy territory.

Their path had led them to a foggy area filled with monster ambushes. Then Sally suddenly pulled up short.

“...Someone’s coming!”

“Got it!”

No one else detected a thing, but nobody doubted her.

They slipped into the shadows, holding their breath and peering into the fog. Soon, they could see shadows in the mist.

“Maybe ten...?”

The numbers alone put them at a disadvantage, but at least they had Maple with them. They could handle this. Chrome raised his shield—just in case—scanning for more enemies.

“.....Ten it is. Mai, Yui, ready?”

“We are!”

“W-we can do this!”

“Okay, Kanade?” Sally said.

“Mm-hmm.”

And the plan was set in motion.

The enemy had no idea what they were walking into, as Maple Tree had spotted them first.

“.....See anyone?”

“Not in this fog.”

“Be careful, though. Someone could be hiding.”

The ten players stuck close to each other, trying to watch their blind spots. Tanks were on the outside, and mages were in the center.

This way, even if someone got the drop on them, they could prevent surprise spells from doing major damage.

But all their caution was instantly outdone by something they couldn't even see.

There was no chance to use a skill. Indomitable Guardian allowed a few to survive, but it didn't buy them time to think. All ten were gone before any of them had even realized what had happened.

Once they were certain of that, Maple Tree emerged from hiding.

“Wow! That’s our twins for you!”

Maple was speaking to empty air, but a moment later, Mai and Yui appeared.

“It worked!”

“Thank goodness...”

They looked relieved. At their feet were two Oboros, looking very smug.

“Then let’s turn these back. This one’s Yukimi.”

“And mine’s Tsukimi. Don’t drop them.”

Kanade and Sally had borrowed the twins’ Bonding Bridges, and they handed them back now, getting their own rings in return.

“A neat work-around.”

“Yeah, trading *is* possible.”

Using a tamed monster required a Bonding Bridge, and each player could only have one. But if they took the ring off and temporarily swapped with another player, each could borrow the other’s pets. Naturally, this required a good deal of faith in the other player, but Maple Tree had that in spades.

“If Oboro and Sou use Fleeting Shadow, we can do that again.”

““Great!””

Fleeting Shadow made them briefly invisible. Sally and Kanade could both use the skill, but neither could do much in that time frame.

However, the twins *could*.

Their DPS was so high, anything they touched disintegrated. As long as they could get close, their sixteen hammers would end things.

No one survived. No one went home.

The enemy party had no chance to escape, and nothing would be relayed to their guild members but the fact that they’d died. And that meant those guild members would have to *scout*. They would know something had taken out their allies, and they’d have to find out for themselves what enemy lay ahead of

them.

“Maple, intercept. Swallow ‘em all.”

“Right! I’ll do what I can!”

The more players that came at them, the better. The greater the numbers, the bigger the pile of corpses.

They’d set a trap. One so extreme it would not leave a thing behind.

Their enemy had no clue. Maple Tree hadn’t *left* a clue. Blissfully ignorant, their enemies formed ranks, and charged in—unaware that they were marching to their deaths.

“Iz, we’ll wait here.”

“Got it. Lend me your hands, everyone?”

They had to get the trap laying done before the enemy arrived. This dense fog was the perfect place for an ambush.

Maple Tree’s members all set to work, and then they only had to wait.

They waited. And waited. And waited some more. And at last, from around the rocks and through the mist, they saw an army approaching.

The sudden death of ten players had been noted. The fog obscured the army’s true numbers, but it was clearly far beyond the scale of that scouting party.

“Let’s do this, Maple. The twins can’t handle this many on their own.”

“Okay, I’m ready.”

“Then follow me... Now!”

Sally led the way, slipping silently from cover to cover, moving into an advantageous position.

Here, at the edge of an open area ideal for fighting in numbers, there were few obstructions.

If they wanted to press their advantage, the enemy would advance through this location.

“Hold off on Martyr’s Devotion until the last second.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Whew...this is nerve-racking.”

“But we’ve made our plan, so let’s stick to it.”

“We’ve...!”

“...got Titan’s Lot!”

“I can keep us safe till the first barrage lands.”

“Ready when you are.”

Confirmations complete, Sally used Web Spinner to tie everyone to Maple.

Maple turned one arm into a cannon and pointed it at the ground. Player after player filed into the clearing before them, and Maple looked to Sally, waiting for the signal.

“Oboro, Shadow Clone!”

“Guardian!”

Chrome’s skill meant he would take damage for everyone, and as it activated, Maple’s arm exploded, launching her and her guild forward and upward.

“Incoming!”

“Ahead...and above?”

The clones rushing at the enemy from the front were a momentary distraction, and they were a second too late to spot Maple flying overhead.

“Range Expansion. Guardian’s Luster.”

Kanade made the whole party briefly invincible as the ground approached, nulling the initial spell volley that would come when they landed.

“Spread out!”

The enemy knew something was flying through the fog at them but didn’t yet know what. The one thing they *did* know was that it was about to touch down.

Ready for an attack, they raised their weapons and spread out—prepared to



strike back the second their enemy landed.

There was a *whump*, and dust flew, but then whatever it was *vanished*.

Worse, the wave of players who'd been charging at them...was no longer there.

"Where'd they go?"

"An illusion?"

"They're still after us! Look out!"

More and more players were finding illusion-based skills, and most people had run up against one. They were now aware of that threat.

Whoever they were facing would be closing in. All knew that to be true, and they formed tight clusters, facing outward. This wasn't a bad strategy at all.

Except in this case, the attackers had ducked underground upon landing, hidden in the dust. And there were still too few skills that brought players underground for anyone to have predicted that.

"Wh-what?"

"We're sinking? Aughhhhh!"

Solid earth became mud—then dark-red sparks raced across the ground, and blue lasers trapped their feet like cages, pulling them down.

No one knew what was happening, but this was a status effect that did damage over time and chipped away at their health while drastically reducing their movement speed.

An explosion of giant vines followed, and then came a surge of water that disrupted their ranks.

All this happened in the blink of an eye. No voices yelled skill names; no visual effects warned that it was coming. These attacks simply manifested before them as if they had always been there.

"Evac! Run for it!"

"My legs...!"

Bewildered and unable to work out what this was or what to do, the players were steamrolled.

This was too flashy for an ambush—it was a well-laid stage of slaughter. And only at the bitter end did anyone perceive the cause.

The boggy ground split open, and a rock dais rose up high above the sinking crowd. Then four black wings no one had ever seen before and two white wings everyone knew unfurled—and the monster whose back from whence they grew unleashed blue and red lights of certain doom.

Whether it was an ambush or annihilation didn't matter. Maple had long since surpassed what she'd displayed in the fourth event. The sight of her made it clear they'd been lured into the belly of the beast.

Maple's Annihilation Domain indeed annihilated the opposing army.

An unnatural AOE attack with a powerful downside—it hurt her allies, too. To prevent their foes from escaping, all members of Maple Tree had used speed-reduction skills. The enemy had been plunged into crisis, unable to react in their confusion.

"Ground Cradle is nuts. I should have grabbed that skill..."

"I think it's just very compatible with what Maple does. But even on its own, it's a very good evasive move."

While Ground Cradle sheltered them underground, any skills she used or items she threw out were pushed to the surface when the skill ran out. They'd used that to their advantage.

"Yeah, nobody expected that much crap to hit them all at once."

"Why would they? And nobody's even seen Annihilation Domain before."

When facing multiple unknown attacks at once, it was critical to stay calm. But this had been a surprise attack, and no one had managed to keep cool—thus, Maple Tree's victory had been assured.

"Whew! It worked!"

"Yeah, landing before you used Martyr's Devotion was huge. If they'd known it was you flying at them, they'd have turned tail and run."

“I sure would’ve.”

“Maple’s too strong.”

“They’re all on the lookout for her...”

Do not step into the lion’s den. No normal player would have consciously *chosen* to fight her.

Without the use of skills, Maple was notoriously slow. She might have been the last boss...but Flee was always an option.

“Think they’ll send even more people next time?”

“.....They’ll probably switch to a small party of their best.”

“I agree. Once they see how many they lost here, they won’t try the same tactic.”

“Then we’d better be careful!”

“Yeah, Maple’s skills have cooldowns, and while we didn’t let anyone get away, odds are high they know it’s her.”

More players had powerful skills now, but there were still only a handful that could sweep up so many players and wreck a battlefield. A loss this profound was basically a giveaway.

“Let’s get Iz’s items set up quick. Maple’s still down Indomitable Guardian, so best we avoid fights that could go either way.”



“Got it!”

“Then let’s get this done before reinforcements arrive.”

After a slaughter of this scale, stealth was hardly the priority. Before anyone else got there, Maple Tree hopped aboard Haku and hustled around, scattering invisible bombs.



The enemy camp were well aware of the battle’s result—no survivors.

It had happened in an instant. One ally after another had gone down, with no lag at all—just the cold facts on the guild membership list. Statuses were marked as absent. Something had gone very wrong, and that was deeply terrifying.

“.....? What’re they yelping about?” the leader of Thunder Storm questioned as she observed the unfolding panic.

“I’ll go ask. You wait here, Velvet.”

Hinata traded a few words with the wailing players and came trotting back.

Thus, Velvet learned that a huge army had been wiped out.

“The Order were in the complete opposite direction...”

“Yes, I imagine Pain’s party *could* pull this off, but...”

If they’d regrouped and headed back out right after engaging Rapid Fire, they *could* have made it this far. Gathering swift players and applying Frederica’s buffs could have allowed them to reach such speeds.

“Hmm...but that don’t feel right. Gonna go pick Lily’s brains on this one!”

The Rapid Fire pair hadn’t left camp yet, so Velvet sent them a message.

Lily and Wilbert soon joined them, and Hinata shared the news—and Rapid Fire agreed.

“It didn’t look like the king’s attacks scathed them, and with their numbers they could certainly be right back in the fight, but...”

“This many players dying instantly...doesn’t sound like them. The Order are powerful, but that’s not really their style.”

The Order used proper buffs, defensive skills, and high levels to maintain the advantage and win their battles. A very orthodox approach. They left few openings and had few weaknesses; they were stable fighters who did not quickly crumble. But that also made it hard for them to win in the blink of an eye.

“This is more like...Mii, or Velvet. They’d need AOE DPS with a powerful supporter. It’s not out of line for Frederica and Drag to play those roles, but...”

Lily’s instincts suggested otherwise.

“I think this is Maple Tree. We’ve already seen Maple use weapons she hadn’t revealed before. Either the one we saw has more applications than the defensive approach she employed...or she has other skills we don’t know about.”

That argument proved convincing, and the others nodded.

Explosive damage that let no players escape—that was far more Maple Tree’s style than the Order’s.

“I heard Mii managed to fend them off, but they’re hitting back pretty soon. Sounds like we need to fight, too.”

They’d thought they had an advantage, but it didn’t take much to turn that around. In which case, they’d have to keep attacking, and more effectively.

“The four of us can play it by ear.”

“You betcha!”

“Hinata, you stick to pinning our foes down.”

“All right. I can do that.”

“Which way are we going, Lily?”

“Will, use those eyes to find the players at the heart of our enemy. The top members of each guild. Take out anyone capable of flipping the fight. *Before* they can do any damage.”

“Understood.”

“Yeah! This oughtta be fun!”



Accurate and appropriate. Pick off the players running the show. With these four people, that was possible.

They set out to ensure the large-scale battles alone could not turn the tide.

“Let’s take this at a run! Spark Impetus!”

Velvet boosted their speed, and Wilbert added a buff on top of that.

Hinata used her gravity control to hover alongside Velvet, who looked at Wilbert for directions.

“No surprise, but there’s no one in range yet. Flame Empire are parked in the central battlefield and won’t be toppled easily.”

“Then where we going?”

“.....Yes, I think we’d better take a look at where that slaughter took place. With Will’s detection skills, we’ll hardly be ambushed.”

The unknown threat—potentially Maple Tree—might have been advancing still, and that required confirmation. As it was, they had no idea what this threat was up to.

And to avoid further casualties, they had to go themselves.

“On the way out of town, let’s warn people not to approach for a while.”

With a party this small, Wilbert could spot foes first; if Hinata pinned them down, they could retreat without taking damage. This minimized the risk. With that, they set out.

“Hmm, but how’d they get this deep in? I’m sure there were people watching this side.”

“I’m assuming they have some stealth skills.”

“Dread was using his pet to do that, so they could be using similar skills to slip through sparsely defended areas.”

“Then we’d better watch ourselves!”

There were no enemies close to town, and they were soon in range of the area in question.

They were moving through a zone rife with geysers but had yet to spot their foes.

“Our teammates died in the fog up ahead?”

“Perfect spot for an ambush. Be careful.”

“Yes, prep skills and be ready to use them. I’ll tell you if our enemies are here or not,” Wilbert said, his eyes locked on the fog ahead.

“Oh dear...”

“See anything?”

“.....Lots of traps, mostly bombs.”

“Ah-ha. If anyone else rolled in, they’d be incinerated.”

“All in the fog?”

“Yes. Just...let’s head in anyway. There’s something I want to check. No enemies here, and if you stay on my heels, you’ll be safe enough.”

Wilbert seemed to know exactly where the traps were. Velvet was from another guild and fundamentally a rival, so she didn’t ask how. Still, it was clear this was no prediction or estimate; he made it sound like he could see right where they were with complete accuracy.

“Hngg, you don’t seem like you’re using a skill...”

“Well? I’ve got good eyes, right?”

“Yes. Avoiding traps...is a huge help.”

For a while, they followed him closely through the fog, until he came to a stop.

“This type won’t blow on contact alone. Let me see...”

“But there ain’t nothing here?”

Wilbert reached out into empty air, picked something unseen up, and tossed it high into the air, quickly drawing his bow.

“Hinata, be ready just in case.”

“G-got it.”

The arrow shot out, striking something above—and an enormous explosion rocked the fog.

“The triggers...aren’t linked.”

“Whoa, that was a shocker.”

“There are invisible bombs all over the area. And fuses running between them, so if you trigger one, the whole area could blow.”

“Only you could get through this, Will.”

“Indeed. I have no clue how anyone else could.”

Other players would have to wait for the bombs’ placement timers to run out or find a way to remove the explosives. Until then, this was a no-man’s-land. It was all too clear their enemies could blow them up whenever they wished, for maximum damage.

“Then let’s get rid of ’em! Seeing as we, like, found them and all.”

“Ha-ha...I’m assuming with force?”

“What else?”

“Fair enough. Let’s back off a ways. Don’t want to get caught up in the blast.”

They left the bomb field, Lily and Wilbert swapped gear, and she made a wall of her soldiers. Hinata added a wall of ice in front of them, blocking the blast from the fore.

“Ready when you are.”

“Thunder God Advent!”

Velvet’s skill made sparks crackle all around her.

“Purple Bolt!”

She swung a fist, and lightning shot out. It was, in fact, purple. A moment after it was swallowed by the fog, everything in sight was enveloped in a blast that scorched the very earth.

“Retainer Rampart!”

“Ice Wall! S-so powerful...”

This was far beyond what any item should have been capable of producing. They had to quickly add more defenses to shut out the approaching flames.

If this blast had come at them from all directions, they would not have fared well.

“.....Guess that’s it.”

“Looks like the blast chained through them all. The area is secure.”

“I’ll send around a message. Better warn everyone there might be traps like this in enemy territory. Our opponents are not messing around.”

The fact that Wilbert might have been waiting for them had served as a deterrent to Maple Tree’s advance, but these bombs were every bit as effective an impediment.

“Will, stay focused on detecting enemies. Let’s take the fight to their camp.”

“As you wish.”

“All right!”

“I’m...rather nervous.”

“We always fight on our terms. You can rest assured on that point.”

It was their duty to get the team safely through this. Wilbert led the way, and they moved forward, cleaning out any bombs as they went.

Before them lay terrain that Maple’s defenses were forcing them to go through.

These four were all great on offense, but no match for Maple’s defense. They had to give several areas a wide berth.

“And this terrain makes it easy to predict what paths we’ll take. Unlikely they’ll be able to match Will on range...but we’re almost in their territory. Take care.”

“Whew...fair enough.”

Feeling the approaching battle prickling her skin, Velvet refocused.

Not long after, Wilbert’s senses detected other players in range.

“Got ’em. Two players, pretty far off—likely scouting.”

“Can you take ’em?”

“If you buff me.”

“You got it. Able Aide. Tactical Tutelage. Transcendent Power. Venerable Command. Take Heart. Advice.”

Lily’s chain of skills covered him in auras. He adjusted his position a bit, drawing his bow.

“Long Range. Drawn Taunt. Mighty Shot.”

With a red tail trailing it, the deadly shot threaded off through the trees, its range extended.

Wilbert notched another arrow, firing again at an enemy the others could not see.

“Whew...all done. Both down.”

“R-really?”

Out of sight, out of mind. Velvet found herself unsure.

“If Will says so, then they are.”

“If you keep this up, we won’t have much to do.”

It was hard to believe, but Will claimed to have felled them just as they’d poked their heads out from behind a tree.

“If they look easy enough—and their numbers are small—I’ll handle them. When that does not apply, I’ll switch to support and securing a retreat.”

“And then I’ll hit ’em!”

“Precisely. Please have at it.”

Wilbert’s preternaturally accurate sniping continued, burying their foes long before anyone else could spot them.

For a while, Wilbert’s group made steady progress, and then he drew to a halt.

“Velvet, you’re up.”

“...!”

That could only mean one thing—there was a foe far stronger than average ahead.

“I’ll still strike first, but you be ready to jump in.”

If Wilbert’s arrow hurt them, Velvet’s blow could finish them.

He took the high ground for an unobstructed shot, and Velvet moved as close as she could without being detected.



The foes Wilbert had spotted were behind a thick pillar in the remains of a collapsed building. It was Dread and Drag, and they were watching their surroundings.

“Let’s hope Frederica’s doing her bit on the other side.”

“She always does when the need arises. No need to worry. She goes all out. She makes a rock-solid DPS.”

“That is true—?”

“What?”

“Not sure. Felt eyes on me.”

“Oh? Okay.”

This was pure instinct—there was nothing to support it. But Dread’s instincts had saved the Order many times before, and everyone took his word for it.

“This skill’s more valuable than any of Frederica’s...but I’m gonna use it here.”

“Yeah, move carefully.”

“Umbra, Track Prey.”

A pack of wolves arose from Dread’s shadow and ran off.

The skill had a very long cooldown but let him detect enemies safely at range.

Soon, one howled in the distance.

“Thunder God Advent! Thunderbolt Alley!”



A moment later, an insane amount of lightning blanketed the area, telling them exactly who they were dealing with.

“Ugh, what a headache.”

“Tch, she’s bad news.”

Only one player could have done *that*—Velvet.

“From what Umbra tells me, there’s at least two nearby with her—definitely including Hinata, that debuffer.”

“I’ll warn ’em. Now what? Doesn’t seem like she’s charging right at us...”

There was lightning everywhere, but she didn’t seem to be coming in hard. The storm wasn’t moving yet, so they had time to come up with a quick plan.

“.....Surround ’em? It’s a risk.”

“But I dig it! That’s how we roll. Can’t ask for better prey!”

“Sigh...fine. Get Earth ready,” Dread said.

Drag got his pet in position and led the charge out from behind the pillar.

Before he could react at all, an arrow pierced his body.

And the HP bar on the golem next to him dropped to 1.

“.....I thought so.”

“Ground Splitter! Earth, Rock Dome, Barricade, Reconstruction.”

Drag used a knockback skill to stall Velvet’s approach, then had Earth throw up rock walls to block the line of fire.

“Ha-ha, you called it again, Dread!”

“.....Wish I’d been wrong.”

They’d had Earth use Scapegoat first so it would take the blow for him. That had forced it to use a passive to avoid death, but that was better than Drag dying.

“High ground to the left. Can’t get to ’em. Use the walls.”

“Right.”

Wilbert was too far off to deal with, but thankfully, this area offered no shortage of cover. Using that to avoid his suppressing fire, they focused on the foe close at hand.

“You sure thought fast! Hot damn! I didn’t get a chance to pounce!”

“Course not. Back atcha! Berserk!”

Drag activated a buff and charged in, ax in one hand. His weapon gave him a huge reach advantage. Forcing this into a pseudo two-on-two, they planned to lay down the hurt before Rapid Fire could change their tactics.

“Eye of the Storm!”

Lightning fell all around Velvet, and she aimed for Drag as he approached.

“Earth, Lightning Rod!”

“Umbra, Shadow Pack!”

But naturally, the two men had a plan. Earth’s skill generated rock columns that drew the AOE damage away from them like giant lightning rods, and Dread summoned a pack of wolves that charged in with Drag.

Velvet’s lightning was strong enough to knock those rods out quickly, but Drag made that moment count.

A few steps more, and she’d be in range of his ax.

“Cocytus.”

A powerful blast of frigid air encased all incoming threats in ice, immobilizing them.

“Electromagnetic Leap!”

Hinata had piled on more debuffs, dropping their defense to nothing, and Velvet came bounding in.

“Thunderclap!”

A column of lightning centered on her and lit up the sky, catching Drag and the wolves in its expanse.

When the light faded, she was facing forward, looking for her opponents.

“Noice! That the skill which lets you pop into the ground?” Velvet called out.

“.....*Sigh*. Rough. They’re too strong,” Dread grumbled to Drag.

“Thanks, Dread! Made her waste a skill at least, right?”

“I guess so.”

Even if they couldn’t move, pulling Drag belowground had avoided the blow. Now they just had to back off once Cocytus ran out.

“Binding skills are brutal, so the cooldowns are long. Make her churn through ‘em.”

“.....It won’t be that easy,” Hinata murmured.

Drag and Dread swapped positions, mindful of their foes’ cooldowns.

“Rain of arrows incoming!” Drag yelled, generating more rock walls.

But Dread was already running.

“Don’t care!”

His daggers didn’t give him much of a reach advantage over Velvet, so she closed in, too. There was no avoiding Hinata’s defense debuffs, so one hit meant death, but that was pretty much always the case for Dread.

“If I can’t handle this, I ain’t getting far.”

He slipped through the arrows, then through Velvet’s lightning.

Where one bolt fell, there was a brief delay before the next would hit. He couldn’t just dart ahead like Sally could, but if he focused on dodging, he could keep it going.

As long as he was faster, they couldn’t catch up.

“Top Speed!”

Dread sped up, seizing a chance to lunge in.

“Zone Freeze!”

“Stun Spark!”

“Then I’ll just back off.”

Dread used a skill to get himself swiftly out of range. If they pinned him down, he was done. So his goal was to bait them into using their stuff, and then hit them while it was on cooldown.

“Grr, he’s so damn good!”

“Thanks. If you main daggers and can’t dodge, you die a lot.”

Drag and Dread had a clear advantage on finesse. But Velvet and Hinata made up for it with the raw power of their skills. The Order’s usual strat was working for now, but it was definitely a tightrope act.

“Then I gotta amp up my voltage!”

Velvet exhaled, regrouping.

“Overcharge!”

“.....!”

As Velvet’s skill activated, a powerful bolt shot from the yellow jewel on her chest. The bolts falling from above grew much thicker, and their range expanded. The sparks showering around Velvet herself grew far more furious, turning blue, and scorching the area around her.

“If I cover this much ground, even you can’t dodge easily.”

“True enough.”

It was one hell of a move. Dread took one look at how thick those columns of lightning were getting and decided to bail.

This was a brute-force maneuver, one that completely overwhelmed any advantage that finesse might have given them. Velvet’s secret skill destroyed any path the two close-range fighters might have had of winning.

“Drag, regroup! Umbra, Shadow World!”

“Earth! Quake!”

Drag used a movement blocker to prevent her from closing in, while Umbra’s skill let them duck into the shadows, gaining distance.

“Only Maple can tackle *that*.”

“Yup. By the end of it, she was just a column of light!”

If there was no space between the lightning strikes, there was no room for dodging or gambits. Velvet needed to merely stride forward, and she’d annihilate anything in her path.

“If they give chase, flank ’em; we just have to buy time.”

Having witnessed these skills was a success. They stayed out of range of Hinata’s binding skills, retreating before Rapid Fire had a chance to catch up.



Velvet pursued for a bit, but soon lost sight of them, and released her skill.

“Wish I had eyes like *his*...”

“Let’s rejoin the others. Chasing after them is too risky.”

They turned back, grouping up with Rapid Fire.

“They got away!”

“Shame, but not surprising. They made the right call at the right time.”

“I don’t think that was a skill...but they certainly seemed aware of our presence, even at that range.”

“That one might just be the voice of experience. Your offense is no joke. If those two backed off, you must have really spooked them.”

Their swift response meant Wilbert had posed little threat. The Order had bailed purely because Velvet and Hinata had proven too much to handle.

“Next time we’ll have to engage under circumstances that prevent their escape.”

“Then I’ll recharge my lightning reserves! Can we go pummel a few monsters?”

“Oh? Will, any around?”

“There’s a prime spot to the east.”

Overcharge was not a move Velvet could use at will. Like the name implied, she had to *charge* it first.

“We’ll clearly need that skill. It is the greatest threat our side has.”

If it was strong enough to make the Order back down, they wanted it available. All four turned east to help Velvet do just that.





## Defense Build and Hidden Cards

Drag and Dread had successfully escaped. Back at the town, they found Pain giving orders to the guild.

“Oh? Back so soon?”

“Yeah, ran into trouble. Figured we’d call for backup and try to surround them, but they didn’t give chase.”

“Both Rapid Fire and Thunder Storm. Seemed like it was just the four leaders.”

“Hmm...in that case, it’s unlikely they’ll come this far in, but we’ll keep our eyes peeled.”

If the enemy hadn’t taken the bait, that suggested they were willing to go all out in a fight, but not yet ready to take unnecessary risks.

“They ain’t dumb enough to hit the main encampment, nah.”

“Velvet’s hotheaded enough to try, but...”

“Yeah, and she used a skill we ain’t seen before. Pain, better send word to Maple Tree. Sally especially.”

“Is that so? Tell me more.”

Dread told Pain all about Overcharge. If anyone wanted to go up against that and live, they’d need a powerful ranged attack, or defense so high they could just run on in.

“Understood. I’ll send word to Maple Tree. They should be on their way back with Frederica.”

“Oh, they wrapped up? Glad things are going smoothly over there.”

Maple Tree had taken Frederica with them to set bombs on the other side of the map. Between Sally and Notes, they could detect any foes and stay undetected themselves.

“Right...about that. We heard stuff blowing up, but not on the scale we’d expected, and the sounds came in sequence. They might have figured out what Maple Tree was up to.”

“From what you’ve said, that’d be Wilbert or Hinata’s work. Odds are high one of them has skills that can minimize explosive damage.”

Not every gambit paid off. Still, there was value in knowing what didn’t work.

“Take a rest, prep for the big battle.”

“Will do!”

“Yeah...good idea. I’m pooped.”

Dread and Drag headed off into town.

Not long after, Maple Tree and Frederica took their place.

“Oh, Pain! Anything go down?”

“No enemies here. How’d you fare?”

“Smooth sailing. We took out what enemies we saw. Mai and Yui turned invisible, moved in, and instagibbed them before they even knew what hit ’em.”

“We’re just glad it worked!”

“It helped that Frederica always knew where the enemy was...”

Oboro and Sou had kept the enemy from figuring out how these assassinations had taken place.

The dead could not speak. If they left no survivors, no one would know what happened.

“And we placed a lot of bombs!”

“And the results...”

Before Sally could finish, a giant column of fire went up from the forest in the distance. An explosion that blanketed the entire area—clearly on a scale that would leave no players alive.

“.....Well, you can see for yourself.”

“Clearly. Glad that paid off so fast.”

“Turning back early was the right call!”

“Friendly fire is always terrifying. We spread word in advance, so let’s hope no one from our side got caught in that...”

“Yeah, can’t promise anyone’ll survive.”

“I wonder if the scouts we killed baited in a larger party?”

No way to tell exactly how many the blast had hit, but clearly, the results were nothing to sneeze at.

It was a solid outcome. Maple Tree followed the path of Drag and Dread into town to rest up. Trips to the front line meant battle could break out at any moment, and tension took a lot out of them.

Getting proper rest was vital to avoid flubbing it when push came to shove.

“Sally, Dread said there’s something you should hear.”

“Me? Okay.”

Sally stayed behind, letting the others go ahead.

Pain relayed Dread’s report.

“Ah-ha...”

“You said you’d fought Velvet once, but you didn’t mention this skill.”

With the Order on their side, Sally had spilled the beans on all known Velvet skills.

“She did say she’d kept some cards up her sleeve, so I’m guessing this is one of them. I’ll definitely be wary of it. Not something I can hope to handle. And I’ll regularly check in with Iz to see if her bombs have been cleared out.”

“Sounds good. I’d also like to hear your thoughts on where we stand. To help with future plans.”

Sally was definitely the brains of Maple Tree. That was why he’d asked her to hang back.

“.....Feels like they’re still hesitant to commit. I’m not exactly digging in myself, so that goes both ways.”

“I had the same impression. Dread had Drag with him. Velvet could have easily caught up with them. Deaths are happening all over, but the front lines are locked down in the center of the map.”

Neither side was trying to force the issue because the total death count had yet to create an overwhelming advantage for either side. The event would run for a while yet, so neither side was getting antsy. Everyone was doing their best to minimize risks.

There’d been a few unpredictable twists—skills like Mii’s Daybreak or Maple’s Annihilation Domain—that had wiped out far more people than the average player could manage, but those had not yet determined the outcome.

With both sides dragging their feet, the scales had failed to tip.

“Feels like we’re just waiting for the right moment. In which case...”

“Yeah, the real war *is* coming. Then we’ll have to call in as many players as we can and see where the chips fall.”

Pain and Sally both had a hunch *when* that would happen.

At some point, the roaming monsters from either side would launch an attack on the enemy camp. If Pain and Maple Tree’s side didn’t follow up on that, some areas with concentrations of many enemy players would clear out the monster waves and then push onward toward their opponent’s camp.

To avoid this, both sides would deploy heavy numbers to the front line alongside the roaming monsters, leading to the biggest clash yet.

And a lot hinged on scoring an advantage there.

“They’re going to attack up the middle, with Flame Empire leading the way. The reason they’ve made a sturdy fortress and are planted on the front lines is to wait for that moment.”

“Flame Empire are best when in formation. Their strongest ploy is to take advantage of that position.”

Sally had no arguments there. Advancing behind Mii as she incinerated all and sundry would prevent anyone from getting near the enemy on land.

Should the Order-Maple Tree alliance meet them head-on? Keep trying to

flank them like they had been, running gambits aimed at the enemy castle? This would require careful consideration.

“What are you thinking, Pain?”

“I’d...prefer to meet them in the center.”

“.....Consider me mildly surprised.”

“Ha-ha, fair. Flame Empire and Thunder Storm...no telling how much damage they’ll do if we leave them unchecked. If they break through, no schemes we pull on the flanks will matter.”

They *had* to take a stand. It wasn’t the most proactive motivation, but that also spoke to the power of the guilds he’d named in large-scale conflicts—those guilds had a clear advantage over their side.

“Still, odds are we’ll be at a disadvantage. I’d rather not pick either option,” Pain admitted.

That told Sally just what the Order wanted from Maple Tree.

“We do have ways of turning a fight around. Some strategies effective in a frontal attack, or tactics when up against numbers...but I do have qualms.”

Sally shifted her gaze away, stalling.

“May I ask what they are?” Pain inquired.

“Can it wait till after I’ve stopped in town? Hard for me to make the choice. After this event, you’ll be our rivals again.”

“Hmm, so there’s quite the ace up your sleeve? In that case, I can hardly force the issue.”

“Still, Maple’s unlikely to reject the idea. This is mostly me being extra cautious.”

Going all out, right here and now. That was their goal—and what came after, they could work out later.

Mindful of the game changer up Maple’s sleeve, Sally led Pain to Maple’s side.

Perhaps waiting for Pain and Sally’s discussion to end, the remaining Maple Tree members had split off from Frederica, who moved to the castle walls to

watch for enemies. They'd found a break room and were resting there.

"Oh, Sally! You done talking?"

"Mm-hmm, at least about as much as we could with just the two of us."

".....?"

"The next bit needs your input, Maple."

They knew a big battle was coming, and Sally had an idea of how Maple might participate.

"I'm thinking we might want you busting out you-know-what."

"...! Oh yeah?"

"And to do that with maximum efficiency, we'll have to *tell* people."

"That's fine by me! If we don't warn 'em, it could hurt!"

"Ha-ha, it hits allies, too? Terrifying."

This move would clearly not be just defensive.

Pain was already picturing an indiscriminate attack.

"Yeah..."

"Right. Better for them to know."

"Especially in crowds."

"Yup."

"Or else..."

"...it could get real."

Members of this guild were used to Maple's nonsense, and the looks on their faces made Pain start to wonder if they should discard this idea preemptively. But no matter what it was, if she used it right, it should prove useful.

"Please, share your secrets with me."

"Okey dokey!"

With that cheery response, Maple began filling him in.

“.....Well, then. That explains the looks on your faces.”

It was rare to see Pain rattled. He took a deep breath to settle himself, then moved on to planning.

“First, we’ll need to gather personnel to head for the center. The Order of the Holy Sword and Maple Tree. We should call the other guilds, too. We’ll have to share this information with all of them, if you’re up for it?”

“Yup!” Maple agreed readily.

“Otherwise, it won’t be much use...”

“Oh well...good point.”

Maple was okay with huddling up and showing her hand. Now they just had to send the word around.

“I’ve got footage saved to an item, so once everyone’s assembled, we can put it up on screen.”

“Oh, you kept that?”

“I figured we’d need it eventually, and this would make explaining faster.”

“Mm-hmm. Seeing is believing.”

Plans for how they’d handle the monster wave were being shored up. With Flame Empire still squatting in the center of the map, Pain was looking for anything they could do in the meantime.

“Let us handle that!”

“Maple? You’ve got an idea?”

“Yep!”

She seemed so confident, he let her roll with it. Leaving Flame Empire to Maple Tree, he headed off to the meeting to represent the Order.

If it was a strategy proposed by a big guild like the Order of the Holy Swords, most smaller guilds would go along with it. A proposal from the Order would be more attractive than one from Maple Tree.

Both groups got ready to carry out their roles.



All of them were trying to gain every little advantage they could in the war to come.



While the Order was gathering people, Maple Tree set out across the field.

Ahead of the upcoming central clash, Flame Empire had been inching the lines forward, their formation rock-solid, so someone had to make them flinch.

Hoping to make the playing field as even as possible, Maple Tree put their plan into action.

“Currently...yeah, they’re firing at maximum spell range.”

Kanade was observing the battle through binoculars. Everyone knew the effective range that spells had; there wasn’t much variance. If Maple Tree’s side stood just far enough outside the fortress and maintained a barrage, then even with Flame Empire’s defenses—powerful healing and fortifications—it would be tough for anyone to move out safely and counterattack the mage divisions keeping them under siege.

But Marx’s One Night Fort and a ton of rock and water walls meant they’d suffered few losses and were instead the ones applying pressure here.

“If we get any closer than that, Mii will light ’em up. It’d work *for* them.”

“Then we’d better get to it! Mai, Yui?”

““Ready!””

The twins would be the key to this plan.

Maple activated Martyr’s Devotion, minimizing the chance of them getting taken out, and they headed to the location they’d scouted.

They went up a slope, to the top of a cliff. The battlefield spread out below them. In the distance, they could see spells flying, but they were outside the range, and would encounter little interference.

On the other hand, without any super long-range attacks that could travel well beyond the range of an average spell, there wasn’t much they could do from here. But this was Maple Tree. They had options.

“Let’s get set up.”

“Yeah, here goes.”

Iz took out pegs, topped by a serving platter—the pegs were like golf tees, only far bigger. They came up to Maple’s waist.

Chrome and Kasumi took one each, drove them into the ground, made sure they were stable, and gave Iz the sign.

“Now it’s your turn, girls.”

““Okay!””

Next, Iz took out some iron balls which were, by this point, just a staple of Maple Tree’s activities.

This time, though, they looked a bit different from standard-issue spheres.

First, their size differed. Their diameter was twice Maple’s height, and nobody but the twins could even move them.

Second, the materials they were made from also differed. They retained the durability of iron spheres but were translucent, like glass, and you could see the view through them. Changing the appearance of the items she made was all part of the craft for Iz.

“Here goes!”

“As long as the holders don’t break...looks like we’re good!”

Each girl put a sphere on a tee, then held their hammers to it, scoping out the view ahead.

““One, two!””

With that, they took a swing. A clean hit, and the spheres shot off across the sky.

“Wow! They flew so far!”

“No one else can imitate this. No one will see it coming.”

“We’ve got more where that came from!”

Their range relied not on skills—simply their raw strength. That made the range of this attack unfathomable. As long as they managed to hit the

projectiles toward their target, then the balls would simply gain force as they fell, until they brutalized the ground below.

“And they’re hard to spot visually. All that’s left...”

“Yeah, just keep swinging till they hit.”

“Mai! Yui! Keep it up!”

“Will do!”

“We can go all day!”

“Don’t worry, I warned them. No one on our side will get in the way.”

The goal was to strike fear into the heart of the enemy. There was no need to aim carefully—the point was to just keep lobbing them into the sky until no one wanted to be anywhere near this meteor shower.



A few seconds later, giant translucent orbs (far too big to be called rain) began landing on Flame Empire’s camp.

“Augh?! Wh-what the—”

“We’re under attack! I-is this a spell?”

“Everyone, deploy barriers! Misery!”

“On it!”

These were Mai and Yui’s projectiles, but they weren’t making direct hits. The orbs were simply falling naturally, and the average Flame Empire member was strong enough to avoid getting one-shot. But if they happened to get stuck under one of these, it was nigh impossible to extract themselves; the weight of the ball would do enough damage over time to finish them off.

“Marx!”

“Checking the cameras...no magic circles, they’re just dropping from the sky. I’m clueless.”

“We must put a stop to this! Find them, Marx!”

“I can’t...! I don’t see anyone!”

“I can heal them, but this is rough...”

The four leaders were holed up in the One Night Fort, but that and the barricades set up around them all had limited durability. If these attacks continued, their defenses would be destroyed, leaving them exposed.

“Mii, what do we do?”

“.....We’ll have to pull back. A one-sided onslaught like this leaves us at a distinct disadvantage.”

Making them back off *was* the enemy’s goal, Mii was well aware.

Yet she accepted those terms, because like all the other players there, she deemed it better to play cautiously and minimize the chance of death. She had no intent of making any last stands yet.

“Marx, traps...?”

“I’ll leave some with harsh conditions that are tough to activate.”

“Fine. Shin, spread the word.”

“Righto! I’ll send the signal round!”

The boys ran off to start the retreat rolling, and Mii sighed.

“There are only two people who can do this,” Misery muttered.

“Yeah, Mai and Yui. With eight hammers and all those STR skills, they can attack from crazy far.”

Mages and archers alike would have been astounded. And the projectiles retained more than enough damage potential, which just made it worse.

“I thought they only fought up close...”

“But they can work as stationary cannons, too.”

Once again, they were showing off an approach far more flexible than their raw stats would have suggested possible. One more thing to be worried about.

Shin and Marx came running back.

“Okay, Mii! Our guild’s all back in.”

“Good on my end.”

“Ngh...fine. We retreat! Marx?”

“Swap!”

That skill traded the positions of the One Night Fort with a trap he had preset at the rear of their formation, instantly moving Flame Empire away from the front line, fortress and all.



“Yup, they backed off. Doesn’t seem like they located us, either.”

“Oh! Then this worked out well.”

“Wow, Mai, Yui! Stunning offense!”

“Thank you!”

“Iz, sorry it took so many...”

“Don’t worry about it. Not like they have other uses...”

“True that.”

“They were created for this purpose.”

“And it’s made things harder for them. Now...let’s keep the attack going a little longer.”

“““Okay!”””

If Maple Tree proved there was more where that came from, it would make their foes think twice about getting too close. Even if it amounted to just trading warning shots, the side that proved more intimidating would keep control of the battlefield.

“And...do we want to try the thing?” Sally suggested. “Should be fine here.”

“Then let’s do it once. Call it practice!”

“““Got it!”””

Maple climbed into a capsule Iz had prepared, and they suspended it in the air between two columns. This was something Iz had hastily made after the event began, but nothing she crafted was low-quality.

“Maple? You good?”

“I’m good!”

Maple’s voice rang out from inside, and Mai and Yui took up positions on either side of the capsule.

Maple could only use Wool Up once a day. After that, if they wanted to launch her, they’d need strong-enough shells in varying sizes.

““One, two!””

In perfect sync, the twins swung their hammers up. There was a metallic clang, and the Maple Capsule shot straight up into the air.

“There she goes.”

“I know it’ll stay intact, but I’d rather not hitch a ride.”

“Ah-ha-ha, well, the plan is to only use this technique on Maple.”

“.....If she’s not falling back down, it must have worked?”

The capsule was designed to self-destruct, and that blast was meant to propel her even higher. In the upper atmosphere, above the clouds, Maple equipped extra shields to her Helping Hands, turning them into platforms to stop her fall.

“I’m so high up!”

Blowing up her weapons could never have gotten her to this height. She probably could have made Syrup float this high but had never bothered to try.

Only the greatest fliers in the game could reach this height; she was well beyond the limits of any ranged skill.

Once she was sure the concept had been a success, she put the extra shields away and let herself plummet back to earth.

Maple Tree extracted her from the impact crater, then went back to town. They found the Order with a crowd of other players, who were all ready to set out for the front line. The Order was just sharing the final strategic details with the other guild masters.

“Pain!”

“Oh, Maple. I hear it went well? Frederica still hasn’t picked up her jaw off the floor.”

“Anyone would lose it to see those things start falling from the sky!”

“Is everyone here going to join in this fight?”

“Indeed. The exact numbers might vary, but assume this is the primary force.”

“Then we’ll have to explain the core of this operation,” Sally said.

She and Iz set up a screen and also had Maple demonstrate nearby.

“Heaven’s Throne! Glow of Deliverance!”

Four white wings unfurled on Maple’s back, and a white throne appeared beneath her. When she sat down on it, two glowing lights spread out across the ground, applying two powerful buffs—damage reduction, and a healing effect—and making everyone considerably more durable.

“We’re assuming we can’t use Martyr’s Devotion here. If they switch to piercing attacks, Maple won’t last long.”

That skill worked wonders with Maple’s natural defense stats, but by this point, most players were aware of that and had prepared countermeasures.

If Maple tried to defend far more players than she usually did, she’d be downed instantly.

“These skills will make you last a lot longer. The buffs won’t vanish unless Maple dies.”

Rather than soak the damage for them, she would simply improve their durability and have them fend for themselves. The AOE damage reduction had seen little use, since Martyr’s Devotion was objectively stronger, but today it would be a huge asset to the front line.

“This should make the fight easier.”

“Yeah!”

They briefed the assembled players on the specific math and had them make plans in light of it.

“So far, everything we’ve shown is totally safe for anyone in our camp. What we’re about to show on screen is not. Once this gets deployed, be prepared for the consequences.”



An ominous statement to hear from your own side. Everyone gulped, watching closely.

“.....?”

“What the—?”

“???????”

It was the first time any other players had seen it in action, and the shock was too much for them. The hubbub showed no signs of dying down.

“Pain, this is Maple’s new ultimate.”

“.....Understood. We’ll exercise due caution.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Good lord. And here I was wondering why our side had to worry...”

Maple Tree promised to send a bolt of light skyward before deploying the ace up Maple’s sleeve—and now everyone need only wait for the frontal assault to begin.



## Defense Build and Spreading Darkness

While Mai and Yui took the occasional trip to the front lines to make it rain iron spheres, the two camps avoided major conflict until the monsters launched their offensive.

With those hordes attacking the enemy, it was a prime opportunity to upset the balance. The players were sweating about that before they even set out.

“It’s about that time, Sally!”

“Yeah. Let’s try and settle this here.”

Maple would definitely be a key player in this campaign. The lack of Indomitable Guardian was concerning, but Sally was there to make up for it. No matter how difficult that would be.

The army was commanded by the biggest guilds, with the Order of the Holy Swords at the fore. Maple Tree were backing that play but were granted considerable freedom.

“The front line’s all yours!”

“We’ll back you from the rear. Good luck!”

““We’re rooting for you!””

Mai, Yui, Chrome, and Iz split off from the others. The twins were now capable of being a formidable threat even at a distance.

“Sorry, without Martyr’s Devotion...”

“Ha-ha, you just focus on killing everyone before they burst through the ranks.”

“Okay! I’ll see what I can do!”

“J-just don’t push yourself too hard.”

As they got themselves motivated, a stir ran through the army—and the

ground shook as the monsters charged.

“Down the center!” Pain roared.

The other guilds roared back, and they marched in step, leaving the town behind.

“Maple!”

“It’s time I get going!”

“Ready when you are!”

““One, two!””

With marching orders given, Maple hopped into a capsule, and the twins’ combined might launched her into the stratosphere.

“All ready.”

“Kanade, Kasumi,” Sally said, “let’s move out as well.”

“Right as planned.”

The three of them followed the army to the front.

The sky was filled with flying monsters—even dragons. Meanwhile, the ground was swarming with beasts and other monsters—with the creatures mostly matching their side’s fire-and-lightning theme. Advancing side by side with this horde, they saw a shadow on the horizon, inside a dust cloud. Not long after, they saw the giant fortress at the center of the dust cloud.

Flame Empire was right in front of them.

“Here we go.”

“Keep your wits about you.”

“But first...”

Both armies stood poised to clash, each readying their attack spells—

And without warning, a dark-red circle appeared toward the back of the enemy lines, emitting sparks that scorched any living thing within its radius.

The effects, power, and origins of this ability were unknown. Seeing how much damage the fragile back-liners were taking, ripples ran through the

enemy camp. The Order picked that moment to charge.

“Our orbital assault weapon’s been deployed!” Sally grinned.

Above them, Maple had activated Annihilation Domain and struck the first blow.

Behind Flame Empire, Rapid Fire was splitting their camp, pulling players out of the dark, crackling energy.

“Will!”

“I’m fine! Just...I can’t see where the attack is coming from!”

“Wh—? Not even with *your* eyes?”

Given the ranges of spells, the source of an attack of this scale could not possibly have escaped his detection.

“Will, try using my eyes, too.”

“Very well.”

“Rest.”

Blue light burst around Lily, and above the clouds, for an instant, light of the same color lit up the entire field.

“Awaken! Well?”

“.....Above us. Maple,” Wilbert reported, wincing.

Lily wasted no time.

“Okay, let’s go to her.”

They had but one course of action. Barking orders to players with flying pets, they flew up to knock Maple from the sky.

Maple soon saw the players coming her way.

“Whoa! They found me already?!”

Sally had predicted this would take much longer, but there were already players on dragons and rocs flying up toward Maple. She was just sitting on a shield, and no match for their mobility.

“Deploy Artillery! Commence Assault!”

She began by attempting to thwart their approach.

Annihilation Domain was centered on Maple’s position, much like Martyr’s Devotion. As long as enemies were in range, over time the damage would pile up, and they’d go falling back to ground, smoking.

Closing in while avoiding her barrage was no easy task. Player after player lost too much HP and was forced to bail.

“D-don’t let them win this!”

“Drag her down!”

“Whoaaa?! Before I get in trouble...”

But before anyone *did* get through and land an attack, Maple chose to drop.

They were fast, but not faster than free fall.

“Commence Assault!”

She began firing upward, taking out pet after pet, sending the other players plummeting after her.

A lot more players could fly now, but the sky was never safe. One always had to consider the sudden loss of their flying ability.

“Augh?!”

“Oh crap...!”

“Buh-bye!”

Her own side would come into range soon, so Maple ended Annihilation Domain, blew up her weapons, and rocketed toward her own camp. Maple alone did not have to worry about landings.

As Maple came crashing down, another player came swinging toward her on spiderwebs.

“Oh, Sally!”

“Nice work, Maple. You got ’em good.”

“Time for the next phase!”

“Yep! Go for it.”

“Heaven’s Throne! Glow of Deliverance!”

This time, Maple was giving everyone a defensive buff.

But her throne and wings were highly visible. She would be a sitting duck.

“Ice Pillar!”

So Sally simply put so much ice around Maple that she was physically cut off from everything else.

Until those pillars timed out, no attacks could shatter them. Behind this absolute wall, Maple couldn’t do a thing, but neither could the enemy stop her from generating a powerful buff.

“Nothing’s getting through that!”

“Thanks!”

“Thank *you*. You just being here is a blessing.”

As their defenses were shored up, Mai and Yui started lobbing in spheres with enough force to rival any cannon. Their formation was complete. They were hitting the enemy with everything they had.



Lights. Fires. Gusts from innumerable spells raked the land—but the strongest fighters made the biggest difference.

“Velvet!”

“Sup! When do I get in there?”

“Best you match Mii. Together, you can turn this fight around. Until then... Will, let’s get in this.”

Lily generated the flying machines she’d used in the fight against Pain. This gave them a platform that spit blue fire from the back, lifting them upward before it hovered in place. This time it was barely big enough for the two of them, but that meant it could move faster. Since she hadn’t swapped gear, she couldn’t mass-produce machines, but as long as she and Wilbert could fit on the platform, that was enough.

“Hinata, we’re moving out!”

“Okay...!”

Not about to take a loss sitting down, Velvet and Hinata ran to the front. Lily and Wilbert took their zippy little platform and literally flew toward the front lines.

“Thunder God Advent! Eye of the Storm!”

Lightning coursed through the lines where players and monsters clashed.

Where it fell, it turned any opposition to ash. Even lightning-themed monsters—who should have had resistance—were helpless before her.

And for good reason. The white mist blanketing the region was a powerful chill that negated defense and resistance alike.

“Hinata, we ain’t stopping!”

“.....Sorry, but you’ve gone far enough.”

“Ha-ha! Time for a rematch!”

Dread and Drag stood before them.

Velvet was a storm made flesh. If they let her plunge into their camp, the results would be catastrophic. They had to stop her here.

No retreat this time. For them, or their foe.

“Let’s do this!”

“I’m with you...”

“Geez, we pulled the short straw.”

“Tough foes are worth fighting!”

“.....I guess I get that.”

For all his grumbling, Dread had his daggers raised. That was all Drag needed. He swung his ax high.

Several players shot past them overhead. Like Maple, they were aiming for the back lines, trying to reduce the damage inflicted by the approaching enemy.



“No time to look sideways! Electromagnetic Leap!”

Gravity control towed Hinata along with her, and that cloud of defense-reducing chill.

“Earth, Lightning Rod! Heavy Charge!”

“Ice Wall!”

Hinata’s wall blocked Drag’s charge, and Velvet punched back. But he had the range advantage, and her swing didn’t reach him.

“Polar Flash!”

“Stone Skin! Ground Armor!”

“Onward...!”

Columns of lightning were falling all around Velvet. She’d assumed he’d back off, but Drag just used skills to enhance his resistance, forcing his way forward.

“Burn Ax!”

“Parry! Double Whammy!”

“Gah!”

Velvet hit the side of his ax, batting it away, then quickly landed a two-hit skill, sending Drag flying.

“Oww! That’s some DPS!”

“But you survived it! Even with Hinata’s skill up?”

“I’m extra durable right now.”

The glowing field was visibly healing the damage Drag had taken. And judging from how little it had hurt him, Velvet knew there was a powerful defense boost in play.

“Then we gotta overwhelm it! Thunderbolt Alley! Lightning Rain!”

“Drag, wall!”

“On it!”

“Top Speed!”

With Dread's lack of durability, he couldn't just plow through the lightning the way Drag had. But he had speed on his side, and with a rock wall right overhead to block the bolts, he could close in instantly.

"Gravity Cage."

".....Tch."

Feeling his speed drop hard as he stepped in close, Dread headed back before the rock wall disintegrated.

Whether he could take Velvet or not, having to also deal with Hinata was a thorn in their side.

Velvet's DPS was beyond the pale, which let Hinata focus entirely on defense and leave Dread and Drag without an opening.

"Nice one!"

"Make sure you wait for Mii..."

"I—I know that!"

They could hear a tower collapsing behind them. Their enemy's assault was in full swing.

"C'mon, Pain. Before Daybreak hits!"

No one was coming to save them against this duo. Pain was every bit as critical to their plans as Maple herself, and while offering a prayer to him, Dread raised his daggers once more.



Mai, Yui, and Iz fell with the tower's collapse. Chrome's Guardian skill let him take that damage for them, though, and he quickly got his shield up, facing front.

"Ha-ha! Geez, can't just hang out in the back, can we?"

His eyes were on the platform hovering above them. Lily was seated upon it, and before her stood Wilbert, aiming right at them.

"No telling what your twins will do if we don't stop them."

"I'm afraid we're here for their heads."

““Chrome!””

“Relax! I got you.”

Despite his words, things weren't looking good. Given how fast they moved and the distance they'd have to travel, they weren't making it back to the castle. They had to block those arrows with Iz's barricades and Chrome's great shield.

“Arrow Rain.”

“Multi-Cover! Spirit Light!”

One skill let Chrome shoulder the damage for all those arrows, and the next canceled it, which allowed him to weather the storm.

“Mai, Yui, listen up,” Chrome said, quietly. “Your DPS is our one shot at victory. Iz and I will make an opening—hit 'em then.”

The twins nodded, bracing eight hammers each.

“Necro! Dead Weight! Burst Flame!”

Lily slid her flying platform smoothly around Chrome's flames as Wilbert fired more arrows. Necro's skills gave Chrome some ranged options, but it was hardly his area of expertise.

“I've got this one!” Iz said, pulling an iron wall out of her inventory, and dropping it between them and the attack.

“Please, Iz! We can't hold out long!”

If any arrow got through, Mai and Yui were down. And if they didn't end this fast, that was bound to happen.

Iz's walls could only soak one hit, but they did manage that, which meant Chrome left her on defense and stepped forward.

“Fey, Item Boost! Chrome!”

“Yup!”

She'd blocked one shot, and even as the arrows bore down with terrifying precision, he caught her eye.

Iz planted her feet as several thick water columns appeared around her.

“You came prepared, then...?”

“And I got more!”

Iz crushed a crystal in her hand, and massive vines—like Syrup’s Mother Nature skill—threaded their way between the water columns, restricting the platform’s movements.

“Now!”

“Do it!”

““Weapon Hurl!””

They could dodge a couple of spheres. But could they dodge sixteen hammers?

Each projectile was even more deadly than Wilbert’s arrows, and they were flying straight at Rapid Fire.

““Quick Change!””

Sensing certain death approaching, Lily and Wilbert swiftly swapped gear. She activated a series of skills with practiced ease.

“Lifeless Horde! Reproduction! Retainer Rampart!”

Soldier after soldier spawned, forming a massive wall. The hammers smashed through them all, and as the wall shattered, Lily and Wilbert let themselves fall.

The twins’ aim had been true, but Rapid Fire did not waste the time the wall had bought them.

“Whew...a scratch, and we’d have been done for. Our raid boss killers have clearly polished their skills. From here, I’ll be fighting you—I don’t have his damage, but it’s enough to whittle you down.”

De-equipping the hammers returned them to the twins’ inventories. Then Mai and Yui put them back on, ready to fight, and Iz dropped more barricades.

“Feel free to switch back to Wilbert! That’s easier for us.”

“Oh, I know. Here I go!”

Lily’s build was all about raw numbers. The field was soon bristling with guns aimed their way, and a bead of sweat ran down Chrome’s brow. He didn’t see himself blocking all of that.

He still had Indomitable Guardian left. He raised his shield, ready to do what he could—when *two* giant white snakes shot in from the side.

“Haku!”

“Sou!”

““Harden!””

The snakes writhed, gouging the ground.

“We made it?”

“Looks like.”

Kanade and Kasumi had come running. They’d been trading blows with the rest of Rapid Fire on the way, blocking their reinforcements, and still made it in time.

“Quite a crowd.”

“Yes, but that works for us.”

“We can handle it.”

With that, Lily perched upon her Junkyard Seat, waved a flag, and summoned an army. The sheer quantity of summons instantly tipped the battle in her favor.

“Let’s continue. The more we have on us, the easier the others have it.”

They could not afford to let the twins resume their bombardment. This would not be an easy fight, but Lily and Wilbert were not going to back off.



Battles were heating up all over, but the main attraction was right smack in the center.

Maple’s surprise blow had made them flinch, and Pain had come running in. Naturally, he’d put a target on himself. If they could take him out, it would be a terrible blow for his side, and a huge boost in morale for theirs.

“Holy Condemnation!”

But that was a very big *if*. Pain was cutting down player after player, overpowering Misery’s healing, and forging a course toward the One Night Fort.

Yet despite this show of force, Mii’s flames had yet to appear.

That could only mean one thing. She was busy prepping Daybreak, the big gun she’d shown off once before. Waiting would only buy her time to cast that and incur considerable losses.

For that reason, Pain needed to break through their lines fast.

“Pain! Argh, you’re insane! Notes, Round! Uh, Multi-Barrier!”

Frederica was casting buffs to ensure his backup could follow and protecting them with barriers. She’d been worried about Thunder Storm’s top two, but they’d just missed them, and since Mii wasn’t in the fight yet, Frederica’s defenses were enough for the time being.

“Drag, Dread, and Maple Tree have drawn them off. Whether they come back or not, we’re shattering this line.”

Backed by support spells from the guilds in his way, the lights from Pain’s holy sword buried all players amassed before him.

“Ah, geez! Is there no way to stop him?”

“Oh, Shin! Yoo-hoo! You struggling as much as I am?”

“You can say that again. I’m sure you know Mii’s charging up, which is why *I’m* here.”

Even with their pet monsters, Misery and Marx didn’t have the skills required to man the front lines of this war. Shin was Flame Empire’s only option. Even as he grumbled, Splinter Sword and Wen’s Wind God generated a bushel of blades.

“Frederica!”

“Huh? Seriously? Okay! Say sorry later. Multi-Transfer!”

Buffs applied to all nearby allies were forcibly transferred to Pain alone. This event’s rules meant that this far exceeded the standard party limitation, buffing

him far past what was normally possible, and with all that stacked on him, Pain charged forward.

Shin saw that and sent all of his blades flying at Pain. Every one of them hit home, pierced him...then flew on out behind him.

“Huh?!”

Pain spared no thought to defense. With the collective buffs of several hundred players on him, he simply soaked every hit. The stacked damage reduction and healing was so great, his health recovered as soon as it diminished.

“Ray, Total Mana Release. Light Flux.”

Stats and buffs like this were just brutal. Nothing could stop this monster’s charge.

Anyone who dared to try was cut down. Shin tried to back away, but Pain was the game’s top player and far faster.

“Jesus Christ, are you for real?!”

“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

He swung, and hundreds of players’ blessings extended both the range and spread of the blade of light, carrying it all the way through to the back of the army, swallowing all in its path.

“Holy moly! That sure is off the chain,” Frederica gasped. This event’s unique rules had clearly broken Multi-Transfer beyond her wildest imagination.

But when the light faded, what did they see...but a crowd of players, still standing with HP remaining. The HP they’d lost was soon filled by a golden glittering magic circle behind them.

“...Resurrect?”

“Bingo! You’re seriously nuts. Really put the fear of God in me.”

Splinter Sword shards beneath his feet, Shin evacuated to the air above.

But Pain’s hyperdimensional attack had been far larger than the range of Resurrect, so their losses remained considerable.



No ordinary means could slow Pain down—much less turn him away.

“We’ve gotta buy time, or nothing’s gonna go our way!”

“Pushing through!”

Players swarmed Flame Empire’s collapsing line. One after another went down, but the advance was not as swift as they’d hoped.

These defenders cared not if they survived. They were fighting not to win this battle but to slow down their foes. To that end, they busted out every defensive or invulnerability skill they had, forcing their opponents to falter.

Only someone of Pain’s might could ignore *that*.

They knew their side had a powerhouse every bit as prodigious as Pain himself. If they steeled their guts and fought for their guild, for their side, then blowing through skills on delaying tactics was absolutely worth it.

“C’mon, Mii! Blow ’em all to hell!”

“Augh! Pain! It’s coming! You sure about this?”

“Form ranks! Tame any monsters in reach!”

“.....Hmm? What for?”

They’d known they were on a timer from the get-go. The sun rising above Flame Empire’s fortress would soon fall.

There was a horde of monsters charging the lines with them, and using event-limited items, they gathered as many as they could before them, but that wall would not stop Mii’s flames.

“You’re sure this’ll work? Tell me you’re sure!”

“Frederica, brace yourself.”

“Aughhhh!”

Since the Order was unable to continue their charge, this was Flame Empire’s chance to hit back. Frederica and Notes were casting spells to ward off those attacks, but her eyes were on the field behind her, like she was waiting for something.

Then there was a crack of thunder, and a humongous pillar of light connected the ground to the clouds.

“I’ve been waiting, Mii!”

“They’re out of Lightning Rods.”

Overcharge had blanketed Velvet in so much lightning that it looked like a single column. Drag and Dread were narrowly avoiding fatal damage, but not exactly faring well. Earth was already downed, and they’d run out of Umbra’s evasion skills.

Velvet and Hinata each had a ton of skills so powerful they *required* swift responses.

“Best not think Overcharge ends here!”

Velvet raised a hand up high, and bolts shot back up from her, illuminating the sky.

Both men saw that gesture, and instantly guessed what was coming. Heavy thunderheads gathered above, glowing with an ominous light.

Behind her, Mii’s sun glowed, the flames it contained expanding further still.

“We ain’t stopping this.”

With a hint of resignation, Dread looked toward Pain and Flame Empire’s fortress.

Timed perfectly, the lightning and fire skills spread out across the ground.

“Thor’s Hammer!”

“Daybreak!”

Lightning from heaven. Hell’s inferno upon the earth. Two types of light consuming all they touched, as far as the eye could see.

In an instant, flames and electricity coursed across the battlefield. It should have been nigh impossible for anything to survive.

Lily and Wilbert had bought themselves enough time and were watching the attacks scorch the very ground.

“Impressive. Few can match their offensive... Will?”

“.....Lily, be ready to fight.”

Wilbert’s brow was furrowed. Through the lightning and the flames, he’d spotted far more survivors than they’d thought possible.

“What’s the trick this time...?”

All swallowed, waiting. There was a moment of silence...and then a clear voice rang out.

“Dark Rebirth!”

An instant later, something black and muddy spread out across the ground, and grotesque creatures crawled out from within.

Each bearing a distinct resemblance...

...to the one and only Atrocity.



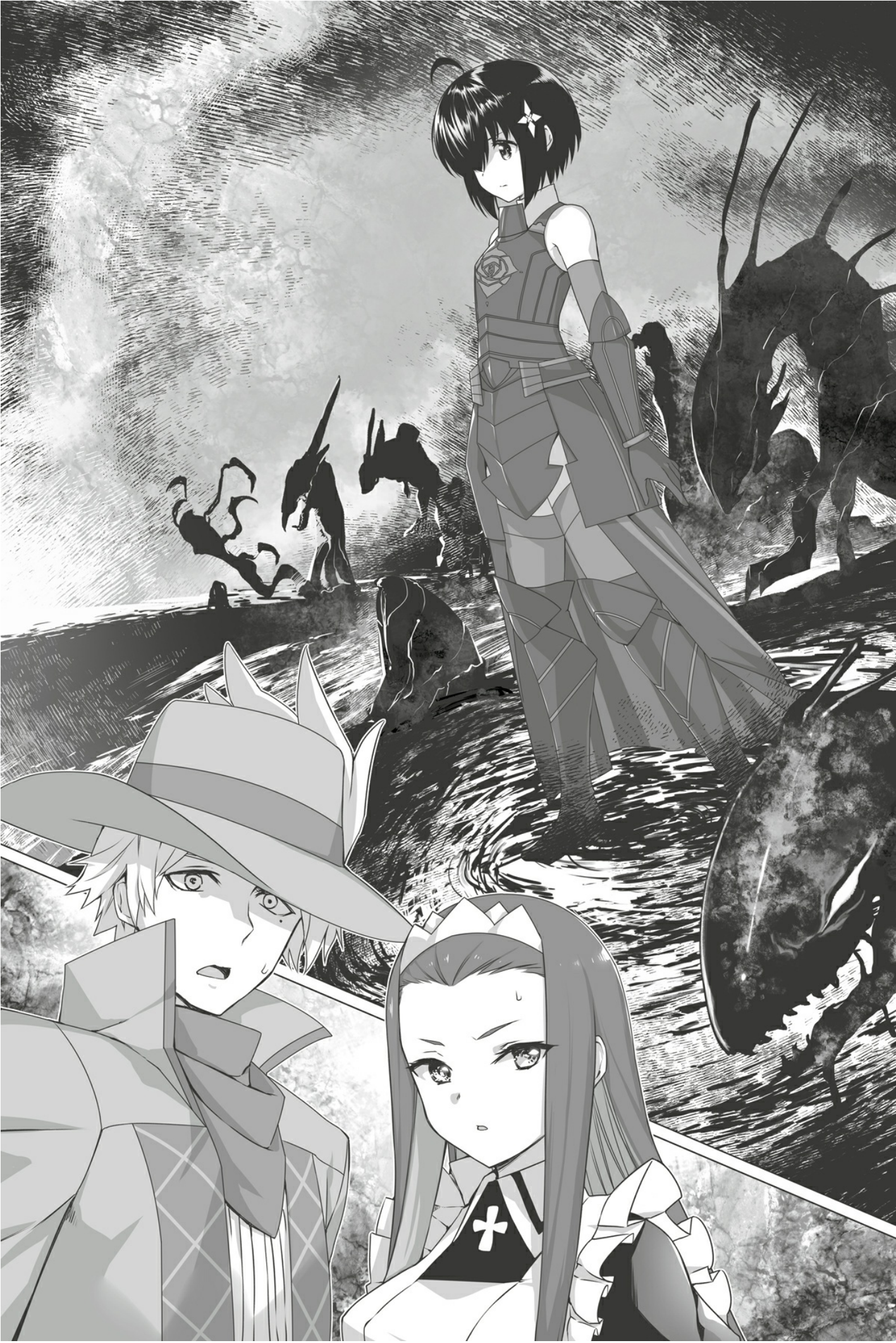
At the heart of this atrocious advance, surrounded by the ominous gloom, was Maple. Sally was busy keelhauling a squawking Frederica outta there.

“Sally! My heart nearly gave out!”

“My bad! But we made it just in time!”

Ark had helped them survive the dual destruction, having been activated just as Mii and Velvet’s attacks had overlapped.







Reality Twister was a skill that made illusions real. The description merely said that non-damage skills would now do damage, but fortunately, Sally had thoroughly explored what *else* it covered.

Ark had a water attack side effect. When she'd copied Machine God, it had given her not just the lasers, but also the physical bullets. It had ignored the detailed prerequisites, reproducing the skill alone when activated.

"And Maple did *that* the second we were out!"

"I was unprepared for that myself! I bet it was Pain's idea. Like I said, if this so much as touches anyone on our side, they're gone!"

Maple's mud. Dark Rebirth had been the reward for the Taboo Master quest. It swallowed up anything that counted as an ally, creating monsters from them.

This included whatever had been summoned through skills, pet monsters, and even players themselves.

"They're still spawning?! We're not getting caught in it, are we?!"

"I-I'm not sure! Someone said something about grabbing weakened monsters to be remade..."

"That's so nasty!"

Morally dubious and visually disturbing, this strategy was nonetheless highly effective. No one could get anywhere near Maple now—and she was launching a second offensive with a whole new wave of monsters, reborn at full health.



At the edge of Maple's darkness, a number of players were bringing in wounded monsters and pets, throwing them into the mud.

A few seconds after contact, they'd sink below the surface and a new monster would emerge in their place.

"I feel kinda conflicted about this..."

"Th-this is a pragmatic approach!"

Convincing themselves that this would bring them closer to victory, they fed more monsters into the murk.

Their camp had a ton of monsters with fire and lightning elements, which meant more monsters than they'd expected had just barely survived Mii and Velvet's attacks. So if they closed their eyes to little things like ethics, that made these monsters the perfect fodder for Maple's mill.

"Bring the next one!"

The Ark evacuation had worked great but had only worked on pet monsters. Anything else, they'd been unable to protect...which had left them with plenty of wounded.

"Augh! C-crap!"

"You fool! Don't touch it! Back away!"

Every now and then, a careless player would accidentally make contact with Maple's muck, which would attempt to drag them under. If they got away in time, it would eventually let go, but the consequences of failure made this extremely terrifying.

"We're just making use of it!"

"Didn't you see what happened to the guy who went under?!"

"I—I did, thanks...!"

Those who got dragged under were dissolved, then rebuilt as monsters that were now out there attacking enemy players. Didn't matter if you had an invulnerability skill. Maple's darkness was basically an instant death attack that *only* worked as friendly fire. Nothing but swift extraction would prevent their forced rebirth. It was far more dangerous than their opponent's attacks.

With her support crew feeding her more monster reinforcements, Maple continued her advance.

Unlike the monsters on the enemy's side, those born from a rare skill like Dark Rebirth were extremely powerful. Like Maple in Atrocity form, they could breathe fire and were tearing apart players and monsters alike.

"Watch your feet!" Maple called. Her horde was powerful but classed as summons, not pets, so she could only give them orders in broad strokes. But at least compared to wild monsters, she could definitely direct them where she

needed them.

And she'd secured more than enough monsters to help ease the pressure on the front lines. They were steadily pushing their foes back.



The enemy camp had also spotted the arrival of the monster army.

“That is so freaky...”

“Ha-ha, you gotta be kidding! What *is* that?!”

Marx and Shin were watching from the top of the One Night Fort, and they quickly passed word along to Mii and Misery.

Marx had made a bunch of cameras, pointed them the right way, and had those feeds displayed on screens inside the base, where the girls stood. This let them use AOE defense skills similar to Martyr's Devotion, providing safety from inside the walls.

The monsters triggered Marx's traps, but the sheer number of creatures was like a wave bearing down on them.

The battlefield was in chaos. Two figures bailed ahead of it, descending an icy staircase from high up; midair, they defied gravity, landing gently next to Marx.

“Waugh?!”

“Excuse the drop-in!”

“Where's Mii...?”

“.....Er, uh, inside.”

“Oh, emergency meeting?”

“Yes.”

“I'm in!”

Velvet and Hinata dashed into the fort.

Inside, they found Misery focused on healing, and Mii about to head out herself.

“Mii! It's all gone to shit!”



“I’m aware. Maple’s doing, I assume.”

No one knew how she’d done it, but this was clearly a skill that generated a ton of powerful monsters.

As they spoke, a flying platform brought Lily and Wilbert back.

“You too, Velvet? Same thought on all our minds.”

“We’ve gotta do something about these monsters.”

Wilbert’s scouting skills had made it clear Mii and Velvet’s attempt at annihilating their foes had not proven as successful as they’d hoped.

“Our foes used a big skill back at us, but I’ve no clue about its cooldown. To my eyes, they momentarily vanished before reappearing.”

“Velvet’s fully discharged...so she can’t use lightning for a while.”

Thor’s Hammer boasted an even bigger range than Mii’s move but carried a stiff penalty. Without electricity, Velvet’s threat level was significantly reduced.

“And given what we’re seeing on the screens...our side’s starting to panic. If we can’t calm them down, we’re in trouble.”

They had Misery’s healing, but disposable monsters versus players with only one life—well, it was clear which was more valuable.

The longer they fought there, the worse things would get.

“I can’t use Daybreak again for a while. I’ve got other powerful skills, but so does our foe.”

“Yeah. If we lack the strength to take her out, then even with healing, we’re headed for a loss.”

Plenty of players still had fight in them, starting with the members of the Order and Maple Tree.

“I’d like to be on the same page as the other guilds. Many are going to retreat, so we may have to accept our foes had the skills to weather our assault, and back off.”

Velvet and Mii’s dual devastation could well have determined the outcome of this entire event. The moment their enemy had prevented that, it had put them

on the defensive. To fight constantly spawning monsters, they needed numbers. Lacking those, they would have to retreat while using delaying tactics.

“Marx, take Misery and Shin and get ready to retreat. If you must fight, do so as you back away.”

“Got it.”

Not all of their allies were on this battlefield. If they fought as they retreated back to the castle, their side would get reinforcements first, and regain an advantage.

“Lily, Hinata, lend us your aid.”

“Very well.”

“Understood.”

“Hinata, you got this!”

“Lily, just say the word.”

As Velvet’s abilities were limited, and because Wilbert’s build was better in one-on-one battles, the two of them stayed behind. The other three headed out of the fort.

Hinata and Lily were the members best equipped to handle this, but it was also a plan that minimized losses if things didn’t go well. If all of them tried to tackle this threat at once, it could spell the end for their side. These eight players knew their enemies were just that devastating.

Mindful of the worst-case scenario, the three of them boarded Ignis, and scouted the field from above. Monsters crawled out of a pitch-black circle. And more monsters were being fed into it from the rear.

That was enough to tell them how this worked.

“Ah-ha! Ha-ha-ha, quite the gimmick.”

“W-wow...”

“This means we may not be able to stop it until we take down Maple herself.”

The visual impact alone was ruining morale; they could see their lines collapsing.

All agreed it was better to call for a retreat than to try and shore up those lines.

“Hinata, are you ready?”

“I am. Just get me in range.”

“We’ll block the attacks. Fear naught.”

Mii barked an order to Ignis, and they shot toward the front lines, where the monsters rampaged.

At those front lines, monsters and humans clashed, but the former had a noticeable advantage.

“Damn, there’s no end to them!”

“Anyone got an idea?”

“We’ve got our hands full!”

The size discrepancy between man and beast provided a reach advantage. And the monsters did not care if they survived. Both these things worked against the players, and the situation was steadily deteriorating.

“Keep it up!”

And the root cause—Maple—was cheering the monsters on.

What else was she to do? There were too many monsters—and they were too big—for her to line up a shot with either Machine God or Ancient Weapon, and nothing could get close enough for her to use Devour. If she used Predators or brought Syrup out, they’d be instantly reborn, and Hydra would just turn the path in front of her into a lake of poison.

Ultimately, all she could do was give orders and encouragement to her minions.

The enemy players slew one monster after another, but the beasts were like a tidal wave of terrors, swallowing up their side. Maple kept pushing forward, as planned...until she saw a phoenix flying her way.

“It’s Mii! Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Her monsters couldn’t reach the air. But Maple’s guns could!

As her barrage began, spells started landing all around. Mii's expert control let Ignis slip through the gunfire and close in.

"Ice Wall!"

"Retainer Rampart!"

"—! They're both with her?!"

Ignis was nimbly dodging, but when that proved impossible, walls appeared to protect it. These were unmistakably the work of Hinata and Lily.

Mii was getting closer, charging through the barrage. A countdown to her all-consuming fires igniting.

Abandoning her attempts to shoot Ignis down, Maple threw out some barriers.

"Overfreeze."

"Hinata!"

But what hit her next was not fire, but a wave of frost, like plumes of white smoke. Most players there had generated barriers to ward off Mii's spells and were too late to block Hinata's skill.

Maple aimed her guns, but Hinata's *second* powerful frost skill spread too fast.

"Niflheim."

"Whoa?! Wh-what the—?!"

There was a *snap*, and Maple couldn't move her body. On closer inspection, she found the entire region coated in a thin layer of ice, capturing every player present and her monsters as well—freezing them all to the spot.

A super-wide AOE freeze every bit as powerful as Velvet's lightning. An immobilization skill that stopped an entire army in their tracks.

"You can't move now," Hinata called down from Ignis's back. "I *am* sorry. But we can't let you rampage forever."

"Urgh...you did all this? Hinata, you're so good!"

“I could say the same to you, Maple.”

Hinata glanced around the ice-encased monsters, bobbing her head. This doubled as a good-bye, and Ignis flew up and away.

And as it did, the retreat began in earnest. No telling how long the monsters would stay frozen.

“Mii, best we hurry. I made it seem like we had time...but this works just like Velvet’s Overcharge. And I’ve stopped her in her tracks, but the ice also prevents us from doing damage.”

“Very well. The others are already retreating; let us join them.”

“Blocking damage is a significant downside, but it suits our purposes here.”

A move this big could hardly be used twice in a row; and like Velvet’s similarly named skill, once it wore off, she was blocked from using *other* cold control skills. Thunder Storm’s leaders would be operating at half strength for a while, and needed a break from the action.

“Thank you, Lily. If you hadn’t got us that far in, I’d have frozen our side, too.”

“Mii’s piloting saved us all. I merely threw out a few walls.”

“Let’s make haste. Ice may melt, but those monsters are going nowhere. They’ll be on our heels.”

Both nodded. They’d need to regroup and intercept. They flew off back to the One Night Fort.

After a while, Hinata’s ice shattered, and all were free of their frigid cage.

“Whoa...! Well, deal with these monsters!”

With the ice wall in their path gone, the enemy’s monsters came charging in. Maple had hers deal with that first—hers being the grotesque minions crawling from the muck at her feet.

A careless move on her part could have forced allied players into the mud, so Maple herself stayed put, watching her side feed weakened monsters into the murk.

Then, from the back, wriggling its bulk to avoid the mud, came a white snake

—Haku—with Maple Tree members aboard.

“You all made it out?”

“Yeah, it was close, though!”

“Maple, your skill made the other camp retreat.”

There were too many unknowns, and what they did know was horrible. Their enemies had wisely decided to abandon the fight and back off.

“You did your part, Sally?”

“Yeah, thanks for lending me Ark. It let us escape in time.”

Sally had copied Ark with Reality Twister, and teleported the front line away, minimizing casualties.

That was a strategy that relied on Sally’s high AGI and knack for running through the air.

“We’re gonna help the people behind us. We lost anyone out of Ark’s range, but the Order’s leaders are all still with us; the risk of pressing this advantage seems worth it.”

“Got it! I’ll just wait here a while longer.”

The enemy had retreated. So they needed to push the front forward.

Sally led the move to get survivors on board, taming as many wild monsters as possible and feeding them to Maple’s darkness.

That gave them even more powerful monster minions, and their footsteps would bring doom to the enemy camp.



This event was time-accelerated, and eliminated players were allowed to watch what else went down from an observation room built just for them.

If they got bored or had seen enough, they could always exit back to the regular map, and return to the normal flow of time. But in here, there were giant screens showing locations around the map, and all the battles taking place.

This was a valuable chance to gain intel. What skill had they been killed by?

That knowledge would help in the next PvP event.

While that motive was certainly part of it, plenty of others just wanted to talk about what had gone down. The observation room was filled with chatter.

A large group of players arrived at once, proving just how deadly the fighting was getting.

“Whoa, looks like both sides got hurt.”

“Hard to handle it when you follow the monster wave in. Trying to stop that is gonna get people killed.”

“I saw! The main battle was a doozy. I guess it still is...”

At the center of the event map was the biggest battle yet. It was still on the screen above, showing black monsters spawning from the ground.

And the sacrifices that had generated them.

“Like a cult’s altar.”

“Are humans capable of such evil?”

“I vote no.”

“I got eaten by one.”

“Damn, those things look tough.”

“I was sacrificed on that altar...”

“Eww...”

Sacrificing your own side.

How often would a skill like that prove useful? But given the evidence before their eyes, they had to concede it was effective.

“Maple’s got a lot of summon skills. Worst-case scenario, she can bust those out, and then set this thing off.”

“The ninth stratum added several skills designed for this event, and this is clearly one that really shines here.”

“Another thing I noticed—Maple and Sally share a skill. A gush of water that teleports them away.”



“Yeah, that thing... Mii’s fires came up from behind, so I thought we were done for and started fighting back—got myself killed. Messed up big time.”

“Maple’s just adding to her collection of wings, too. And Pain’s tossing out light beams to rival any mage...”

“AOE attacks are so good! I gotta get me one after this.”

Even for close-quarters weapons, ranged attacks could shine in moments like this. Players had proven that in this event—not just Pain, but the Maple Tree twins, too.

“Pull out a win, our side! I need the medals!”

The losers got medals, too, but the winners got more. All hoped their side would emerge victorious, but the only thing they could do now was watch to see what happened.



# Defense Build and Eliminations

In due time, the wild monsters stopped attacking their enemies. The frenzied hordes vanished, respawning in their original locations, and rendering the field peaceful once more.

No, that was not entirely accurate.

Any monsters that had been swallowed by the dark mud were still milling around Maple, waiting for their master's orders.

"Okay, that should be enough!"

Maple deactivated Dark Rebirth. With nothing else to feed to the murk, having it out just got in her allies' way.

This signaled the entire company to march on their enemy's castle.

And at the heart of this march were the monsters their hard work had created. It didn't matter if these monsters died; they were disposable, and all the more powerful for it. This massive wall would protect the players from incoming spells.

"Maple, climb aboard!" Sally called down from Haku's head.

"Okay!"

Maple needed transport to keep up with the march.

"We're gonna try and end this here."

"Cool! That's what we all prepped for!"

Excited to find out what her monster horde could do, they headed toward their foes.

"Are we gonna get frozen again?"

"A skill like that's gotta have a long cooldown. But it took us a while to get ready, so it's not entirely out of the question."

An immobilization skill that worked on an unprecedented scale. It would make sense if it could only be used once a day.

“We did outplay their strategy, but the main reason they retreated is almost certainly fear of Maple.”

“But they didn’t burn so many resources that they can’t fight back. Stay sharp.”

Once their foes stepped outside their castle, the Order’s side wouldn’t allow them to retreat. They would do everything they could to fend off the invasion.

And just as they’d disrupted the enemy’s chain of command, the same could happen to them. If the unexpected came to pass, that would be a major setback. Even just getting everyone on the same page for simple questions like “Retreat or advance?” could become an issue.

“Best-case scenario, everything goes as planned.”

“But that never happens.”

“We know what to do...”

“Back the Order’s charge!”

To make this invasion count, Maple’s army of darkness would have to tear apart and devour all that came near—until the enemy kingdom fell.

Meanwhile, the opposition was in a race against time, trying to get ready to resist the coming invasion.

“Velvet, Hinata, how much longer?”

“We’re going all out!”

“We’ll be done in time, I swear!”

Velvet’s lightning and Hinata’s ice were both mandatory. Both had rendered these skill trees useless in the last battle and were out slaughtering monsters to try and refresh them.

“Next! Here they come.”

Lily was summoning machine soldiers to Taunt nearby monsters, making them swarm this way.

“Do what it takes. We’ve got a plan, but it requires you to both be at full strength.”

Thunder Storm’s leaders played just that critical a role in any large-scale battle. Their skills were irreplaceable.

Velvet and Hinata both knew that and were going as fast as they could.

But even so, if their enemy kept up this pace, they might not make it in time. For that reason, Flame Empire had a One Night Fort set up outside the castle walls and were prepared to defend it with their lives.

“Ha-ha, geez... So much we *gotta* defend!”

“We knew that going in. Our builds aren’t meant for leading invasions...well, other than Mii’s.”

“Let’s do what we can. I’d like us all to get through this alive.”

“Yup, but Thunder Storm needs to get back in time for that to happen! Sorry, Wilbert! We may all die here.”

“With you by my side, I’m confident that won’t happen. Without Lily, my own damage is diminished, but just the sight of me will make people think twice.”

Wilbert’s detection and sniping skills had proven themselves a major threat over and over. Much like Maple herself, just knowing he was there made people wary.

“Okay, Marx. Final checks. All traps good?”

“Yeah. They’re still around. Ready whenever.”

“Misery, skill cooldowns?”

“No issues there.”

“All right! Anything goes wrong, I’ll go get killed first. Your skills are each invaluable, so the enemy will be gunning for you.”

Shin’s build was all about raw damage—it was good, but not unusual. In contrast, Misery’s AOE heals and Marx’s traps were not easily imitated. That put the pair at the core of their guild’s strategies, and losing them would result in incalculable damage.

“.....Our foes are here,” Wilbert said, having spotted them first. “Focus.”

Marx’s cameras soon spotted them, too. At the front was a wall of inky black. A wave of monsters, surging across the plains.

“Yikes.”

“Oh...dear? There’s even more of them.”

They’d expected to see more monsters...but not this many more. Marx’s jaw dropped, but they’d have to fight the things eventually, so he stayed put.

“I’ve warned Mii to go as fast as she can. I’ll concentrate on healing.”

“Thanks. Wilbert, shall we?”

“Absolutely.”

Shin activated Splinter Sword, stepping onto one shard, but leaving several floating around Wilbert, defending him.

“I’ll try and pull anything that flies in and thin them out; you finish ’em off.”

“The more we kill, the better.”

Atop the One Night Fort, Wilbert drew his bow, and as the monsters entered Shin’s range, he sent his blades flying toward them.

Maple’s side was in visual range of Shin, which meant the reverse was also true.

“Maple! Shin’s coming!” Sally yelled.

“Per the plan, Haku’s staying the course!” Kasumi cried. “Maple, you do you!”

“Mai, Yui! I’m your defense, do your thing! Heaven’s Throne! Glow of Deliverance! Full Deploy!”

Maple booted up her skills, putting the throne on Haku’s head, much like she often did when on Syrup’s shell. By sitting on it, she reduced the damage taken by those all around her. Finally, she bristled with artillery.

Haku raised its head. At this height, Maple had a clean line of sight, with nothing to block her shots.

“Web Spinner!”

Sally's webs bound all their feet in place. This made dodging harder, but it was better for their plan.

"Splinter Sword! Wen, Wind God!"

"Commence Assault!"

"Haku, go!"

Splinters flew at the monsters, and at the big targets—Maple Tree. Kasumi saw them coming and barked an order.

Since Sally's webs had them all fixed in place, Haku could writhe quickly, and moved its head out of the way.

""Throw!""

"Ah-ha! World's wildest mobile cannon!" Shin said, totally getting the logic.

The spheres were followed by a hail of bullets. Haku's height meant they always had line of sight, but it was far more agile than Syrup, so it was much harder for an enemy to hit. And it was high enough off the ground that few could reach it even if they got close.

Stopping this mobile cannon required killing Haku, but in Supergiant form it had lots of HP, and with Harden boosting its defense, that was easier said than done.

"Argh, gotta throw in the towel! Willbert, please!"

They'd known all along the monsters would also need handling. Shin turned his attention to the easier threat, keeping one eye on evading while hopping around his blades, out of reach of both monsters and spells, slicing and dicing them from above.

"Drawn Taunt, Long Range, Range Expansion... With all that in the way, even I can't see! Annihilation Arrow!"

Crimson light wreathed Wilbert's arrow and left a trail in the air as it shot forward.

Piercing everything in its path, a supersonic bolt vaporized the monsters it hit, and the players beyond as well.

Maple's camp had the numbers advantage. This one attack hurt but did not stop their invasion. They knew their foes were powerful. Pain's orders acknowledged that there would be sacrifices, and he'd promised they'd push through them to victory.

"Marx! Set off the traps! Our side's about to make contact!"

"Spring Traps!"

Not all traps sprang when you stepped on them. Marx had a skill that let him manually activate all traps in range. The ground swelled. Boulders and wooden pillars as tall as Haku shot up, blocking the monsters' paths.

"Trick Shot! Arrow Rain!"

"Splinter Sword!"

An arrow shot, which bounded between targets with no loss of momentum. A barrage of bolts from above. With the monsters stopped in their tracks, far more were slain. Yet one after another, they shattered the traps, slipped through the gaps, and closed in. Players who failed to bail in time were lost in a dust cloud.

"Healing Light! Recovery Spring!"

Misery healed the front lines, going through all her skills to keep as many players' HP bars full as she could. What she lacked in offense, she made up for in support.

But even as they held on, a powerful light raced across the ground.

"Holy Condemnation!"

"Whirlwind Slicer!"

"Multi-Firebolt!"

"Ground Wave!"

Backing up the monsters, the Order of the Holy Sword began mowing players down.

Misery's healing was powerful, but the burst damage their blows did was too high for that to matter.

“Maple, this is all you!”

“Sally, going to Pain?”

“No, this is my shot. I’m going to Shin! Iz, Kanade, start firing at the ground!”

“Got it. I’ll keep as many grimoires as I can.”

“Be careful!”

Iz’s bombs did not discriminate. Sally could easily get caught in the blast. And that could kill her. So if she was elsewhere, they could join the fray.

Sally’s webs shot out, grabbed one of Marx’s pillars, and yanked her toward Shin.

“Oh, we throwing down? I feel like my build’s a good check for yours!” Shin said.

“Could be. But I’m not gonna make it easy,” Sally replied.

Sally could tell the team of Shin and Wilbert was killing more monsters than they’d anticipated.

If she could stop that, and let Maple, Mai, and Yui focus on death from above, it would be much easier for the Order to make strides.

For that reason, she was coming for his head.

“Not what I wanted, but this could work for me long-term!”

Shin pulled a bunch of his blades back to him, focusing them on Sally. He wanted her gone just as much as she wanted him out of the way. Either one going down would be a big plus for the other side.

“Waterway. Water Cowl.”

“Sweet!”

Sally was making paths of water, and swiftly swimming from perch to perch.

Shin controlled the blades he stood on, trying to keep his distance while targeting her with Wen’s wind blades.

Sally wielded dual daggers. She knew basic spells, but it wasn’t her build’s focus. If he could play keep-away, he wouldn’t go down easy.



“But I can’t hit her, either!”

“All I gotta do is keep your splinters busy!”

Less of them in the fray below created openings. And with Shin keeping a safe distance, Wen stuck to his side, and the wind blades took that much more time to reach her.

Ordinarily, the sheer quantity of ranged hits would overwhelm a foe, but Sally’s unnatural evasion skills let her thread through the larger gaps created from Shin being at this distance.

“Okay, the monsters below are bad news. Gotta take you down! Wen, Far-Reaching Winds! Whirlwind!”

Wen’s skill created a huge swirling wind vortex, and the winds buffeted Sally.

Wind Blades followed, and splinters sealed the deal.

“Superspeed! Leap!”

Before she could be fully surrounded, Sally used her skills to launch herself.

“Oboro, Whet Wisp!”

Dodging nimbly round the oncoming gale, she made platforms in midair and closed in.

“Not happening!”

“Oboro, Spirited Away!”

Shin fired the blades left nearby like a shotgun. Her approach having been intercepted, Sally used one of Oboro’s skills, nulling the attack and passing right through it.

One more step. A vital chance to attack.

But Sally had kept her wits about her—her peripheral caught that red glow.

“—! Ice Pillar!”

“Damn, you’re good!”

Shin had lured her into the open, and Wilbert’s deadly arrow had come up from below, but Sally’s ice blocked it.

Nothing got past her. Shin braced his shield, calling his blades back.

If he could weather this strike, he'd have blades to hit back with. Eyes on Sally, ready for any attack— Except the one she named.

“Origin Blade: Void.”

Sally's hair turned white, and her eyes turned red.

The visuals and skill name were unmistakable. Kasumi had used this very skill to cut Shin down before. A trap? Or was it real? Before he could make up his mind, Sally vanished.

“Wen, behind me!”

With that setup, her disappearance could only mean one thing. Shin was forced to conclude Sally had somehow acquired Origin Blade: Void, and so he kicked up a gale to the rear. Sally had far less HP than Kasumi, so those blades would easily down her.

“I knew you'd react that way, Shin. How could you not?”

“Huh.....?”

Right in front of him. The air shimmered...and there stood Sally, daggers raised high.

No way to avoid a direct hit. She'd made it so close to him. And his instincts told him this blow would be enough to vanquish his health pool. But he was Flame Empire, and they had Misery's Resurrect.

Shin thought fast. He'd revive an instant later, and strike back. And from this close, even Sally couldn't dodge that strike.

He steeled himself to soak the blow, but then his eyes caught a brilliant light, rising up from the ground below.

“.....!”

Shin's eyes met Sally's and caught her intent.

The implication was clear. If Misery used Resurrect now, Pain's super-wide AOE would mow down the rest of their army. A moment's delay meant she could save them instead.

He knew he was caught in a snare, one far better laid than he could have imagined.

“Misery!” he yelled. “Cut me loose!”

“.....In that case!” Sally shouted as she lunged in, slashing his vital points before he could block her strikes.

Where she hit, water and fire effects burst, and with the buff from Sword Dance, his HP melted.

“Augh, you got me good...!”

Maple was not the only player who’d improved. Shin had failed to see through Sally’s deception and was thus eliminated.

“The rest is yours!”

Shin burst into light, and the last thing he saw was a wave of light racing across the ground, followed by a familiar resurrection effect.

Pain’s light annihilated everything, and a much gentler light enveloped them all, pulling players back from the brink.

“Marx, traps?”

“Ugh, Pain blew away nearly everything active!”

Shin’s snap decision had prevented the complete loss of their front line, but Pain’s blow had eliminated all pillars blocking the monsters’ path forward. The dams had burst, and they were pouring in. Wilbert was reducing their numbers, but without Shin, his pace had slowed. Once they overwhelmed the front-line players, they and the back line would be monster feed.

This was now a losing battle.

“Wilbert, any ideas? We can’t buy much more time!”

Marx activated what traps were left—surges of water, gusts of wind—doing what little he could.

“Sorry! One-versus-many is Lily’s territory!”

Wilbert never stopped shooting, doing everything he could. Thinning out the monsters’ numbers, piercing the heart of any player who misjudged their

position—all of it helped slow the enemy’s advance.

But he could not *stop* it. The monster wave was slowly, steadily, mercilessly swallowing them up as Misery’s healing proved inadequate for one player after another.

What terrified enemies inspired allies.

With Shin out of the picture, the monsters, Mai/Yui/Maple’s destructive barrage, and the Order’s charge, their side was at a clear advantage.

“Pain!”

“Joining us?”

“Oh, Sally! That went well. So you!”

“I liked my odds. Not a trick that’ll work often, but if I can make it count *here*, I’ll call that good.”

“Yeah...”

“It sure made things easier for us! Not that Wilbert’s any less broken...”

The wall of monsters was blocking his arrows, and slowly chewing through the enemy.

Vines, flames, ice, and wind—traps ran interference, but through them, they could see the One Night Fort dead ahead.

Not much further. Victory was almost at hand.

Dread had Umbra doing the bulk of his attacks. Sally was following him, but she glanced up, seeing a brief flicker through the effects around them. A dire portent, and a signal she’d almost missed.

But that flicker alone was enough for these two.

A moment later, the sky lit up, and thunderbolts slammed down around them.

“Velvet...!”

“Umbra, Shadow World.”

Spotting it a second early gave Dread time to drag players nearby into the

ground, away from the lightning, and hide them among the monster horde. Maple realized Velvet was there, and gathered her monsters together, blocking attacks from above.

“Notes, Sonar!... She’s coming in from above?”

Frederica sensed her plummeting toward them and threw up her staff.

“She’s got Hinata with her! She can decelerate!”

“Damn right!”

Hinata provided even more aerial options than Sally had. Just before Velvet hit the ground, they took a hard turn, rocketing toward their five opponents.

“Hinata, get ‘em!”

“Isolation Domain!”

A purple aura belched out around her, quickly covering the area.

“.....!”

“I-it’s pushing us back?!”

It was a dome of purple light. Hinata’s gravity control forced everything outward—except Dread and Drag. Isolation Domain was worthy of its name. A dome of warped gravity cut off all outside interference, and prevented those within from doing anything to those outside.

Dread fired a spell at the purple wall, saw it bounce off, and turned his eyes toward Velvet.

“Okay. So this is a two-on-two death match?”

“Yup! Glad you catch on quick.”

“Drag, we’re doing this.”

“Works for me! I mean, this dome’s blocking the lightning strikes—it’s not all bad!”

“Yeah.”

This was their third face-off. Frederica, Pain, and Sally had been expelled, and Dread and Drag were trapped here with no escape. The fact that they’d fought

Dread and Drag earlier meant Velvet and Hinata had *chosen* to tackle Dread and Drag again here.

In other words, they were certain they could win.

“We’re not going down easy.”

“Hell, you’d better make us work for it!” Velvet yelled excitedly.

The lightning storm outside was blocked by the gravity wall, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t make more. Velvet balled her fists, scattering bolts all around.

“Ground Armor! Stone Skin!”

To counter that, Drag coated himself in rocks and upped his defense, then charged at her.

He gave a mighty swing of his ax, and when she ducked under it, Dread closed in.

“.....!”

“Purple Bolt!”

He swung his daggers, but Velvet’s momentum died on a dime; she slid abruptly to the right, where she pushed him back with her lightning.

“Gravity Control...sure opens up your options.”

Velvet was floating just off the ground—and then her feet touched back down. Hinata’s finesse allowed her to move in ways that were otherwise impossible.

Drag and Dread quickly whispered to each other.

“She’s too mobile for us. I ain’t gonna hit home, but I can dodge ’em.”

“Then I’ll finish her. Umbra, Shadow Pack.”

Dread called out shadowy wolves, siccing them on Velvet.

“Thunderclap!”

In lieu of the bolts from the sky, Velvet generated a mighty column, incinerating the wolves.

“Heavy Charge! Ground Wave!”

Drag charged right on through it, closing in, and making the ground ripple.

“Ice Wall! Zone Freeze!”

“Ain’t gonna work!”

Ice coated the ground, but if you weren’t in contact with the ground when it activated, they knew it would do nothing.

Drag made a short hop over the effect and slammed right through the wall in front of him.

“Spark Impetus! Double Whammy!”

Velvet sped up, but Drag soaked her blows bodily—taking damage, but grabbing her hand. Her reach was ultra-short—the greatest weakness of any fisticuffs player.

“Gotcha! Ground Lance!”

“Polar Flash!”

Drag’s stone spears and Velvet’s massive bolt each did damage.

When the light died down, Dread was right on top of her.

“Cocytus!”

“Umbra, Shadow Dive!”

Ducking below the ground avoided the immobility effect. Down there, Hinata’s cold couldn’t get him.

“Velvet!”

“Discharge!”

“Gah! Damn, that hurts...!”

But no matter how much damage she did, Drag wasn’t about to let go. And as much damage as this blinding discharge did, it wasn’t quite enough to take out a pure front-line build.

But when the light died down, Drag saw Velvet’s hands in his, giving off a blue glow. Not an electric one—it was some sort of aura.

An instant later, a burst of strength let her shake him off, and her fists struck hard.

“Gah! Yo, Dread! Look out!”

“.....!”

Bursting through the remaining sparks, a blue aura trailing behind her, Velvet was charging in far faster, closing in on Dread.

“What’d you do...?”

“I kept a few cards hidden!”

“Top Speed! Superspeed!”

Fists hurtled toward Dread, and he got his daggers on them—but those blows were weighty, and so fast that even with his double speed buff, he was falling behind.

“Thought Freeze.”

“Tch, a seal...?”

It wouldn’t last long, but Hinata’s skill prevented Dread from using Godspeed and making himself even faster. That momentary loss proved fatal, and Velvet’s fist punched through him, tearing into his HP.

“Charge!”

“Velvet, behind you!”

Drag was closing in. His ax was powerful enough to take her out in one shot. Velvet dodged that and moved to finish *him*.

“Can’t catch you, huh?”

Velvet was now faster than a player with a speed build. It was nothing for her to duck past Drag’s ax and go for the counter.

But as Drag vanished, he and Dread made eye contact.

Even as Velvet landed that counter, Dread stabbed at her from behind with a knife.

“.....?!”



Her dodge was unearthly. Like a gymnast, she cleared his knife, standing upside down in the air. She was utterly ignoring gravity, a move that could not be predicted even if you tried. She twisted her body in the air, then planted her feet on Dread's shoulders.

"Welp, I returned that letter."

".....? It was hella fun!"

Her foot leaving a blue streak in its wake, she stomped Dread's shoulder, taking out the 1 HP his skill had left him with.

Velvet's aura faded, and the dome around them vanished.

"*Gulp!* They lost?!"

"Sally," Pain said.

That was all she needed.

"Yep."

Together, they shot forward, closing in on Velvet.

"Gravity Cage! Ice Pillar!"

The extra gravity slowed them, and a pillar of ice blocked their path.

They darted around it, and the ground shook. Behind the ice pillar, columns of light were rising here and there across the field, and it was clearly *not* Velvet's lightning.



## Defense Build and a Risky Ploy

“Interesting...”

Beyond the pillar, Pain and Sally found a massive magic circle spreading out across the ground, and lifeless soldiers rising up from within.

“I can match Maple on mass summons.”

“Finally, Lily! I was about to blow my traps...”

“My apologies.”

Ignis came in for a landing on the One Night Fort, and Mii’s fires flowed free.

“All Armies Attack!”

“Spring All Traps!”

She’d set them up ahead of time—at each location, a magic circle started spawning troops.

The traps placed with them also activated, regardless of range.

This changed *everything*. And not only on this battlefield. Marx and Lily’s diligent groundwork had flipped the tide on every front.

“Velvet did her part—now we take back the fight!” Mii was fanning both her flames and group morale.

The players’ heads were spinning trying to keep up with the fluctuating flow of the battle. Maple’s side was at a crossroads and could potentially suffer serious losses.

“Pain, that light...!”

“Yeah, we’ll have to divide our forces. I don’t see Thunder Storm, so the other offensives are in trouble.”

“We’ll head that way and leave Maple here.”

Maple was the monster master. If she left, this strategy would implode.

“How strong are her armies?” Frederica said, scowling at them.

Sally quickly briefed everyone on Maple Tree’s plan. Support fire from the rear died off, and Maple landed next to Sally and the others, four white wings on her back.

“That was quick.”

“Yup! Dread and Drag?”

“Thunder Storm got ’em! Shame, but they’re out.”

“They made no major errors. Their foes were just that good.”

The enemies they now faced were the three leaders from Flame Empire and both leaders of Rapid Fire, each with their weapons drawn.

Players gathered on both sides. Maple’s monsters against Lily’s summons, with four players bound for the One Night Fort.

Ally or enemy alike, all avoided Maple and Mii, choosing instead to fight on either flank. For one simple reason...

“Holy Splendor!”

“Funeral Pyre!”

No one had enough lives to risk getting caught in the cross fire.

To lower the odds of being hit by a piercing attack, Maple avoided using Martyr’s Devotion. She attacked with her weapons, but primarily focused on commanding her monsters.

“Sally, don’t get hit! Multi-Firebolt! Notes, Round!”

“I won’t, I’m in peak condition.”

She wasn’t lying. Sally was making good use of Marx’s stone columns and her own ice to slip between the spell barrages.

Frederica and Maple’s strikes were scattering the summoned soldiers, while Lily and Mii’s were ending monster lives.

“Frederica, can you up your output and clean them out?”

“Well...temporarily, yeah? Just...”

They'd come right back. She gave Pain a look, making sure he was serious.

Their foes had Marx and Misery—in other words, they had powerful support. Even if all four of them teamed up on one of these five, it was anyone's guess whether they could topple them.

"If she really has no limits on production, we're at a disadvantage."

Maple's horde had required a lot of prep to achieve. They'd not soon match that number if their foes dispatched them all. The monsters had slaughtered and massacred a lot of players—exactly what they'd hoped for—but now the total monster swarm was steadily shrinking.

"It's not that I don't trust Maple Tree...but our other fronts are a concern."

"So...we need the right moment to back off?" Sally asked Pain.

"Yes."

"Then I'll stick with Sally! You know that!" Maple said, yelling over her blasting guns.

"Right, Maple," Sally nodded, getting it right away. "When you need it, we'll make that moment happen."

"Excellent. Very helpful."

"But how are we going to do it?" Maple shouted.

"If we wanna retreat, we gotta hit 'em hard enough to make them think twice about chasing us. We're gonna take out the two players making bases and keeping their front line so tough."

"Ah... Well, tell me when you're ready!"

Their targets: Marx and Misery. As these two were vital to the security of their enemy's lines, Maple and the others just needed a chance to hit them hard.

Per Sally's plan, the rest of Maple Tree had split into three parties, each headed to one of the columns of light: Chrome and Kasumi, Iz and Kanade, Mai and Yui. Each was taking a bit of a risk, but they'd all made their choice.

"Ain't keen on splitting up, but it's no time to be picky."

“Yes, we’ll just have to trust them.”

Maple Tree were at their best as a group, but Lily’s plan had made sticking together impossible.

Not everything would go their way. They had to hit up as many fights as they could, pitching in where needed.

“Haku, charge!”

They plunged into the battlefield, using the snake’s sheer bulk to send the enemy and their summons flying.

“Wah, what the—?!”

“Kasumi’s snake! Look out!”

Kasumi rode Haku right across the field, then she and Chrome dismounted, ready to advance.

“Well, let’s pitch in and go one at a time. I’ll pull the summons. Kasumi, hit the players.”

“Armored Arms! Blood Blade!”

“Polter Bolster!”

These enemies weren’t gonna reduce their own numbers. But the summons weren’t exactly marching on detailed orders. Despite the quantity of them, Chrome was pretty sure he could hold his own.

With Necro in defensive mode, Chrome joined other Great Shielders, tanking hits. Kasumi used Harden to shore up Haku’s defenses, and had it charge in while wielding a liquid blade atop it.

“Mind’s Eye! Specter of Carnage!”

Kasumi’s vision changed, making all incoming attacks visible. A reckless charge like this made everyone target her, but she knew where the attacks would land, and could direct Haku to slip through them all.

“Tornado!”

“Range Expansion! Flame Lance!”

“First Blade: Heat Haze!”

Since she could see the hitboxes for the enemy’s attacks, she teleported to her opponents, hitting them hard, and the extra arms added to the damage.

“Gah...Damn!”

“First Blade: Heat Haze!”

With so many players around, no one could tell who she was after. Specter of Carnage freed her from cooldown restrictions and let her use skills in rapid succession, cutting down one player after another.

“Sh-she’s nuts!”

“Form ranks! Stand your ground!”

“Sword Mountain!”

Coming off a teleport, Kasumi cut someone down, then stuck her blade in the ground.

A moment later, red liquid—like Blood Blade—spread out across the ground, and a huge quantity of purple blades thrust up through the gathered players.

Skills from her Blighted Blade carried penalties. But at a moment like this, a temporary stats reduction was worth it.

“She’s here...!”

“Snake coming! Regroup!”

Even as Kasumi showed off mobility that was nothing like a typical speed build, flames were buffeting the summons.

“Burst Flame! Taunt! Hey, these things can’t kill me easily. Forget them and go hit the players!”

“Got it!”

“Thanks!”

With Chrome pulling the summons, the rest of the front line could regroup, keeping their mages safe.

“Stimulation! Impact Reflection!”

“Multi-Heal!”

“Oh, thanks!”

Chrome was making deft use of his shield, maintaining his HP with multiple overlapping skills. Seeing him tackling the summons, healers behind him sent spells his way.

This battle was not *just* Maple Tree’s. There were many allies around, all capable of making up for what Maple Tree lacked.

“Hope the others are doing all right...but I got no time to think about that!”

Acknowledging that he’d just have to trust his guildmates, Chrome focused on the enemy at hand.

Elsewhere, Iz and Kanade had reached the battle raging in the opposite direction.

“Sou, thanks. You got us here in no time.”

Kanade’s pet had been disguised as Haku, but when Mimic ran out, it turned back into a slime. Still, the skill had lasted more than long enough to make up for their lack of mobility.

Unlike Kasumi and Chrome, neither were exactly suited for throwing themselves into the thick of battle, so they took up positions toward the back, offering support.

“Let’s get some defense up.”

“Yeah. Gotta counter Marx’s traps.”

Only their enemies had cover (and an infinite supply of troops). Spells were flying everywhere, but Maple Tree’s side was taking the brunt of the damage.

“I’ll hand you some barricades.”

“Mm-hmm, I’ll start laying them down.”

Kanade and Iz split the labor, remaking the battlefield in their favor. Several allies saw this and came to help, deeming it a priority.

“I know these are strong enough. Put them wherever they’re needed.”

“Will do! Thanks!”

If they had cover to duck behind, they could conserve their defensive skills.

“Fey, Item Boost.”

Iz took out a few potions, and had her pet enhance them. All these potions provided stat buffs.

“Craft Dusting!”

This widened the area of effect and allowed everyone in range to receive the buff provided. This was true not just of the stat boosts, but for the reduced damage and constant healing effects, too. Buffs provided by rare items were every bit as good as those from skills and spells.

“I’ll send defenses round,” Kanade said, doing his part. “Mass Spell Barrier! Might Minimizer!”

Between the spells, cover, buffs, and healing, they were curbing losses, improving the health of their side, and getting them back in the fight.

Once she was done buffing, it was time for *debuffs*. Iz loaded the cannons she’d brought.

Not with standard shells, but with items that, upon landing, would spread a black mist, which increased damage taken and reduced healing effects.

“Kanade, can you pin them down?”

“Absolutely. Gravity Control!”

That was one of Hinata’s skills. Kanade wafted off the ground, flying toward the front.

“Binding Ground! Slow Field!”

“Augh! Wh-what the?!”

“M-my legs...!”

Yelps of surprise and consternation went up.

Kanade and Iz had slipped into the back lines unobtrusively, and most of their foes had not yet noticed their arrival.



These skills came out of nowhere, warping the air around their foes, sticking their feet to the ground and preventing movement.

The enemy assumed that, had anyone here had access to these skills, they'd have been used long ago. Their sudden appearance this late in the game threw the enemy for a loop.

But it was no great mystery. Kanade had only just arrived.

Iz had been watching from below, and once the skills went off, she activated her row of cannons.

“Here goes!”

With a boom, the bombardment began, and screams filled the air. One side got buffed, the other debuffed.

In no time at all, there was a huge stat discrepancy. The enemy might have had bottomless resources, but this went a long way to making up for that. Better players meant better performance.

Battles that they'd been losing had evened back out. Chrome, Kasumi, Iz, and Kanade had made that possible. Meanwhile, Mai and Yui had reached a battle of their own.

This area was filled with cover, but that cover was destructible rocks. The rocks respawned every so often, but if the battle raged hard enough, the area would soon be totally flat.

The wave of summons had pushed them back. Their cover had been destroyed by a barrage of spells. Now they were fully exposed, and in deep trouble. Until the twins called out:

“Hi!”

“Anything we can do?”

“.....Oh!”

“Yes, absolutely!”

“We've gotta do something!”

Several guild masters spotted them and were instantly on the same page.

Each used a skill to make their enemy flinch, threw up multiple barriers, and then the survivors converged on the twins.

“Mai and Yui, right? Can you fight?”

““We can!””

“As it stands, they’re chewing through us. We’ll back you up, so do your thing!”

““Got it!””

The twins hopped aboard Tsukimi and Yukimi. They had four deadly hammers in the air, and one in each hand. The iron-sphere-lobbing tactic wasn’t going to work here.

What this battle needed was direct hits—fatal devastation no one could counter.

““Destroy Mode!””

Their weapons began to glow red. Tattered great shielders came rushing in to keep them safe. Their work against the raid bosses was very well known, and their arrival was a ray of hope for everyone on their side.

Everyone knew at once it was worth giving their life to keep the twins safe.

“Put ‘em down! Don’t let anything through!”

“Crimson Wave!”

“Tidal Wave!”

But the enemy was just as aware of the twins’ importance. If those hammers hit them, nothing they did would matter. They might have survived the spheres, but hammers wielded by the girls themselves were *proper* weapons, and just the sight of them promised victory and put fear in the hearts of their enemies.

““Cover!””

The tanks soaked the waves of fire and water. But not every shield was up to the task, and one after another went down, the line crumbling.

“Keep going! Don’t stop!”

“We can’t block this forever!”

They were betting hard on the twins. Their charge would only stop when all the enemy were dead, or so many allies had fallen that the twins were left exposed.

“Impenetrable Barrier!”

This blocked all incoming spells, and Mai and Yui reached the enemy soldiers.

““Hyahh!””

The hammers held by Helping Hands swung, leaving red streaks in their wake, and everything in their paths disintegrated. As easily as brushing the dust off their hands. Nothing could stop them. The twins charged on, turning all summons to light.

“They’re monsters!”

“Stop them! Arrow Rain!”

“Chain Spell!”

Everyone there received a sharp reminder of just how freakish the twins were.

Do not touch, do not approach. Even in planning sessions, the twins had been discussed in those terms.

“Multi-Cover! Cut through!”

““Protection!””

This was why Maple Tree had sent the twins off together. Even without Chrome around, they knew someone else would keep the girls safe. In which case, letting them work together provided the best path to victory.

“Thank you!”

“Yui, this way!”

They’d burst through the summons, and their talons dug into the line of players beyond. Now they hopped down from their bears so that they could get *all* their hammers in play.

““Quick Change!””

They were in range. Tsukimi and Yukimi went back into the rings, and two more hammers appeared in their place. Now the twins could each strike eight players at once.

““Double Impact!””

““Spirit Light!””

““Guardian’s Luster!””

It didn’t matter if their opponents raised their shields. Their protection would shatter the moment the hammers hit home. Those who had damage-nullification skills used them; those without them had no choice but to resort to survival skills like Indomitable Guardian.

And if they didn’t even have that much? Well, they vanished like they’d never even been there, and the hammers were free to whop those *with* skills.

“Gahhh!”

“Wha?!”

Some players’ skills had made them invulnerable, but that just resulted in them being launched into the air, like Maple had been earlier. Shooting rapidly skyward—a flight with no promise of a safe landing.

“H-huh?!”

Before this mighty display, far beyond any expectations, the enemy could not believe their eyes. Blood drained from every face.

Mai and Yui just kept swinging. There was no cooldown on regular attacks, everyone knew that! The moment they needed an invulnerability skill for a *regular* attack, it was all over.

“Strike through! Cut ’em down! We only have to hit ’em once!”

“Guard them! The enemy losses outnumber ours!”

All manner of spells flew in, blocked by barriers and by a wall of players. Defensive resources were devoted solely to the protection of the two girls making their hammers dance.

Each time the twins brushed someone, the victim burst. Each time the enemy got close, they flew into the stratosphere.

A storm without mercy, that left only dust in its wake.

Attack. Attack. As long as those orders stood, Mai and Yui devoted themselves to destruction.

Enemy and ally alike raced to their deaths, leaving but a handful of players and the constantly spawning summons.

Perhaps some had fled in the midst of all the chaos, but at this moment, there was not a soul moving on the enemy line.

“Sorry! We lost so many!”

“If we could have hit them faster...”

“No, not many could go faster than that.”

“Ha-ha, this was well worth dying for.”

“We were headed for a wipe anyway.”

“Uh, we’d better group up with someone else. Those summons ain’t stopping. You coming with?”

““Sure!””

It seemed like a waste to keep hitting the lifeless soldiers. With the few allied survivors surrounding them, Mai and Yui left the scene of the ongoing spawning.

Maple Tree members were handling several areas, but they couldn’t cover everything. Lily and Marx had laid far more groundwork than that, and looking at the whole map, Maple Tree’s allies were *losing* ground more often than not.

But this was the biggest of those battles, and combat was still ferocious.

Nearly all of Marx’s pillars had fallen. The wave of monsters was unobstructed. Their bulk trampled Lily’s ever-spawning soldiers, and mauled the players beyond.

But waves of flames and projectiles were vaporizing Maple’s monsters, too. And the soldiers overflowed, bearing down on Pain’s location.

“Poltergeist!”

Maple froze Machine God’s lasers in the air, grabbing them like swords, and started waving them wildly.

That cleared out the soldiers and let another wave of monsters through.

“Looks like they’re handling things well,” Sally said, reporting on Maple Tree’s efforts.

“.....Then let’s move!” Pain cried, pointing to their enemy formation.

Advancing here made it unlikely either side would emerge without substantial losses, and retreat would be that much harder. A win would be worth it, but with the rest of the line under attack, this was a huge risk. Not one taken without good reason.

That was why he’d waited for the good news on Maple Tree’s actions.

“Broadstrafe.”

“Blue Fire.”

Behind the perpetually spawning troops, Lily summoned machine soldiers wielding guns, which sprayed bullets everywhere. And Mii’s flames followed in their wake.

As the volley and fires died down, Maple’s side closed in.

“Frederica!”

“Yeah, yeah! Watch this, Sally! See what I got up my sleeve! Mana Ocean!”

A sparkling effect danced around Frederica. Sally thought that was the only visual difference, but the moment the next spell left Frederica’s wand, she knew why Frederica had kept this secret.

“Ultra Multi-Firebolt! Notes, Round!”

A stupendous number of red circles appeared behind her. A barrage of fire bullets every bit as thick as Machine God, so many it made one think that regular Multi-Firebolt had been slacking off.

“Ultra Multi-Waterbolt! Ultra Multi-Wind Blades!”

“Er, where’s this MP coming from?”

Coupled with Notes’s skill, she was blasting ridiculous numbers of advanced spells like they were entry-level. Yet her MP showed no signs of running out. Sally had to assume Mana Ocean was making that happen.

“So you probably can’t use this any time you like.”

“Right. Which is why I’m piling it on here!”

If Frederica could do this easily, she’d have started with it. She hadn’t because—like she’d said—this was the card she kept up her sleeve. Not something she could play lightly.

“Gather round!”

Each time the troops spawned, Frederica’s spells tore them up. And timed with those attacks, Maple’s remaining monsters gathered together, focusing on the One Night Fort.

“Awaken!”

“Waterway!”





With the ground covered in swarming monsters, Pain hopped onto Ray, and Sally swam above them.

Both sides were in spell range. Players with high AGI could close that gap in no time.

“Ray, Shooting Star. Total Mana Release. Light Flux.”

With a brilliant flash, Ray and Pain shot right at the One Night Fort. They knew full well the building was actually a trap. Which meant they needed merely to hit it as hard as they could.

“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

“Retainer Rampart!”

The perpetual platoons melted into light, reforming as a wall in front of the fort.

But with Ray lending Pain its power, his attack pierced that wall, shattered the One Night Fort, and forced Misery and Marx into the open.

“Not happening! Ignis! Wha—?!”

Mii tried to join the fray, but her eyes caught the impossible. Behind Pain, Sally shot out of the water, her sword shining with the *exact same light* as Pain’s.

“One more! Soak this!”

“What the—?!”

Both Lily and Mii could only gape. This should not have been possible, but Sally’s sword was blinding.

“Palidragon’s Lightsword!”

“Angel Guardian!”

A blast of light.

Sally’s move was clearly identical to Pain’s, and Misery was forced to use a skill that canceled any attacks from enemies in range. One of her trump cards—powerful, but with harsh limitations.

But the light did *not* vanish. It just kept coming.

“How?!”

“Huh?! Why—”

“Ignis!”

Marx and Misery were flummoxed, but Ignis snatched them both up in its feet, carrying them upward, intending to soak the blow for them. Sally’s blow hit Ignis dead-on...and it just kept flying.

“Ignis took no damage... An illusion?!”

Lily and Wilbert both reached the same conclusion. They could see no damage.

Given Sally’s known skills, there were several that seemed capable of such a thing.

“Marx, Misery, let’s take it back!” Mii shouted.

Intending to land safely, Mii checked to see if Pain was pursuing them.

“Okay, Maple. Do it,” Sally said.

As a result of that glance, Mii just happened to spot her right as Sally gave the sign.

Maple. Ahead of them, on the back of a flying turtle with one arm out, supplemented by Machine God’s laser and a giant black tube, blue sparks flying all around. Aimed right at them.

It didn’t take much for them to realize this was a *cannon*.

“Ancient Weapon! Commence Assault!”

At Maple’s call, even at this distance, they could see the blue and red sparks brighten and release.

It would be a blast big enough to swallow Ignis and all three of them as well—their previous fight had taught them that.

“Gah!”

“I can’t use traps in the air!”

Misery took stock of the situation and made her decision before the worst happened.

“Bell, Awaken! Final Prayer.”



Bell was Misery's pet monster. It had learned only passive skills...until right before this event. This skill sacrificed itself and the player who owned it, but granted invincibility and powerful healing to anyone else nearby—hence the name.

She'd kept it in reserve, hoping it would save them in a pinch, and this was vastly preferable to wasting it.

"Misery!"

"W-wait...no, but..."

Once a skill name was called, it could not be taken back. And both knew there was no other option. The laser was on them...yet it did no damage. Mii got them out, but they'd lost Misery.

"Mii, Marx—make it count."

With Misery gone, they'd lost their healer. It was a huge blow, but they'd already defeated the bulk of Maple's monsters.

With Lily still alive, Mii deemed the advantage with them. To strike back, or not? As Lily backed away from Pain, Mii landed beside her to confer.

"Do we fight—?"

But as she began to speak, her eyes widened. Sally, on Ray's back, was aiming Machine God's lasers and a massive cannon emitting blue sparks. The exact same attack Maple had *just* fired.

"Frederica!"

"Multi-Transfer!"

An insane number of buffs hit Sally, extending the attacks' power and range tenfold.

"Think it's an illusion? Go on, soak the hit!"

Mii hesitated for an instant. Was it real or not? She didn't know enough to tell. And that instant delayed the real choice—to dodge or ignore.

"Lily!"

“Would that I could! Sorry, Mii! My call. Change Formation.”

“Ancient Weapon! Commence Assault!”

Where Maple’s blue beam had shot across the sky, this one scorched the ground, spreading outward.

Looking at her enemy take evasive maneuvers, Sally watched as the illusory light raced across the ground...and faded.

“To our defenses! Pincer them!”

With that, Pain ordered the retreat. Pressing forward would only expose their foothold here.

Both sides had lost untold numbers in this frontal assault, and for now, they called an end to it. The scars carved into the field itself spoke volumes to the ferocity of the battle fought there.

Change Formation. The effect of this skill was rather like Maple’s Ark. It moved anyone affected by an AOE buff, which allowed Lily to shuffle a lot of players to the rear.

“Lily, thanks. You saved me.”

“Hmm? No, I made the call to retreat all on my own.”

“No telling if that was real or an illusion. Better not to find out the hard way.”

“Will and I will try and verify that before our next pitched battle. We’ll have to rely on his eyesight, but that’s far better than letting her hit us once.”

If it had been real—and fatal—that would have been too costly. To avoid that, and safely pry further, Wilbert was their best bet.

“My troops were near the end of their time limit. Marx’s traps weren’t much better.”

“Yeah. I’ll have to replace them where they’re most needed...”

They had far fewer players on their side now. From this point on, it would not be just big battles, but ambushes and sneak attacks.

“Night’s coming. Let’s try and thin their numbers then.”

“Good plan. Will can see in the dark.”

“Mii would stick out like a sore thumb. Better man the fort...”

“.....Point taken.”

Fire was very visible in the dark. Even if it hadn't been, Mii's fighting style was ostentatious. Even her choice of pet was easily spotted. Stealth was just not her thing.

“Looks like they're not giving chase. Oh, the king's attack gave them pause?”

There were magic circles in the sky above, and the king's spells were raining down upon them. Lily sighed. Good thing they hadn't overextended themselves, either.

“Getting tired?”

“Quite.”

“Yeah...so many attacks you can't afford to soak.”

“Indeed. One wrong move, and it's all over.”

They could have done more. They each had their share of regrets about that last fight.

But this game boasted a wide variety of skills. All the top players had aces up their sleeves, and what those could do was hard to predict.

“Just gotta make sure they don't get us twice. Oh, look who's back.”

From the spell-studded sky, Velvet dropped in with a clap of thunder. Hinata's skill slowed their descent inches from the ground for a tidy landing.

“How'd it go?”

“Lost Misery. We took out a fair number of players, but no further eliminations from the Order or Maple Tree.”

“Ugh, damn.”

“Sorry, Velvet. I know you wanted to fight, but strategically we had to pull you out.”

“Nah, that's all good. If I just follow my own muse, it'd let my guild down!”

“It was one twist after another. Frankly, perhaps we should have kept you around.”

“Ohh? That sounds like a story I gotta hear!”

“A story...?”

“To Velvet’s ears...it would be.”

“Right.”

As they talked, they headed toward the castle.

“Oh yeah, how’d your end of the plan turn out?”

“Perfecto! And I took out a bunch of suckers on the way.”

“Good. It was worth minimizing losses.”

If Velvet and Hinata had been with them, perhaps the outcome would have been different. But they’d sent them away, because all six of them knew their strategy would be critical in the long run.

They’d sown the seeds. Now they needed only wait for them to bear fruit.

“Time for a rest, then?”

“Yes, and to prepare for night raids.”

Constant combat was exhausting. Knowing when to rest was vital to maintaining peak performance.

The sight of the castle ahead proved they’d stepped away from the battlefield and helped ease the tension in their shoulders.



In the observation room...

With the pitched battle over, the audience was split between those who’d seen enough and were headed back to the main game, and those who stuck around, sorting through what they’d learned. To each their own, but the hype had died down. This was clearly a lull in the action, and the mood was much more relaxed.

Shin, Misery, Dread, and Drag were the center of attention there. Once enemies, now all eliminated.



“Damn, I was trying to keep you alive, Misery.”

“Sorry. Perhaps there was a better timing for Bell’s skill...”

“They came at you hard. I’d call it lucky you had a way to null all of that.”

“Argh, I wasn’t ready to go!”

“Also, what the hell is going on with Sally? Busting out Maple’s skills, and Pain’s, plus Kasumi’s?”

Shin looked at Drag and Dread, wondering if she’d tipped her own camp off.

“Beats me. Frederica didn’t tell us anything. Bet she’s kept it all under wraps.”

“We mean that.”

Neither seemed to be lying, so Shin didn’t press the point. He’d just have to figure it out himself. The same thing had led to Misery’s death, so both were curious.

“Her gear didn’t seem any different... Was she *actually* using those skills? Or was that some skill of her own?”

“That’s a Holy Sword skill! If she can use one of Pain’s, she can probably use ‘em all...but is that possible?”

“I feel like that can’t be true. Perhaps that’s wishful thinking...”

Skills from the Holy Sword tree were unlikely to be obtainable individually. If they were, well, that was such a big deal that a unique series was likely involved.

But she’d also used Machine God—which only Maple had—and Origin Blade: Void—which only Kasumi knew. They were skills so rare, no other players had acquired them, which suggested there was a trick involved.



“But if she *can* use ‘em, no one’s stopping her.”

Sally’s gaming sense alone had always been unparalleled. She was a monster even without her skills. And each time she got a powerful skill, her threat level shot up.

“What’s your plan, Shin?”

“I’m watching! Gotta know what happens! You joining us, Dread? Drag?”

“Hell yeah! Not like I can grind that much XP even if I ditch this place. Sticking around is way more valuable.”

With time accelerated here, once they left this room, the event itself would soon be over. Since none of them were all that tired, staying put and gathering info was a more valuable use of time.

“Some things are easier to work out when you ain’t in the fight yourself,” Dread said, agreeing.

“Guess the next fight’s after dark?”

“I bet the speed-build assassins can’t wait. Argh, why aren’t you there, Dread?”

“I bet that’s one reason Thunder Storm snared us. We fell right into their scheme.”

“Uh...honestly, I didn’t get the impression she’d thought that far ahead. Maybe Hinata had...”

“.....Can’t argue there,” Shin admitted. He’d been in the briefing with the rest of Flame Empire.

“As long as Pain delivers the final victory, I ain’t gonna gripe.”

“Let’s hope Mii finds a way.”

“I got food and drinks. Something to pass the time.”

“Oh, sweet! Did I get anything?”

“Frederica almost certainly would stuff herself.”

“Let’s find some seats with a table.”

“Good plan.”

They found a table with a good view of the screen.

Like the players around them, all wanted to cheer for their own side and learn what they could, while hoping the next eliminations were not their own side’s leaders. With those thoughts on every mind, their gazes turned to the screen above.



## Defense Build and the Shroud of Night

Back at the castle, Maple's side took stock of the survivors. This was a mechanic only available at home base. Certainly, they were praying all of Maple Tree had made it through, but it was also the right moment to confirm how their camp had held out.

If someone died and was sent to the observation room, that was reflected on their display name. It would be obvious at a glance.

"Yup, looks like they're all alive."

"Great! It's so nerve-racking when we're not together."

"If nothing goes wrong, they should be back here in due time."

They waited for just that, and one after another, the Maple Tree pairs returned.

It hadn't been all that long in the grand scheme of things, but it sure felt like they'd been apart for hours. That spoke volumes to how intense each fight had been.

"Oh, good! Mai, Yui, you made it!"

"We did!"

"Everyone worked hard to keep us safe..."

"And if your efforts paid off, be proud. That's why they guarded you."

"Iz and I basically just kept the losses balanced."

"Yeah...once they realize there's a debuff on them, they focus on getting rid of it. Always frustrating."

There weren't that many ways to remove an enemy's buff, but there were plenty of options for removing allied debuffs. Light magic, in particular.

Kanade and Iz had worked to stabilize their side, but the result had been less

about slaughtering the enemy than it had been about halting their advance.

“Kasumi warped around wreaking havoc, but the actual kill count wasn’t all that high. They were on the ropes when we got there, so the difference in numbers worked against us.”

“Once Mind’s Eye ran out, I was reluctant to be as reckless. Perhaps a bold offensive would have changed things...”

Chrome laughed. She’d been plenty bold. And from what they said, it seemed everyone agreed. Chrome, Kasumi, Iz, and Kanade had helped stop their battlefields from turning into a rout. Many players still lived who would have otherwise died without their arrival.

“Mai, Yui?”

“You were in the thick of it?”

“Yes!”

“In our case...”

They explained how their fight had gone. Looking merely at the outcome... they’d wiped out the enemy.

“O-oh. Well...that sounds like you.”

“The spheres are nuts, but they’re nothing compared to what you can really do...”

“Weaponizing random iron spheres is not normal. Don’t forget that!”

“If you slew them all with hammers, then I don’t need to refill your sphere stock.”

In this event, back-line support was plenty helpful. Given that they wielded close-quarters weapons, having that option was pretty wild, but after all that time spent lobbing spheres, perhaps it only made sense the twins would perform like this once they actually hit the lines directly.

“Wow! You did great!”

“Yeah...just throwing yourselves in without fear is impressive enough.”

“Th-that’s because we weren’t fighting alone.”

“Everyone encouraged us!”

They’d met players who had what they needed, then. They were all relieved that the twins had done well, but fatigue was catching up with them.

“Let’s get some rest. Better we do that near the castle, just in case.”

“Yeah, good point. Our enemies are after the throne! If we’re nearby, we can join the defense no matter what happens.”

No one disagreed, so Maple Tree headed to the castle.

“Perhaps we should restock items we’ve used. Town functions are still working. If you need anything I can make, just say the word.”

“Yeah, I used Doping Seeds on the rescue, and a few potions.”

“Don’t wanna be fresh out when the need arises.”

“How’s your weapon durability?” Kanade suggested. “Not something I—or most of us—need to worry about, but...”

“Oh!”

“Can you repair ours?”

“Of course.”

Iz had made Mai and Yui’s weapons, so their durability declined with use.

Sixteen fully customized hammers were far better than anything available in stores. It would be quite difficult for her to make the same thing again, so it was always better to avoid letting them break in the first place.

Their plans were firming up. They’d agreed to rest and recover, so Maple Tree relaxed, offering feedback on each other’s performance, speculating on what lay ahead, and sharing what caught their attention.

There was no telling when they’d be forced to split up again, so exchanges like this were important, and everyone made sure to contribute.

“I know Maple’s worried, so I *am* gonna take a break,” Sally said, stretching as she walked.

“Yeah! There’s a place in the castle where they make food for you, so it’s

perfect for resting.”

“You’ve tried it out already?”

“It’s still in my inventory! They cooked me the biggest slab of meat ever!”

“.....Not what I’d imagined.”

Maple’s example dish was much more “wild hunt” than Sally had expected. Then she remembered who ruled this kingdom, and concluded that perhaps such fare was inevitable.

“I bet there’s more!”

“Then let’s see if they’ve got anything better than what Iz makes.”

“Huh? Uh...that’s a tall order...”

Maple sounded dubious. She tried to remember what else they’d had available, and the eight of them headed off to the castle for a much-needed break.

Frederica watched them go, then turned to Pain, who’d finished dishing out commands to the Order’s rank and file.

“With Drag and Dread gone, we gotta rethink our plans.”

“Yeah, and the skill that did them in...”

Their defeat had come to pass because Hinata’s skill had forcibly cordoned them off.

“I imagine Hinata decides who winds up inside it.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing! Honestly, if she’d picked me, it’d have been rough. Don’t wanna find out how rough!”

If they could pick and choose players they were certain they could beat, that was a major threat.

If they ran up against Maple Tree, and put Iz, Mai, and Yui inside, Maple tree would be in big trouble. And it was not clear if there was a way for them to prevent the skill from going off.

“Best not to let them get too close.”



“Velvet and Hinata both have flashy skills! We’ll have to spot them coming, keep our distance, and handle ’em that way.”

There were too many things they hadn’t tried out, so there might have been a way to block the skill...but they wouldn’t get many opportunities to experiment.

“What about tonight? We were gonna have Dread lead, but that ain’t happening.”

“We’ll have to discuss with Maple Tree.”

“Yeah, I bet Sally’s got ideas.”

Some players had an easier time fighting in the dark.

It would change the style of the conflict, but there would definitely be players out there. They’d have to send someone out, if only to prevent the other side from taking action.

“Oh, that reminds me: I got a ‘letter’ from Dread. Want a look, Pain?”

“I’d like to know what it says. And after that...perhaps we should pass it to Sally. What do you say?”

“I bet she’d make good use of it. Yeah, will do!”

“Please.”

Before Frederica took it to Sally, Pain gave the letter a quick read, nodding to himself. The info it contained would be valuable.

“So everyone’s got something up their sleeve.”

“True! We were pretty well informed, but most times the really big guns don’t come out till you fight ’em.”

No one wanted to play their biggest cards until the fighting demanded it. For that reason, it was unlikely they’d ever see them used in a routine battle. Frederica herself barely ever used Ultra Multi-Magic. That was just being smart.

“I’ve learned to adapt on the fly. Let’s hope that carries me to victory.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Don’t get spooked just ’cause we lost a couple! You’re the one we’re pinning all our hopes on, Pain.”

Not just the Order of the Holy Sword—members from most guilds relied upon him.

He'd been a powerhouse figure since the very first event, and everyone believed that if the chips were down, he'd step up and fix things.

"Yes, I'm aware. In return, I fully intend to lead us to victory."

"Mm-hmm, that's more like it! Okay, I'm gonna pop in on Maple Tree."

"I'll send a message if anything comes up."

"Same here!"

Drag was gone, and they had far fewer skills that could block enemy approaches and attacks. Dread was gone, so they'd lost skills that could protect multiple allies at once. Moving in large numbers was now far riskier than before.

"Subterfuge is not my strong suit," Pain muttered.

No use wishing for what he lacked. He'd have to come up with something else, or rethink his plans so he could compensate. In the interest of victory, Pain sat for a while, lost in thought.



With the big battle over, it was not just the players who could take a breather—the dev team did, too.

"No issues so far."

"Yeah, things are going fine."

"Whew...thank goodness."

"Tamed monsters, placeable items, skills...everything that should stay in place is. And they're activating properly."

"Good."

A lot of players were dropping items and traps around, and there were fewer and fewer spots that were safe to walk. Arguably, dangerous terrain was now safer.

"That last battle was huge."

“Yeah, like we thought.”

“They’re so good with those skills!”

“Using them in ways we never expected, maximizing their impact. He might have been eliminated, but I nearly did a spit take when Shin started riding Splinter Sword around.”

“Could you do that?”

“No. I’d need a ton of practice *and* natural aptitude. Controlling that skill at *all* is pretty demanding.”

There were some things they’d only see after players had worked with a skill for a long time. The developer was nodding to himself.

“And night is coming.”

“That it is. That’s when the fourth event really got brutal...”

But this event’s format and standings were pretty different. It was hard to tell just how things would play out. Both sides had taken heavy casualties, so all were curious to see how they’d do.

“It’s gotta die down for a bit, right?”

“They could stay on the offensive.”

“I guess? But it’s not like either side gained a real advantage. I feel like it’s not the time for bold moves...”

“Losing players has to mean something. Fewer people guarding the low-priority areas, not as many people left to guard the castles...”

People who’d been parked there had yet to see any combat. If one death meant elimination, there was no need to risk it all gunning for the throne. They gained nothing from failure, so this made sense. And the more they defended their bases, the thinner their front lines got, so it also made sense they’d send more into combat.

“If enough people leave...”

“Well, it’s not out of the question. There are plenty of players who are hard to stop.”

What would the outcome be? Not even the developers could tell. They had to make a digest video later, so they were recording anything spectacular and keeping constant tabs on the game's performance.

The first half had begun tentatively.

As the battle gradually increased in intensity, many players had proved how far they'd come.

And at last, full-on war had broken out—with the results being an even match.

Losses had mounted, but the war was far from done. The chaos of combat had made things tough for both camps. They needed to rest and regroup.

The event's first night fell. Some took a stealthy approach, while others attacked head-on.

All had planned for this. All knew the importance of the cover darkness brought. Which camp would be the first to strike? Each player had a style of their own, but all were doing their best to help their side win.

As the shroud of night wrapped round the field, tensions rose—quite different from those found in the daylight. The first sparks of war were about to illuminate that darkness.



## AFTERWORD

Hello to anyone who happened to spot Volume 14 on the shelf. Deepest thanks to anyone who's been following the series all along. I am Yuumikan.

*Bofuri* may be fourteen volumes strong, but it's been a while since they had proper PvP. As skills fly this way and that, the world continues to expand. I dream of a day when we all might experience such adventures ourselves. I envy Maple deeply.

As for the anime's second season, you won't have to wait that much longer! I myself can't wait to see Maple Tree enjoying the game again. When I started writing this series, I never imagined it would last this long. I want to continue their adventures for everyone reading, and for all those who find pleasure in it.

They'll be back on TV before you know it, so please enjoy it when that day comes! And I hope you'll join me again for Volume 15.

*Yuumikan*

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