



HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY
SHRI

DEATH MARCH ²⁰ Rhapsody
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD



DEATH MARCH ²⁰
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY



NANA
An expressionless homunculus.

LULU
Born in the Kuvork Kingdom. She is Arisa's older sister.

LIZA
A scatefolk girl.

MIA
A tacturn elf who loves music.

TAMA
A cat-eared girl.

POCHI
A dog-eared girl.

SATOU
A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.

ARISA
A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.



“Sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Hayato.”

“I’m counting on you to have my back, bud.”

“Yes, of course.”

I recognized the sword in Satou’s hand. It was Mezzalt’s Holy Sword, Blutgang.



DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

20

★ ★ ★
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ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

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Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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A Pure Nation

Satou here. I used to have a colleague who was way too fastidious for his own good. Of course everyone should follow the rules, but he was such a stickler about even the smallest details that it drove everyone else crazy.

“Staaars?”

“It just turned from noon into night, sir!”

Two young girls with animal ears gazed up at the starry night sky in surprise: Tama, with short white hair and cat ears and tail, and Pochi, with a brown bob cut and dog ears and tail.

“There must be a time difference.”

This comment came from Arisa, along with an exhale that formed a puff of white vapor. As a reincarnation with lilac hair that was considered unlucky, she had the modern-day knowledge to match her status as someone who was once Japanese.

“We’re at the western edge of the great desert now, which is very far away from where we were in Kuvork Kingdom a moment ago,” I confirmed.

We teleported here after a little girl with pale blue hair, possibly the goddess Parion herself, told me to “save the hero of this age.” Our destination was Parion Province, where Hayato the Hero must have been in trouble.

Our current location was the City Core room at the western edge of the continent, the closest place I could bring us with Unit Deployment.

From there, Arisa used Space Magic to bring us out into the desert.

“The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?” Lulu remarked.

Personally, I thought her beautiful features and black hair could rival even the moon hanging over the desert.

“Yes, it is.”

As I responded, I remembered that in Japanese classical literature, this exchange could famously be interpreted as a confession of love.

But of course, as someone from this parallel world, Lulu wouldn't know that. Never mind.

“You like it, too, Mia?”

“Hmm.”

The elf girl absently responded to my question.

When she gave a slight nod without taking her eyes off the sky, her pigtails shifted, revealing a peek at her slightly pointed ears.

“Master, my heat sensors have detected an abnormality. We should take action to prevent decline in body temperature, I recommend.”

This roundabout way of saying “it's cold” was hardly unusual for Nana, a blond homunculus who was just over a year old.

Since the other girls looked cold, too, I handed out some warmer clothing from my Storage.

The desert seems to get a lot colder at night, in stark contrast to the daytime.

“Master, I disposed of all the monsters lurking nearby.”

Liza reported in with a cool expression.

The crisp moonlight reflected off the scales around her neck and wrists that marked her as a member of the orangescale tribe, as well as off her tail, which pounded against the sand when I praised her efforts.

“Will we be traveling by airship from here?”

“Good question...”

For the time being, Hayato and his party didn't appear to be seriously wounded.

The hero's information in my marker tab showed only a bit of lost health and stamina, which was well within the realm of expectation for a group that was

aiming to defeat a demon lord.

Their current location was the Den of Evil, not Parion Province. They must have been in the middle of exploring some kind of demon lord hideout.

It might be a little while longer before they actually needed our help.

“I’ll use my Space Magic to bring us close to the Parion Province border.”

The fastest way to get there would be to use “Flashrunning” to go there and set a teleport point, then transport everyone with the Space Magic spell Return.

“From there, we’ll enter the province normally, by land.”

I figured we could start by heading to the capital of Parion Province, finding someone who knew Hayato the Hero, and getting information about his whereabouts.

I used my Ministry of Tourism guide to quickly find my way to the entrance of Parion Province, then brought everyone else along with me.

“Hmm? We’re still in the desert? Have we not gone very far, then?”

“No, Parion Province is nearly two small nations’ length away from the great desert. This is a small desert that’s technically its own territory.”

Based on what I saw from above, Parion Province was surrounded by the Great Barrier Wall, which bore a close resemblance to the Great Wall of China.

According to my Ministry of Tourism documents, 30 percent of Parion Province was desert, and another 50 was a sparse wasteland.

“Hey, as long we’re in the desert, let’s travel to the capital city on camels!”

“Camels? I mean, I guess I could make camel-shaped golems pretty quickly...”

“The city gates probably won’t open until sunrise anyway, right?”

Arisa had a point; there were probably still around three hours left before the sun came up.

Since we weren’t in much of a rush yet, there was no harm in enjoying ourselves while we waited.

I used the surrounding sand to create enough stone camel golems for each of

us to ride.

“Satou.”

“Look at usss?”

“It’s *Abarian Nights*, sir.”

Mia, Tama, and Pochi appeared dressed in belly dancer–like costumes: bikini tops, loose pants with semi-translucent fabric, and decorations like coins and beads that jangled with every movement.

My first instinct was to warn them that they’d catch a cold, but the air around us was warmer than before. Arisa must have heated things up with Fire Magic.

“Hee-hee. What do you think? Sexy, right?”

Arisa approached in a similar outfit and struck a pose, looking a little self-conscious.

“You all look very cute.”

As I smiled at the younger girls, the older girls showed up behind them in the same getups.

“Master, am I cute, too? I inquire.”

“This is a little embarrassing.”

“You both look lovely.”

The outfit was especially showstopping on Nana, with her impressive proportions.

It looked a bit scandalous on Lulu, who was still on her way to adulthood.

“I do not think an outfit like this suits someone like me...”

“You look great, too, Liza.”

The costume took on an imposing air when worn by the strong and slender Liza.

I could definitely picture her doing a sword dance with a look like this.

“Well, shall we get going?”

The camel golems were too tall for some of the shorter girls, even when they knelt down, so I lifted them onto their stone steeds by the waist.

Once everyone was aboard, I activated the stone camels.

“Riding across the desert on a line of camels by moonlight... I feel like we’ve slipped into the world of *Arabian Nights*.”

“Should I have made djinn rings and genie lamps, too?”

It might be fun to travel by magic carpet, for that matter.

As we chatted among ourselves, we soon approached the border of Parion Province, guarded by the Great Barrier Wall.

For starters, I used the “Search Entire Map” skill to investigate the province.

Like Shiga Kingdom, it was broken up into several maps. The only one that revealed itself to me here was the Parion Province East Gate Area map.

Some 60 percent of the population was human, while 30 percent was a demi-human race I’d never heard of called “sandfolk.” The remaining 10 percent consisted of various scalefolk and beastfolk, as well as a small handful of fairy races. There didn’t appear to be any demons or reincarnations.

However, I did find a few dozen members of Light of Freedom, the demon lord–worshipping cult that caused chaos in the royal capital of Shiga Kingdom not long ago. I promptly used the Material Transfer spell to deliver a letter detailing this information to the east gate viceroy—or “holy warden,” as they were evidently called in Parion Province.

I could’ve dealt with them myself, but since I didn’t know the particular laws of the east gate area and it would take too long to track down the non-member collaborators, I decided to drop that work on the holy warden’s lap instead.



“These outer walls seem to go on for ages.”

“According to my Ministry of Tourism guide, it’s called the ‘Great Barrier Wall.’ It’s so long that it circles around the entire territory of Parion Province.”

The wall had finally come into view.

“It also says the only way to enter the province is through the gateway towns on three sides of the territory.”

The gate in front of us was the eastern entrance.

Around the gateway town was a wall only about half the height of the Great Barrier Wall.

“So, the town sticks out from the Great Barrier Wall like a little island... If you broke part of the wall, do you think a giant face would be inside?”

“I’m gonna go with no.” I shut down Arisa’s reference to a certain titanically popular manga.

We joined the other people waiting at the gate, and once it opened, we were allowed into the east gateway town without any kind of process or payment. What a generous town.

Since this place was right in the middle of the trade route, there were people in all kinds of garments around.

The majority wore Middle Eastern–style fashions, with turban-like cloths wrapped around their heads like Cardinal Hozzunus, the man who caused the Evil God’s Spawn incident in the royal capital at the end of the year. Most of their clothes were in plain brownish and tan hues; perhaps dye was expensive in this area.

“Smells goood?”

“Pochi can tell, sir! This is grilled Mr. Sheep meat, sir!”

“Heh-heh. You still have much to learn, Pochi. It’s hard to tell with the strong smell of spices, but this is undoubtedly the scent of grilled goat.”

The main street just past the plaza at the town’s entrance was thick with the delicious smells of breakfast and snack carts, as well as with the enthusiastic calls of vendors.

Since Parion Province had its own official language, I gave everyone translation rings.

“You there, Mr. Foreigner! How about some of Parion Province’s famous goat-meat fried rice?!”

The salesman lifted the lid off an enormous pan, releasing the smells of butter and spices.

The delicious fragrance certainly activated my appetite. In addition to the goat meat, it also seemed to contain minced dates and some unfamiliar local vegetables; luckily, there weren't any bugs involved, as far as I could see.

Since it appeared to be made with uncooked rice, it was probably more like rice pilaf than the fried rice I knew best.

"Hungryyy?"

"It smells so good that Pochi might go crazy, sir."

"Ha-ha. Let's get some breakfast from these food carts, shall we?"

"Yes, please!"

We bought pilaf as our main course for breakfast, as well as various other dishes.

Although eating with one's hands seemed to be the norm in this area, most of us had trouble doing so without spilling, so we used our own spoons.

A little miffed, I vowed to master eating with my hands in the local style during our stay.

"What do you think this white stuff is?"

"It looks and feels like yogurt, but the flavor is more like sesame tofu..."

"I believe you're supposed to scoop it up with this flatbread," Lulu explained.

According to my AR display, it was **Palif Bean Paste**. It reminded me of hummus.

"Master, this is painfully spicy, I report."

Nana showed me a bright red soup.

"Mew!"

"My tummy hurts, sir!"

"That's quite an intense shade of red. It must contain a lot of peppers of some kind."

“It’s pretty tasty, but it does make you break into a sweat.”

This was the kind of dish I’d prefer to eat in a cold climate.

“Radish and cucumber salad.”

“Ooh, it has grated cheese on top.”

Mia had discovered a colorful salad. It was eaten in a thin shell made from wheat flour.

The dish was topped with a citrus-flavored dressing, combining with the crunchy texture for a refreshing bite. There was a hint of something like bitter melon in it, too.

“Meat is still the best, sir.”

“Hear, heeear?”

Tama and Pochi held nearly two-foot-long skewers, packed with plenty of meat.

“Be careful not to injure anyone with those.”

“Aye.”

“Yes, sir.”

The pair nodded cheerfully in response to Liza’s warning. Watching them fondly, I dug into my own skewer.

While the meat had a rather strong smell and flavor, eating it in tandem with the salad Mia found balanced it out nicely.

All of the dishes were rich but delicious, making for an exotic and plentiful spread.

Hopefully, we could enjoy sightseeing a little longer before we had to meet up with Hayato the Hero.



“C’mon, lemme in! I’mma go see my dad!”

“Quiet down, brat! No one without an entry permit is allowed through this gate, no matter their reason!”

As we took in the sights of the crowded streets while making our way toward the gate of the Great Barrier Wall, we heard a young boy and a gatekeeper man arguing up ahead.

“That kid’s not gettin’ through.”

“Yeah, not when an entry permit costs a whopping ten gold coins. That’s a serious sum even for a full-fledged merchant.”

“Won’t they issue you an entry permit if you train enough at a temple?”

“In theory. But I heard you gotta do ten years of real tough trainin’ for that.”

“What about warriors? Can’t they get in to become temple soldiers?”

“They say you gotta be an ‘adept’ to get in.”

“Experts are in demand no matter where you go. I hear they’ll let in mages and craftsmen, too.”

“Well, at any rate, that kid’s outta luck.”

I overheard this conversation between some men watching the quarrel at the gate.

“I’m trying to work here. Come back when you’ve got an entry permit for me.”

The gatekeeper gave the boy a hard shove, sending him tumbling toward us.

A slight child with gritty ochre-toned skin, he was apparently one of the sandfolk I learned about in my map search earlier.

“A-are you all right, sir?”

“Are you huuurt?”

Tama and Pochi ran over to the boy.

“Nah, I’mma be fine. Thanks for carin’, though... Hey, are these ears real?”

“Mew!”

“You shouldn’t touch a young lady’s ears without asking, sir...”

Tama sprang back from the boy when he brazenly reached for her cat ears.

Pochi wagged a finger reproachfully at the startled boy.

“S-sorry, my bad. Didn’t think you’d mind so much.”

“Don’t worry, be happyyy.”

Tama’s flattened ears quickly perked up as she accepted the boy’s apology.

“Wait just a minute—he *is* injured. Mia?”

“Mmm, on it.”

We moved away from the crowded area near the gate so that Mia could use Water Magic to heal the boy.

“Thanks a bunch. You’re pretty cool for someone so small.”

The blunt-mannered boy appraised Mia.

Her elf ears seemed to catch his interest, but he didn’t try to touch them this time; clearly, he’d learned his lesson from Tama’s reaction. He seemed like a good kid deep down.

Hmm?

My AR display gave the boy’s name as **Raito**.

While it seemed fairly common for names in Parion Province to end in *to*, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the Japanese spelling of the English word *light*.

Out of curiosity, I checked for signs that he might be a reincarnation. He didn’t have any unusual titles, or abilities known as Unique Skills. In fact, he only had one skill, though it was a rather odd one: “Intuition.”

“I heard you arguing with the gatekeeper. Why do you want to go through the gate?”

“I’mma find my dad, s’why.”

“Your father?”

“Yeah, ’cause my mom died in the epidemic. I’mma tell my dad her final message.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“The holy city. Haven’t heard from him since he got called there by the Great Sage.”

The “holy city” referred to the Holy City of Parion, the capital of Parion Province.

“If I see your father, I’ll let him know you’re looking for him. Could you tell me his name?”

“My dad’s name is Iyusahk. Pretty weird, right? Says he’s from some foreign land.”

I took his word for it. Since I’d just arrived in this area, I had no idea what made the name unusual.

At any rate, I did a search for that name, but I didn’t find anyone on this map or any others nearby that I had available.

“Master, couldn’t we perhaps take this young man along with us to the holy city?”

The kindhearted Lulu seemed to sympathize with Raito’s plight.

“Hey, you’re pretty nice for such an uggo.”

Raito promptly repaid Lulu’s kindness with more rudeness, which turned her expression downcast.

“Watch your mouth, you blockhead!”

Arisa bopped the boy soundly on the head.

“Owww! Damn, you’re one violent chick.”

“You deserved that for calling Lulu ugly. You shouldn’t say things that will hurt people’s feelings.”

“What, did that hurt your feelings?”

Lulu gave a tiny nod.

“Gotcha. Sorry ’bout that. My mom was always gettin’ mad at me, too. ‘Think about what you’re about to say before you say it, why don’t you?!’ ...Man, she was always on my case. I’mma... I’mma make my mom mad all the time... I don’t care if she kept on yellin’ at me, I just wish she was still here...!”

When Raito started to cry as he thought about his mother, Tama and Pochi looked flustered, unsure how to help.

Arisa handed him a handkerchief to wipe his tears, and he blew his nose with a cartoonish honking sound.

“Master, permission to bring the larvae along? I request.”

“Well, I suppose they say chance meetings are the result of karma. Let’s bring him with us to the holy city.”

It seemed like this problem could easily be solved with money, anyway.



“They let us through awfully quickly.”

As it turns out, we didn’t even need money to pass through the gate.

My Shiga Kingdom Vice-Minister of Tourism medallion was enough to get us permission to enter, and they gave Raito a permit to accompany us when I said I would be his guardian.

“Hey, you must be a real bigwig. That gatekeeper guy was bowin’ like crazy.”

“Yes indeeed?”

“Master is a very, very bigwig, sir.”

Tama and Pochi looked pleased by Raito’s enthusiasm.

“There’s another town in here, I report.”

The streets beyond the gate were populated primarily by temple staff in plain clothing and caravans of merchants.

Somehow, the whole area had a somewhat somber religious tone.

We headed for the outskirts of town to find a stagecoach to the holy city, as recommended by the gatekeeper.

“Low?”

Mia was right: The inner wall around the town was quite low.

“You’re not kiddin’.” Raito looked up at it. “Any old monsters could get over that wall.”

“Gah-ha-ha-ha, don’t you worry your little head about that.” A hearty-looking merchant caught wind of Raito’s comment and ambled over to respond. “Parion Province here is protected by the pure and holy power of the goddess herself. You won’t find any monsters here, no sir.”

Wow, that’s impressive.

Sure enough, I checked my map and didn’t find any monsters in the area.

Maybe the goddess was more powerful than I realized.

“Well, unless you go poking around in the underground ruins we call the Dens of Evil. Long as you stay out of there, you’ll be safe.”

Although I couldn’t find the underground ruins in a map search, I did see several small empty areas ranging in size from that of a human to a horse-drawn carriage. These must be the entrances to the Dens of Evil.

“And seeing as we steer clear of the Dens of Evil, our trade caravan is safe as they come.”

Apparently, our stagecoach to the holy city would be traveling with his caravan.

We were also joined by carriages full of craftsmen and kids who were temple soldiers in training. Every one of the kids had some kind of Gift—a special hereditary skill.

“This whole situation smells like trouble.”

“Easy-peasy.”

“Yes, Mia. As long as Master is with us, we are in no danger, I confirm.”

It’s nice to be trusted so completely.

“Despite all their claims of safety, they’ve certainly assigned plenty of guards.”

“Well, even if there aren’t monsters, there could still be bandits and such.”

Liza still looked suspicious, despite Lulu’s reasonable response.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha, you’ll not find such lawless miscreants in our great holy land. Any nonbelievers foolish enough to try it are doomed to be sucked into the

‘dreaded depths beneath the sand,’ thanks to Goddess Parion’s divine punishment.”

Is that some roundabout way of saying they’ll go to hell?

“At any rate, our caravan is safe, that’s for certain. Rest easy, relax, and enjoy the ride without any fear, I say.”

The merchant must have really overdone it on the foreshadowing there, because next thing you know...

“We’re dooooooomed!”

...a swarm of mummy-like monsters surrounded us in a cloud of sand.



“Master, did you see their stats?”

Looking alarmed, Arisa whispered in my ear.

“I’m checking them right now.”

According to my AR display, the mummies were monsters called “Sandstorm Soldiers,” ranging from level three to six with inherent skills like “Physical Attack Resistance” and “Regeneration.”

That wasn’t the problem, though.

“Swords don’t work on them! Sand just comes out of the cuts, instead of blood...!”

“Same for maces! The crushed body parts just grow right back!”

The mercenaries hired to protect the caravan seemed to be struggling against the monster swarm. Still, since they were high-level fighters and many of them had mithril swords or magic skills, they would probably manage somehow.

My biggest concern was the fact that their title column showed the Sandstorm Soldiers as spawn of a demon lord called the “Sandstorm Lord.”

That must be what Arisa was whispering in my ear about.

This could only mean one thing: There was definitely a demon lord in this land.

“Master, the mercenaries have succeeded in defeating the Sandstorm Soldiers, I report.”

Well, that’s good, at least...

“Mew?”

Just as Tama peered intently past the sand dunes, a huge number of red dots appeared on my radar.

A moment later, Raito cried out. “More enemies are coming!”

His rare “Intuition” skill was impressive indeed. It was slower than Tama’s sharp senses, but faster than Mia’s “Spirit Detection” at noticing the enemies’ approach.

Clearly it wasn’t entirely reliable, though, given that it didn’t detect the first wave of enemies.

“Those beasts called for backup!”

Mere moments after the first wave of Sandstorm Soldiers fell, a far larger swarm appeared from beyond the sand dunes.

Though some of them looked like scorpion-people instead of mummies, apparently they were all still Sandstorm Soldiers.

“Run for it!”

“Too late. We’re surrounded!”

“This is terrible! You must do something at once!”

The merchant leading the caravan looked pale at the mercenaries’ cries.

“Master, is it all right if we lend a hand this time around?”

Arisa was already pulling a staff out of her Fairy Pack.

“No need.”

“Oui, ouiii.”

“I hear horses coming, sir.”

Tama and Pochi pointed toward the dunes just as a group of Parion Province’s Temple Knights came into view.

They must have come to help after one of the merchants sent up a signal flare when the first wave of monsters attacked.

“Look! Knights!”

“The Temple Knights have come to save us!”

The merchants and mercenaries alike lit up with hope and waved at the knights.

“They’re quite skilled, I see.”

Liza observed the knights in battle approvingly.

The Temple Knights showed skill on par with the elite Holy Knights of Shiga Kingdom as they made quick work of the Sandstorm Soldiers.

They all had a fair amount of skills, and not a wasted one among them. They must have trained under very strict guidelines.

“Damn, they’re so awesome!”

Raito’s eyes sparkled as he watched the Temple Knights in action.

“Master, look at that person—the one with the feathered helmet.”

It didn’t take long to figure out who Lulu meant.

The Temple Knight in question was wielding a sword that shone with blue light.

“A Holy Sword.”

The Holy Sword, called Blutgang, was probably left behind by a summoned hero of the past.

It was so powerful that it reduced the Sandstorm Soldiers to dust with even the lightest graze.

The Temple Knights made short work of the Sandstorm Soldiers and began healing the injured mercenaries with Holy Magic.

“Thank you kindly, O noble hero.”

The merchant addressed Mezzalt, the Temple Knight with the Holy Sword.

He probably assumed he was a hero because of his weapon.

“...Hero?” Lifting the visor of his feathered helmet, Sir Mezzalt curled his lip. “We are honorable Temple Knights. I’ll thank you not to compare us to some sniveling rat who cannot even finish off one measly demon lord.”

“F-forgive me, good sir.”

The merchant bowed frantically to the scowling Mezzalt.

After a moment, the Temple Knight led his retinue away.

Maybe he had some kind of history with Hayato the Hero.

“Wow, that guy turned out to be a real jerk at the last second.”

Arisa stuck out her tongue at the knight Mezzalt as he rode away.

Evidently, Hayato the Hero was fighting more than just a demon lord in Parion Province.

I was still scratching my head over which part I was meant to help him with, when our caravan reached the Holy City of Parion, capital of Parion Province.



“Boy, this place is lively.”

Once we exited our carriage and passed a quick inspection, we entered through the white stone gates of the holy city.

My “Search Entire Map” skill confirmed that the Light of Freedom cult was infesting this place as well; I’d have to report them later, once I found someone I could trust.

It was possible that some of their people might have disguise items that could fool even my menu, like Cardinal Hozzunus from the royal capital incident did. I even found a bishop named Shippunas with the same Brace of Stolen Divinity the cardinal had, so I put a marker on him, just to be safe.

“Happyyy?”

“Mmm, lots of spirits.”

The city was at a comfortable temperature and humidity level, no doubt thanks to the power of the City Core.

Even the intensely strong sunlight was gentler here.

“Welcome to the holy city!”

“You must be tired. Come and partake of our free clean water and food.”

“I pray thee, accept the benevolence of Goddess Parion.”

Lovely young priestesses called out to the travelers entering through the gates.

“Whoa, damn! All that food for free?!”

Raito yelped with delight, bolting toward the spot where they were offering free food.

The priestesses watched warmly as he gleefully dug into the water and flatbread that was handed to him.

“There’s fried fish over there, too.”

“And dates, tooo?”

The ever-hungry duo were already hot on the trail of food.

“There seems to be plenty of food for a place in the middle of the harsh desert.”

“It seems there is a plentiful water source here, I report.”

Liza and Nana looked around thoughtfully.

“You aren’t going to eat, good nobles?”

“Well, I suppose we wouldn’t want to be rude. Thank you.”

Once we’d partaken of some of the free food, we headed for the cathedral at the center of the city, where my map showed some of the hero’s party members.

The cathedral had four large domed towers, one in each cardinal direction, making for a landmark that was visible from anywhere in the city.

“It almost seems like paradise, doesn’t it?”

Lulu’s eyes were wide as we followed the main street toward the cathedral.

Everyone around us wore pleasant smiles, and white and blue flowers bloomed all along the roadside.

“Perhaps there’s some kind of event today?” Arisa mused.

There was indeed a crowd gathered in the plaza in front of the cathedral, as if at a concert hall.

“There are a lot of injured or sick-looking people, though.”

Maybe there was some kind of free healing event at the cathedral?

“The pontiff! The pontiff is here!”

At this cry, the entire crowd knelt and began praying on the spot.

We were among a handful of people who got left awkwardly standing around, unsure of the situation, but at least this gave us a good view of the pontiff and company.

While walls of cloth hid the pontiff from view in every direction, my map information stated that someone called Pontiff Zarzaris of Parion Province was inside. I remembered hearing that this person could use Prayer Magic.

...Hmm?

Among the entourage was one person in a black robe who looked more like a sorcerer than a priest. Though a hood hid most of the person’s face, I guessed from the peek of wrinkled mouth that it must be an elderly man.

He had an Advanced Recognition-Inhibiting item or something that blocked my “Analyze” skill; still, my AR display indicated that he was a level-50 mage. Judging by the outfit, he probably wasn’t a priest. His “Sage” title suggested that he might be a personal adviser to the pontiff or something of the sort.

His name was Sorijeyro, and he was probably the “Great Sage” that Raito mentioned.

“Mew.”

As I was reading the mage’s information, Tama suddenly pressed her face into my leg. She seemed anxious, or perhaps just overwhelmed by the crowd.

A chorus of cheers drew my attention back in time to see pure blue light

glowing from within the cloth and spreading across the audience. The cloth fluttered, and I caught a glimpse of the pontiff within: a gentle old face with a flowing white beard.

“My wounds healed up!”

“Ooh, the coughing’s finally stopped...”

“My daughter opened her eyes...!”

The light seemed to be healing everyone it touched.

“Thank you, oh, thank you!”

“The pontiff is truly an apostle of Parion herself!”

“Huzzah for the pontiff! Glory to Goddess Parion!”

Tears streamed down the worshippers’ faces as they cheered in admiration.

The pontiff soon retreated from sight, still within the cloth.

I caught a tiny glimpse of his face as he left, looking somewhat nonplussed by the fervor of his fans. Maybe he was actually a pretty modest person.

“That’s just like my dad’s power.”

Raito stared after the retreating pontiff.

“Your dad could do that?”

“Sorta, yeah. It wasn’t nearly as strong, though.” Raito nodded at Arisa. “Hey, maybe my dad’s an apprentice to the pontiff now! I’mma find out!”

Before I could stop him, Raito dashed off into the crowd.

I didn’t see his father anywhere in my map of the city.

“There he goes. Should I go fetch him?”

“No, it’s fine.”

Technically, we were only supposed to take him as far as the holy city anyway. I’d be worried about leaving such a small kid on his own here, though.

Once we met up with Hayato the Hero’s friends, I resolved to find someone to take care of young Raito.

“That pontiff’s magic was awfully impressive, though. Do you suppose that was a taste of just how strong Holy Magic can be?”

“No, that was a Unique Skill.”

My map information showed that the pontiff had a special ability: Heal All.

“You mean he’s a reincarnation?”

“I’m not sure. I caught a glimpse of his beard and the hair under his turban, and it wasn’t purple.”

He didn’t have the “Hero” title, either, of course.

Although I guess he might have a single lock of purple hair, like Cardinal Hozunas did.

“Given that he’s the pontiff of Parion Province and all, maybe he got a Unique Skill from the goddess herself, like a hero?”

“Good point. That would certainly win her plenty more worshippers.”

As Arisa nodded wisely, I saw Tama and Mia look up at the sky, ears pricking.

“Mew?”

“Satou.”

I followed their gazes and saw a rippling effect spread through the air. Then a silver ship appeared near the cathedral.

“Master, look!”

“Yeah, I know that ship.”

It was Hayato the Hero’s ship, the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne*.

“How blasphemous to approach the cathedral like that!”

“Even with the Goddess Parion’s favor, that’s still going too far!”

“We must send a strongly worded protest to the Saga Empire!”

The priests and Temple Knights in the plaza looked enraged at the *Jules Verne*’s sudden appearance.

“They’re headed for the pontiff’s room!”

Hayato's party emerged from the hatch of the *Jules Verne* and leaped onto the veranda, setting up a ramp of sorts in between.

Then I saw Hayato himself staggering unsteadily across the ramp, supported by another member of his party.

A sort of black smoke was rising off the hero's body.

Well, that can't be good.

"Looks like something must have happened."

"Yeah, this could be a bit of a problem."

I hurried toward the cathedral entrance, with my companions following close behind.

The Cursed Hero

Satou here. Some big CEO once said that it's best to reduce individuality so that any employee can be easily replaced. But in reality, they certainly don't reduce the workload of any of those individuals.

"Let's go, quickly!"

I took off into the cathedral without waiting for an answer.

"What's the matter, Tama, sir?"

"Meeew..."

I looked back and saw Liza lifting Tama, who was reluctant to enter the cathedral.

She probably didn't want to get any closer to the black smoke coming out of Hayato.

As much as I sympathized, I couldn't just ignore his plight.

Leaving Liza and the others to handle Tama, I hurried toward Hayato the Hero.

Luckily, the cathedral was in so much chaos that nobody stopped us from running up the stairs to find him.

"Why won't you call His Grace for us?!"

"The pontiff only just healed the injured and ailing citizens. It will be several days, if not more, until he can use his power again."

Two women were protesting at a high-ranking priest.

I recognized them as Hayato's party members: Princess Mariest of the Saga Empire, and the archer Weeyari of the long-eared tribe.

"Hayato must be treated with Remove Curse." Weeyari backed up Mariest.
"We need a mage more skilled than Loleiya."

“Mari, where’s the pontiff? Loleiya can’t suppress the symptoms much longer!”

“Standin’ around here ain’t gonna get us nowhere. I’m gonna go grab that pontiff by the scruff of the neck and drag him here myself!”

Two wild and glamorous women ran out of the room. It was the tiger-eared Rusus and the wolf-eared Fifi, more members of Hayato’s party.

“J-just a moment, hero’s attendants! We Temple Knights won’t allow such violence!”

“Hmph! You think some fake-ass knights who can’t even use their skills probably will be able to stop us?!”

The pair looked ready to draw their swords at any moment out of extreme concern for their hero.

At that moment, I realized that Rusus’s left arm was missing from the elbow down. She must have lost it in the fight against the demon lord.

“Lady Mariest!”

I called out to the imperial princess from across the crowd.

Everyone turned to look at me.

“Satou...? What are you doing here?”

“I received a divine message from the Goddess Parion.”

I used my “Fabrication” skill to give a believable-sounding reason.

While I wasn’t sure who that mysterious blue-haired girl really was, there was a good chance that she really was Parion, since she sent me here to save Hayato.

“I have an elixir, too, although it’s only a lesser one.”

I’d used my best elixir to save Lady Ryuona the Grass Cutter of the Shiga Eight when she was burned by dragon fire in Vistall Duchy.

I would have to go back to Bolenan Forest soon to make more elixirs. I had all the ingredients for it, anyway.

“You do? Really?!”

“Please, use it on Hayato!”

Rusus and Fifi grabbed my hands and pulled me into the center of the room.

“Rin! Loleiya! Satou’s here, and he brought an elixir!”

This was apparently the pontiff’s private room. Hayato the Hero was lying on a guest couch in one corner of the large room, looking deathly pale. My AR display gave his condition as “Corrupted,” which was slightly different from the “Cursed” condition.

Lady Ringrande, the Witch of Heavenly Destruction, and another of Hayato’s attendants, was in front of the couch, along with the quiet priestess Loleiya.

“A-an elixir?!”

“Give it here, quickly!”

Ringrande reached out toward me.

There was a fresh scar on her face and an eyepatch over her right eye. Their battle with the demon lord must have been really rough.

I reached into my breast pocket and pulled out two lesser elixirs, placing them carefully in her hand.

With her and Loleiya turning toward me, I was finally able to catch a glimpse of Hayato.

His armor had been stripped away from his right arm. Its muscle fibers were laid bare, as if the skin itself were missing, too, and blackened blood vessels rose to the surface, writhing around like they had a mind of their own.

The black smoke was coming out of his arm, crackling with black lines like lightning.

Something about it was deeply unsettling. No wonder Tama didn’t want to get any closer.

On top of that, those black lines looked familiar...

They were just like the vestiges that tried to creep under the sky dragon’s scales when we defeated the Evil God’s Spawn in Shiga Kingdom.

“Hayato! Open your mouth—we’ve got elixirs.”

Miss Ringrande poured the lesser elixir into Hayato’s mouth, and a magic circle appeared around the wound, scattering the black smoke and restoring the arm to a healthy state.

“Aah, Hayato...”

Ringrande whispered his name, overcome with emotion.

But then, as if in mockery of her relief, the lightning-like black lines regained their strength and turned his arm back into its grotesque form.

“No...!”

She gave him the second elixir right away, only to repeat the same results.

“Satou! Don’t you have any more elixirs?”

I did, but it would only hurt Hayato more.

I stepped up close to him instead.

“Satou, ‘Miasma Vision.’”

Mia called out a suggestion from behind me.

Once I lowered my head so that Ringrande and Loleiya wouldn’t see my eyes and activated “Miasma Vision,” I saw countless black lines splitting off the lightning and wrapping around Hayato.

It reminded me of the curse that was tormenting the half-ghost Reiaane, who we met in the Lalakie incident.

Unlike the structured and orderly curse that had been carefully cast on her, this seemed to be more of a primal kind.

Well, I had experience with that.

I reached out my hand toward the black lines...

“Wait!” The priestess Loleiya grabbed my arm. “A knight who touched that died earlier. It’s a curse so powerful that it’s visible to the naked eye.”

The memory of monsters that were betrayed and killed by the black lines during the Evil God’s Spawn incident flashed through my mind.

“Don’t worry. I’ve seen this before.”

I pulled out a prop glove from Storage by way of my pocket.

I’d created it for performance purposes. The back was embroidered with a magic circle in orichalcum thread, which glowed and raised when charged with magic.

I put on the magic glove and filled it with magic power, channeling the same energy I used to make Sacredblade.

“A blue magic circle...?”

“Yes, this is a Holy Tool for dispelling curses.”

Thanks to my “Fabrication” excuse, the priestess finally let go of my arm.

Now that the other members of Hayato’s party seemed willing to let me try, too, I reached out toward Hayato again.

Goose bumps prickled my skin.

This was no ordinary curse. My “Sense Danger” skill was screaming at me not to touch it.

I was tempted to pull back my hand, but I couldn’t give up now.

If I did, my friend would suffer and die before my eyes.

Trusting my “Curse Resistance” skill, I focused my “Remove Curse” and “Reverse Curse” skills as I grabbed the black lines in an effort to save Hayato the Hero’s life.

Immediately, visions of an undead army screaming toward me ran up from my fingertips toward the top of my head.

I covered my arm in Sacredblade, purging them all.

My fingertips felt cold. The curse must have been starting to afflict my hand, too, though I couldn’t see it through the glove. I didn’t have long to make this work.

With the help of my “Remove Curse” skill, I started to pull the black lines away from Hayato. The curse fought back, trying to deepen its roots in Hayato’s body and spirit.

“GAAAAAAAAAH!”

As it dug into Hayato, the curse tormented him.

I used my “Magic Heal” skill to wrap my own magic power around the roots of the curse. Hayato’s expression eased slightly, and the screaming stopped.

But the roots of the curse grew thornlike protrusions, thrashing around to break through my magic’s protection.

“NNGHHHHH...!”

Hayato clenched his teeth, blood dribbling from his lips.

This can’t go on much longer.

Like before, I transformed the magic power around the curse roots into holy power.

The layer of Sacredblade burned away the thorns that had sprouted from the roots, and they began to wither.

That’s it.

One by one, I carefully stripped away each of the roots that were digging into Hayato’s body.

“AAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The roots of the curse made one last desperate struggle.

Hayato the Hero let out a scream, blood gushing from his body.

Ringrande sprinkled magic potions over him without my needing to say a word, and Loleiya used the Holy Magic she had been storing to heal his wounds.

The miasma that remained in his body seemed to be slowing the healing, dampening the effect of the Holy Magic.

In order to get rid of it, I let loose my spirit light that I normally kept suppressed. Since there was no one in this nation with the “Spirit Vision” skill, I turned it on full throttle.

That seemed to do the trick; Loleiya’s Healing Magic started to work in earnest.

Now!



Thankful for the help, I focused on pulling out the main root of the curse, which was wrapping around Hayato's heart.

The black lines writhed in my fingers. Evidently, pulling it out completely wasn't enough to destroy it. This was one stubborn curse.

I focused on the core of the curse that was still struggling in my hand.

Dousing it in spirit light still wasn't doing the trick. The black lines spread like a net and attempted to ensnare me; I undid my cloak and wrapped it around the bundle.

Of course, that wasn't going to do anything to stop the non-physical form of the cursed black lines.

But that's not what I was after.

As soon as the cloak was covering the black lines, I took out an unsheathed Divine Blade from Storage directly inside.

The moment it touched them the black lines let out a hiss like water droplets on a hot frying pan, and were sucked into the blade.

I quickly put the Divine Blade back in Storage and let the cloak fall to the floor.

Then I wiped away the sweat that had gathered on my forehead and let out a breath.

"Is it over...?"

I nodded at the stunned-looking Weeyari.

"We'll need to wait for Lady Loleiya's diagnosis, but I don't sense any evil coming from Sir Hayato anymore."

Given his strength, he would probably recover from his weakened state soon enough.

"Go to him." I gave the archer a gentle push, and the rest of Hayato's party ran to his side as well. I stepped away from the circle around him and discreetly checked under my glove.

Black.

The tips of my fingers had blackened down to the first joint.

My arm had turned black the same way after I pulled the Fragments of the Evil God's Spawn off the sky dragon.

Just as I suspected, that curse was similar in nature to the vestiges left behind by the Evil God's Spawn.

"You okaaaay?"

"Master, what in the world happened?!"

My own party came running up to me, noticing something amiss.

"I'm fine."

I already knew how to fix this.

I'd just have to cut off the fingers and regrow them with an advanced potion—hmm?

The black color had moved from my fingers to my fingernails.

However it happened, one thing was certain—removing a fingernail was a lot preferable to losing the whole finger. Turning my "Pain Resistance" up to the max, I plucked the fingernails off and regrew them with "Self-Healing."

It still hurt a little, but it was no worse than the momentary dull pain of stubbing one's toe. Nobody was likely to notice.

I stashed the nails stained by the cursed black lines in Storage and returned to the hero and company along with my friends.



"Satou! Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Ringrande wrapped her arms around me, weeping as she thanked me over and over.

I heard Arisa and Mia growling off to the side. They didn't step in to interfere, though.

"Thanks, Satou!"

"We owe ya big time!"

Rusus and Fifi joined in on the hug with Ringrande.

“I wish to thank you, too.”

Though the cool and collected archer Weeyari didn’t join in on the group hug, she gave me a small smile.

“Is your hand quite all right?”

“Yes, it’s fine—see?”

Aside from the magic circle on the glove, which had burned up from too much magic, my hand looked perfectly normal. The nails that had blackened and been removed were already regrown.

“Your Holy Tool must have protected you.”

“I’m sure it’s happy to have been of use to a great hero.”

Surely, this was an even more noble fate than being used for a party trick, especially with so many onlookers to witness it.

“We really cannot thank you enough. I shall make sure that the Saga Empire sends you a reward and commendation letter, as well as compensation for the elixir.”

Princess Mariest clutched my hand, promising to repay me on behalf of the hero’s party.

It would be rude to say I didn’t need any of that, so I just told her not to worry about it for the moment.

“What in the world is all this commotion?! I’ll have you know these are the pontiff’s private chambers!”

A high-ranking priest came running into the room, looking like a blood vessel was about to burst in his forehead. Several Temple Knights and soldiers followed close behind him.

Princess Mariest stepped forward to respond to the cardinal.

“My apologies, good cardinal. I’m afraid the hero’s life was hanging in the balance. I hope you can forgive our ill-mannered intrusion.”

“Forgive you?! Why, just because the pontiff is such a kindhearted soul—?”

“That’s quite enough, Dobbunaf.”

“Y-Your Grace!”

The Temple Knights and soldiers parted to reveal Pontiff Zarzaris himself, fresh from healing the masses outside the cathedral.

“While I cannot currently use the healing powers granted to me by the goddess, I came in hopes that I could be of aid with Holy Magic...but it appears that perhaps I am a tad too late?”

“Please allow me to express our gratitude for Your Grace’s kindness on behalf of Hayato the Hero.”

Mariest bowed her head to the amiable pontiff.

“If the hero has healed, it would be best for you to take him and leave at once —”

“Dobbunaf, you mustn’t address our guests so rudely. The hero was injured in a battle with the demon lord, mortal enemy of humankind.” The pontiff scolded the cardinal, then turned back to us. “Miss Mariest, please make yourself at home in my room until the hero is well again.”

With that, he left the room. However, since Hayato was no longer in mortal peril, Fifi and Weeyari carried him on a stretcher to his own part of the building so as not to impose.



“Loleiya, when is Hayato going to wake up?” Rusus asked.

“He’ll probably be sleeping for a while yet,” the priestess replied. “The demon lord’s curse weakened him considerably.”

“You must be tired from the battle, too, are you not? Let my ladies-in-waiting take care of things here and go get some sleep.”

Despite Princess Mariest’s proposal, not one of Hayato’s attendants was willing to leave his side, herself included.

In the end, she recognized this and suggested that everyone should at least remove their armor and get more comfortable.

“Satou, you said earlier that you came because you ‘received a divine message from the goddess Parion.’ Was it an oracle vision?” Lady Ringrande asked as she returned from changing clothes.

I nodded and explained the presumably divine vision I had.

“...Loleiya?”

Princess Mariest, who’d been listening as well, looked at the priestess Loleiya, who slowly shook her head.

“I’ve never heard of anything like that from the oracle priestesses,” she said firmly. “In the legends, Goddess Parion does appear as a young girl, but the priestesses and Hayato always describe her as an avatar of blue light. We certainly have this mysterious girl’s message to thank for Hayato’s survival, yet I cannot think that she is Goddess Parion incarnate...”

“She didn’t introduce herself as such, either. Maybe she was a fairy or spirit with the gift of oracle messages, or something like that.”

I used my “Fabrication” skill to make up a plausible story.

After all, she might be the same mystery girl who saved me during the battle with Doghead, although she seemed very different at the time.

“So, you fought a demon lord, right? What sort of demon lord was he?”

Arisa spoke up brightly, changing the subject in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“If I had to sum him up in one word...” Fifi caught onto Arisa’s intentions and responded quickly. “I’d say...slippery.”

“Huh?”

Arisa blinked in surprise at the unexpected description.

“He was always producing substitutes or sending other monsters after us and then running away,” Rusus supplied.

“He sure was strong, though, yeah? Just look what he did to my arm, and Fifi lost a few limbs at one point, too.”

“Sounds ouchiie?”

“Nah, doesn’t hurt a bit once ya put some potion on it and close the wound.”

Rusus smiled reassuringly at Tama.

“It was a close call.” Weeyari spoke up quietly, leaning against the wall. “Without Hayato, we might’ve all been killed.”

Liza tilted her head. “I thought you said the demon lord ran away?”

“Yeah, he did,” Fifi answered. “He threw some orb at us as he left that broke open and hit Hayato with that curse.”

My map search didn’t show any demon lords; he must already have been outside the Parion Province map area.

“Was the demon lord scary, sir?”

“He looked like a cross between a huge sand-colored scorpion and a human. He was hunched over and had a really long tail.”

“Yeah, and his tail was segmented and real flexible—kept lashing out at your arms and legs from your blind spot. Gotta be real careful.”

Rusus and Fifi told Pochi and Tama about the demon lord.

My eye caught on Rusus’s severed arm as she gestured wildly.

“You aren’t going to grow it back?” I asked.

“Even Loleiya’s greater magic couldn’t fix it. Musta gotten cursed when the demon lord bit it off.”

“My eye was the same way. At some point, I’d like to see if the pontiff’s holy light can heal it. If not, that’s fine, too.”

Ringrande touched the scar that ran down from behind her eyepatch.

I hid my face and took a look with “Miasma Vision”; Ringrande’s eye and Rusus’s arm still had traces of miasma, which were fading as I watched. My still-active spirit light must have been purifying them.

“The curse may have weakened with time. Try using potions on them again.”

I gave them each a few greater potions.

Since Rusus was missing a limb, I gave her a large vial of Concentrated

Nutritional Supplement Potion, too. Otherwise, she'd be temporarily weakened from the effort of healing.

"Are these advanced healing potions? We can't waste something so valuable without even knowing if they'll work..."

"Don't worry, I still have at least a dozen. Please go ahead and use them."

At my urging, Ringrande and Rusus drank down the potions.

"Nngh...!"

"Oooh..."

Ringrande pressed a hand against her covered eye, while Rusus flung herself down on the sofa and writhed in pain.

Restoring a lost limb or organ is always painful.

"It grew back! My arm grew back!"

"I can see... It's still a little blurry, but I can see again! Oh, thank you, Satou!"

The smiling pair wrapped their arms around me.

Unlike when they were wearing armor before, this time a blissful softness pressed against my face on either side.

Maybe paradise was closer than I thought.

"Guilty."

"Hey! Have a little modesty, will you!"

The usual iron-wall pair swept in with lightning speed.

I tried to pacify them, though I felt like I'd been kicked out of paradise.

"Guess you little shrimps are still women, huh?"

"I'm sorry, you two. Please don't be angry—I promise we won't try to take Satou away."

Rusus grinned, while Miss Ringrande apologized to Arisa and Mia.

"Wonder if I should cut my leg back off and reattach it, too? Still feels kinda off."

Looking at Rusus's restored arm, Fifi casually made a painful-sounding suggestion.

"Did it shift a little when you reattached it before?"

"Nah, that seems fine, but sometimes it just goes kinda limp."

I used Practical Magic to look at her limb with X-ray vision and saw what looked like a small shard of rock lodged in her knee joint. That must have been the source of the discomfort.

It might have been mistaken for part of her body when the potion fused things together.

"Shall I try and repair it?"

"You can do that?"

"Yes, I have the perfect tool for this sort of thing."

I took out a glove embroidered with a healing rune from Storage by way of my Garage Bag.



Arisa made it for me during her lessons at the royal academy. It could heal small wounds and scrapes just by touching them a few times, making it perfect for when Pochi or Tama took a tumble and other such occasions.

“Let me see your leg, please.”

“Pervy.”

“Not like that, Mia. I’m just going to heal her knee.”

I suppose the way I phrased it at first might have sounded a little perverted.

“Eh, I don’t mind if you wanna touch my leg a little.”

Sitting on the sofa, Fifi stripped off her boot rather seductively and held her foot out toward me.

It was certainly a lovely and alluring leg, even with the scars of a hardened warrior.

“All right, I’ll begin the healing process now. Please try to relax.”

I activated my “Magic Heal” skill and began isolating the small rock shard that had attached to Fifi’s knee joint.

Once it was separated, the rest was simple. I used the telekinetic Magic Hand to grasp the shard and put it away in Storage.

“All done. Does that feel any better?”

“You’re done already?”

Fifi stood up from the sofa, bent and stretched her leg a few times, then moved between a few different battle postures experimentally.

“Damn, it’s as good as new! You’re awesome, Satou.”

Fifi pounded my back as she praised my work. It was a bit painful.

After that, I wound up having to fix Weeyari’s elbow and Loleiya’s shoulder, too. The latter was especially difficult since I had to try not to let my gaze stray to the valley of temptation.

“Will you be chasing after the demon lord once Sir Hayato wakes up?”

“More like we’ll have to start searching from square one.”

“Seems like a demon that can use teleportation is helpin’ the bastard. Not even a Saga Empire Space Magic specialist can track ’em down.”

“Space Magic...,” Arisa murmured.

“Do you have any idea where he might have gone?” I asked Rusus and Fifi.

“Probably somewhere in the Dens of Evil.”

“For some reason, this demon lord ain’t leavin’ the borders of Parion Province.”

“This is the third time we’ve found the demon lord. The first few times, he ran away as soon as we laid eyes on him.”

“Huh? We’ve seen ’im more than that, no?”

“The rest were all imposters,” Princess Mariest told Fifi. “I’d say we’ve seen about nine of those. They look exactly like the demon lord, but they’re all lesser or intermediate demons merged with Sandstorm Soldiers.”

“Sandstorm Soldiers are those sandy-looking guys, right?” Arisa asked.

“The very same,” Miss Ringrande responded. “Even though they’re remarkably weak, they’re still spawn of the demon lord.”

They explained that the Sandstorm Soldiers spread the demon lord’s presence throughout the Dens of Evil, making it difficult to pin down exactly which cave the demon lord was in, even with Wind or Space Magic. As such, they had to narrow it down with techniques like Divination and Miasma Measurement, then send in plenty of people to search.

“Are there that many different dens?”

“I heard there’s at least ten thousand different entrances, and those are just the ones we know about.”

Wow. No wonder there were so many small empty areas on the Parion Province map.

“That’s an awful lot. They can’t all be magic power spots...maybe they’re some kind of ruins?”

“Long ago, it’s said there was a labyrinth here called the ‘Evil God’s Prison.’”

The Evil God's Prison?

I don't like the sound of that name.

"I thought the Evil God was sealed in the moon?"

"Right? That's what we said!"

"So it wasn't just us who got the wrong idea."

Rusus and Fifi seemed pleased about Arisa's question.

"Wrong? How so?"

"Apparently, the name means 'the prison the Evil God created,' not 'the prison that held the Evil God captive.'"

Although I didn't say it out loud, I had the awful thought that the demon lord might be staying in Parion Province because he was trying to free something from the Evil God's Prison.

Whether I was right or wrong, I hoped we wouldn't have to deal with more terrible foes like the Evil God's Spawn.

"These days, we avoid invoking the Evil God by calling them the Dens of Evil."

"It seems there was a labyrinth here until over a thousand years ago. The Dens of Evil are what remain of that labyrinth after it fell."

I remembered the sight of the Kuvork Kingdom labyrinth collapsing after the labyrinth core was destroyed.

If something similar happened over a thousand years ago, it made sense that this would be the result.

There were entrances to these Dens of Evil all over the kingdom, many of which were connected to each other. Overall, this made for a structure with well over a thousand different areas.

They came in all shapes and sizes, and the party had encountered the demon lord and his imposters in five of the largest ones.



"Sir Hayato! Is the hero all right?!"

A knight in black armor came crashing into the room.

My AR display said he was a knight of the Saga Empire. His gentlemanly moustache suited him well.

“Sir Ryukken. The hero is safe. He’s resting right now, so please try to keep your voice down.”

The priestess scolded the knight in black armor.

“Ah, my apologies. I came as fast as Arcadia would carry me.”

Arcadia was apparently the name of a high-speed airship of the Saga Empire.

I couldn’t help picturing a skull mark on the bow, thanks to a certain famous old anime, although that couldn’t possibly be the case.

“Hrmm? And what are these children doing in the hero’s room?”

The black knight looked down at us, addressing no one in particular.

“Satou saved Hayato’s life.”

“Saved his life?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sir Knight. I am a vassal of Count Muno of Shiga Kingdom—”

“Shiga Kingdom? What does someone from the kingdom that traitorous hero founded want with us?!”

The black knight bellowed over the rest of my introduction.

Wait, “traitorous hero”?

That had to be referring to the ancestral king Yamato—also known as Hikaru.

It was clear, too, that this man hated Shiga Kingdom.

As much as it rankled me to hear him insult Hikaru, there was probably no point in arguing with someone who hated anything to do with a kingdom he irrationally disliked.

Getting angry would only be giving him what he wanted.

“He received a divine message and came to aid the hero.”

“What can a brat like you possibly do?”

“That’s enough, Ryukken!”

Miss Ringrande stepped between the black knight and me.

“Of course. I’d forgotten you’re Shigan, too.”

“And what of it? I may be a duke’s daughter of Shiga Kingdom, but my loyalty is to Hayato the Hero first.”

“Rin, how are you going to mediate if you start picking a fight instead? And Ryukken, did you not hear Wee say that Satou saved the hero’s life?”

“...Your Highness.”

Even the haughty black knight couldn’t argue with a princess of the Saga Empire.

“I’m sorry, Satou. Allow me to apologize for Ryukken’s rudeness.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” I told her. Then, thinking of her position, I added, “I accept your apology.”

“...Nngh.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up a small groan.

All the commotion must have woken Hayato the Hero.

“Hayato!”

“Rin...are we in the holy city? What happened with the demon lord?”

Hayato blinked up at Ringrande as she peered down at him.

He didn’t seem to have fully regained consciousness yet.

“Don’t you remember? The demon lord ran away.”

“Ah, right. So we’re back to square one again...”

Hayato clenched his fists and grimaced. His arms still seemed too weak to raise off the bed.

Then he spotted me.

“...Satou?”

“It’s good to see you again, Sir Hayato.”

I gave him a slight bow.

“He freed you from the demon lord’s curse.”

“Really? I owe you, Satou.”

Hayato smiled gallantly.

“I just happened to have a Holy Tool for removing curses, that’s all.”

With help from my “Fabrication” skill, I insisted that it was thanks to the glove that I was able to heal his curse. Otherwise, I was afraid I was going to get some weird new reputation.

“Sir Hero.”

“Ryukken, eh...I hate to ask, but will you help us search again?”

“Yes, of course. I shall send my scouting party to investigate right away.”

The black knight looked around smugly at the hero’s party.

As far as I knew, they didn’t have a scout. I guess they had to outsource some support members to track down the demon lord.

“If you’ll excuse me a moment, I must order my scouting party to set out at once.”

“Wait.”

The black knight turned to dash out the door, until Princess Mariest stopped him.

“Your scouts must be exhausted as well. Keep them on standby until Seina and the others return from searching for traces of the demon lord.”

“My subordinates are hardly so wimpy. Besides, I doubt that puny assistant is going to find anything much. We will continue the search with our own resources alone, as we always have.”

Though I’d never met her, evidently Seina was another one of the hero’s followers.

“You intend to search on your own again?”

“But of course.”

“Have you forgotten how many members of your scouting party have been lost already?”

“All battles come with sacrifice, madam.”

Princess Mariest’s harsh reminder seemed to fall on deaf ears.

“Is the search that dangerous?” I asked Ringrande.

“Yes, the Dens of Evil are just as complex as a labyrinth and filled with enemies and nasty traps besides.”

Maybe I should help with the search, too, then.

“Sir Hayato, if you’ll have me, I’d be happy to help as well.”

“What can some Shigan noble brat with no battle experience possibly do?!”

As soon as I offered my assistance, the black knight began snarling at me.

He probably felt like I was intruding on his dominion.

“I may not look it, but I am a licensed explorer. Searching a labyrinth is one of my strong suits.”

Even if the Dens of Evil weren’t exactly a labyrinth, they seemed very similar.

Between my “Search Entire Map” skill and my menu’s map functions, I should have been able to find the demon lord much faster than any ordinary scouting party.

I didn’t mind playing second fiddle to the black knight and his troops, either.

“My scouting party already boasts wind mages and scouts who excel at—”

“Ryukken.”

As the black knight started to protest further, Hayato interrupted him, with Princess Mariest supporting his weight.

“I intend to accept Satou’s offer.”

“Do you doubt our abilities, Sir Hero?!”

“Of course not. I have faith in you and your men. But I have just as much faith

in Satou, you know. He's a dear friend of mine."

Although the knight still looked dissatisfied, he couldn't continue to argue when Hayato the Hero spoke that strongly. He left the room, saying he would report to his subordinates in the Dens of Evil that the hero was safe.

"I'm counting on you to help us out, Satou."

"Of course. I'll do whatever I can."

Hayato held out his hand to me, and I shook it firmly.



"Oh my, what a beautiful friendship."

Arisa addressed the hero with the most formal and ladylike manners she could muster.

"Truly, I wish you a swift recovery, Sir Hero."

"My honey!"

Hayato broke into a broad smile when he saw Arisa.

Behind her, Tama and Pochi hurried to put their hands to Arisa's forehead. "Feveeer?" "She's acting weird, sir!"

Liza promptly retrieved them before they could ruin the mood further.

"Your well wishes have already healed me a hundred times over..."

Hayato started to respond happily, only to cut off mid-sentence, his smile fading.

"Whatever is the matter?"

Without answering her, Hayato snapped his head around to look at me.

"Satou! What did you do?!"

He began staggering toward me unsteadily.

"Don't tell me...you gave these little honeys demonic potion?"

"Um...no?"

Where'd this come from?

Also, his face was way too close.

“Then why in the world are these little girls all level fifty-four and above?!”

Hayato pointed at Arisa and the others so emphatically, I practically heard a whooshing sound effect, his voice was so fervent.

At first, I didn’t understand. Then I remembered that demonic potion has the effect of leveling up more quickly and figured out why Hayato had the wrong idea.

Still, I wished he wouldn’t get so worked up in his weakened state.

“Labyrinth trainiing?”

“We worked really, really hard, sir!”

“Yes, it’s all thanks to the wonderful support and equipment Master provided.”

The beastfolk girls spoke up on my behalf.

“We just hunted monsters in the Celivera Labyrinth nearly to the point of extinction, wiped out huge areas of monster territory, and so on.”

Not wanting to complicate things, I left out the part where we recaptured Muno City, fought the red-rope monsters in the royal capital, and other notable incidents.

“Got it...sorry for jumping to conclusions like that.”

The hero bowed his head apologetically, and the girls began excitedly telling him about their training.

Arisa and Mia helpfully changed the subject whenever Tama or Pochi started steering toward something that was supposed to be secret.

For some reason, as the conversation went on, Hayato’s attendants looked increasingly shocked, muttering among themselves “Seriously?” and “Brutal...” and “Satou’s not as gentle as he looks...”

Personally, I felt like I’d just found effective training methods while putting safety first. Maybe without context, it sounded like I just threw them into harm’s way to train without stopping for rest.

Luckily, Arisa and Lulu made sure to talk about our barbecue parties and lunchtime breaks, too, so hopefully that made things clear.

“Are you all right, Sir Hayato?!”

A short-statured girl burst into the room.

Since she was somewhere between Arisa and Lulu in height, I thought at first that a child had gotten into the room. Only when I saw her face and the curves of her body did I realize she was an adult woman.

“Hey, Lilo. Don’t worry, we’re fine.”

“Thank goodness...”

Once she saw that Hayato was unharmed, she breathed a sigh of relief, then quickly readjusted her skirt and tousled hair. The panicked expression disappeared as she straightened herself up.

“Pardon my intrusion. When I heard that the *Jules Verne* appeared next to the cathedral and you were carried into the pontiff’s room, I thought something terrible must have happened to you.”

“You’re not wrong about that. Satou here saved my life.”

“Satou...?”

The woman tilted her head and looked at me.

“Lemme introduce you, Satou. This is Lilo. She’s one of my two secretaries, and a valued member of our group.”

So this was another of Hayato’s attendants. I learned later that the other secretary was a quiet girl named Nono, who was currently heading to the Saga Empire to replenish their supplies.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Lilo. I am Viscount Satou Pendragon, vassal of Count Munro of the Shiga Kingdom.”

“The pleasure is all—”

“Viscount?!” Ringrande exclaimed, interrupting Lilo.

“Rin, I was in the middle of introducing myself.”

“Sorry, Lilo. But since when were you a viscount? I thought you were an honorary knight when we met in the old capital!”

“For various reasons, I was promoted at the kingdom meeting at the beginning of the year.”

“What kind of reasons? The girls mentioned earlier that you defeated a floormaster, but surely that would only get you promoted to an honorary baron or permanent baronet?”

Despite my best efforts to gloss things over, Miss Ringrande kept pressing for more information. Finally, I explained my publicly known achievements, mostly defeating demons and plunderers.

“It would certainly be wonderful to have someone so accomplished on our side.”

“Don’t worry, Lilo. Satou already agreed to help us.”

Hayato gave a thumbs-up with a manly grin.

“I shouldn’t be surprised, Sir Hayato. You have such a wonderful way with people.”

After that, the secretary excused herself. “I’ll go arrange for rooms for all of you. We can discuss the details later.”

Before she returned, a magic device in the corner of the room began to ring.

“Hey, Seina here. Hayato all right?”

A casual, somewhat boyish-sounding female voice came out of the apparatus. It must have been a telephone-like device.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Hayato! Oh, good. I was really worried, you know.”

“More importantly, did you find any clues?”

“Nope, no luck here. We searched high and low, but we couldn’t find a single trace of the demon lord. Now the scouting party says they’re withdrawing—guess I’ll head back, too.”

“Got it. Just don’t get careless on your way out.”

“Of course! The word ‘careless’ isn’t even in my vocabulary, you know!”

Ringrande told me that Seina was a member of their party in charge of scouting.

As their conversation wrapped up, Lilo came back and recommended that Hayato sleep for a while, telling the rest of his group to take a break as well.

She seemed to be in charge of managing the hero party.

I asked her about Raito’s situation, and she offered to introduce someone who would be willing to look after him, explaining that there were plenty of systems in place for this in the holy city.

Before we left the group to their rest, I gave out Nutrition Supplement Potions to Hayato and his party as thanks to help with the healing process.

Interlude: Deep in the Ground

“Still only thirty percent...”

By the eerie light emitting from an old altar in the darkness, a man was toiling away at something alone.

“What can I do ya for?”

An accented voice spoke from behind him.

“Your Majesty.”

The man turned and saw only the empty air—no, there was a black silhouette that was darker than its surroundings, like a shadow puppet.

“Oh, do stop calling me that. I’m just a measly court attendant now, ya hear?”

“Surely you jest, sire. I am but a temporary shadow made for gathering information, no more than mere garbage before the Troll Lord. My body, my heart, my soul all exist solely to be offered to Your Highness—”

“Enough.”

The joking tone disappeared as the shadow interrupted the man sharply.

“Respect and reverence are all well and good, but worship simply won’t do.”

“...But of course. How foolish of me... Please forgive me, Your Majesty.”

“I told ya to stop calling me ‘Majesty,’ didn’ I? Keep it up, and I’ll call ya ‘Your Highness,’ ya hear?”

“I am not at all qualified to be called by that title.”

“Ya think? Well, yer right. I’m nothing but a goblin myself—a far more fitting name than something as ominous as Troll Lord.”

“What a terrifying goblin you would make, sire.”

The man smiled faintly.

“Awful, ennit? Just look how adorable I am.”

The man remained silent at the joke that came from the shadow.

“Oh dear, bombed that one, didn’t I? Maybe the Holy Woman will console me.”

“Ha-ha.”

“Doing well, is she?”

“If you mean Shizuka, she’s holed up in her usual place, refusing to come out.”

“She mad or what, eh?”

“No, she is simply very unsociable. Not to worry—she will still work in accordance with orders when the time comes.”

“Well, people en’t machines. Gotta treat ’em with respect.”

“Understood, sire. I shall endeavor to humor her wishes as long as it does not interfere with the progress of our plan.”

The man accepted the shadow’s orders.

“...So, speaking of progress. How’re we looking?”

“It’s still only thirty percent, I’m afraid.”

“Slower than we expected, ennit?”

“Yes, my ‘Charm’ skill and the imitation Geist we made can just barely bind the demon lord—the Sandstorm Lord, that is—in the Dens of Evil.”

“He won’t obey us, eh?”

“I ordered him to attack the nearby city in order to deepen the miasma in the Dens of Evil, yet he is reluctant to take people’s lives, making for little progress.”

“Demon lords en’t supposed to have such noble values.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Perhaps our best course of action would be to capture the Yowork Kingdom imperial mage who copied the ‘Geist’ skill and have him rebind the Sandstorm Lord for us in order to reach our goal more quickly.”

“Ah, no can do, sorry to say.”

The man looked confused at the shadow's response, prompting further explanation.

"That Yowork Kingdom mage is dead, ya see."

"...Dead?"

"As a doornail. He became a dungeonmaster, which is all well and good, 'cept the dungeon went up in flames and him along with it. And after I had ol' Touya revive that labyrinth to help create a little girl demon lord, too... That's all gone to the dogs now, eh?"

The shadow's manner of speech was so peculiar that it was difficult to understand at times; nevertheless, the man gleaned that the gist of the meaning was "We revived a labyrinth to create a new demon lord, but it was destroyed along with the mage who became its dungeonmaster."

"In that case, I suppose we have no choice but to continue in our current course."

"What's the shape of things right now, then?"

"We've increased production of Sandstorm Soldiers in various parts of the Dens of Evil in order to thicken the miasma, and my people are working to defeat the hero and his associates whenever they attempt to track down the Sandstorm Lord."

The man spoke as if the demon lord was his subordinate.

"The Sandstorm Lord en't gonna go down to the hero, too, I hope? The current hero is nothing to sneeze at, ya hear?"

"There's no need to worry. The Sandstorm Lord is incredibly quick to flee. Not to mention, I've assigned the lesser and intermediate demons we borrowed from Lord Green to guard the demon lord, and Lord Green himself will step in if need be."

"Don't rely too much on a greater demon like Lord Green, though, eh? They seem like they're loyal to demon lords, but in the end it's their own skin they care about the most. And Green is especially quick to stab ye in the back if ye en't careful."

“I will take your warning to heart, sire. Still, Lord Green’s goal is the same as ours. I should think he will hardly betray us, at least until the goal is achieved.”

“I sure hope yer right.” The shadow shrugged. “Don’t suppose we can trap the hero in a Geist?”

“It would be difficult to lure the hero and his companions into an area with all of the conditions for casting a Geist on them, and what’s more, they all have that wretched Parion’s protection in the form of a Divine Talisman...”

“Ah, right, ‘Charm’ doesn’t work on ‘em, either. Oh, well. Forget it, eh?” Dismissing the topic, the shadow moved on. “By the way, howsabout we use that other doohickey? The one they slipped to us on the sly.”

“Ah, the Evil God’s Spawn Fragments. I gave them to the Sandstorm Lord, but thus far he refuses to use them. Though he did throw one at the hero a few days ago, utterly wasting it.”

“I’d hardly call that a waste. No ordinary potion or magic can cure the corruption from those things, and even the ol’ pontiff’s Unique Skill would have a tough time. That oughtta take the hero out of our hair for a while, eh?”

“No, I’m told that a Shiga Kingdom noble who happened to be present was able to cure him with a Holy Tool.”

“Well, en’t that a shame...”

“But it seems the Holy Tool broke in the process, so hopefully that won’t happen again.”

“Got it. Do ye have any spares left, then? If’n ye don’t, I can give ye some of mine. I shipped most of ‘em out to the Overgrown Labyrinth and the Demon’s Labyrinth, but I en’t sent any to Tarou yet.”

“No, we still have five more. In an effort to prevent the Sandstorm Lord from wasting any more, I’ve taken two into my own hands, and given the rest to Lord Green.”

“Dearie me. You trust those demons too much.”

The man bowed his head silently at the shadow’s warning.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn ye. Keep at it, eh? I’ll check in again but soon.”

With that, the shadow puppet vanished into the darkness.

“I promise I won’t let you down.”

The man bowed deeply to the now-vanished figure.

“No matter what, I will undo the seal on the Evil God’s Prison for Your Majesty the Troll Lord.”

His words, too, disappeared into the dark.

Preparing for the Investigation

Satou here. One of my coworkers once said that only the most incompetent workers want to hold meetings all the time. I suppose having a meeting can make you feel like you've been working hard, even if nothing actually gets resolved in the process.

"Welcome back, Lord Kuro."

After parting with the hero, then producing more potions and medicine at the Ivy Manor in Labyrinth City so that my stocks didn't run out, I went to the Echigoya Company headquarters in the royal capital. I only did preparations for the elixir-making process for now, since you can't create those as quickly.

Even though it was the dead of night, the beautiful blond manager Eluterina and the quietly lovely, silver-haired Tifaleeza were still hard at work, along with many of the other executive staff members.

Little Louna, who usually rode on a stone wolf, was away on business with the former Shadow Thief, Sharururuun.

"I want to give Pippin a job to do. Is he free?"

"Yes, we haven't given him any major assignments yet."

"Glad to hear it. I'm going to have him provide support for the Saga Empire hero in Parion Province."

"Sir Hayato the Hero? Not Sir Nanashi?"

"That's right. A demon lord's presence has been confirmed in Parion."

"Pippin is certainly talented, but I can't see him being very helpful in defeating a demon lord..."

"Don't worry. I just want him to deal with an assassin who's targeting the hero."

While I doubted Hayato would lose to any attacker head-on, he might have been in trouble if someone mixed poison into his food in the holy city or out in the field, and it'd be stressful to be on edge during every meal.

I was hoping Pippin could help deal with most of that.

"That sounds like the perfect job for him, then."

"I'll come to get him around dawn. Tell him to be ready."

"Understood."

That should take care of any attempts to poison Hayato.

"Got anything to report?"

"Lady Ryuona of the Shiga Eight came to visit, though we aren't sure of her intentions."

Miss Manager's caution was probably unnecessary. My guess was that she just came to thank Nanashi the Hero for healing her with an elixir after she was burned by a dragon.

But even after I told Eluterina not to worry because it was probably nothing important, her expression stayed clouded.

Maybe something happened to set her off? She and Ryuona had very different personalities, so it was possible that they clashed.

Next I turned to Tifaleeza, who looked like she wanted to report something.

"Some prospective immigrants arrived with letters of recommendation from you, Lord Kuro. We sent them to the in-development villages with top priority. Most of the completed villages are nearly full, so we've temporarily suspended applications for migration."

"Since some of the applicants were craftsmen, we offered them jobs at the Echigoya Company. Those who missed out on the migration to the new villages are currently living in Echigoya Company tenement houses, making ends meet as day laborers."

"Are there still a lot of applicants?"

"Yes, because the conditions are too—I mean, very generous. We may need

to begin choosing by lottery.”

That sounds like a lot...

Maybe I should accelerate the plan for sending immigrants to Muno County.

For now, we had better make ten or so more villages.

“The mining villages have also begun to operate in earnest. We’ve been selling precious metals to the kingdom and metals like iron and lead to the commerce guilds, all at market price. We also keep a certain amount in stock at our company, so please let us know if you need any.”

I looked over the ledgers Tifaleeza handed me, satisfied that things seemed to be going well.

“Lord Kuro, we used some surplus assets to purchase empty lots and property in the royal capital and nearby cities. We’re thinking of extensively recruiting people to work at all of these locations.”

I approved the request to expand the size of the company staff, on the condition that confidential matters at the headquarters be kept only among those who were already executives here.

“I’ve also called in some of our best people for the expansion of our defense department, including Sumina from Labyrinth City.”

The big-sisterly Sumina was the head of the labyrinth exploration division of the Echigoya Company’s Celivera location, though now she was evidently being called back to the headquarters in the royal capital. Her apprentice and second-in-command was taking over the labyrinth division. I probably should have given them access to the areas I developed for Karina’s and Nana’s sisters to train in.

“We also established a clothing division of the company in order to use up excess thread and fabric produced by the textile division. Is it all right if we temporarily hire some of the seamstresses we’ve been subcontracting?”

“Of course. If they’re good workers, you can officially hire them, too. I’ll leave the decision up to you.”

“The airship division has begun rolling out the small MK I airships. Professor

Jahado is continuing to refine the skypower engine schematics; we've prepared a hull for use in his work."

She added that the professor and his assistant, young Aoi, were working through the night on their experiments.

Recently, he'd also begun roping in the magic tool craftsmen, shipbuilders, and other artisans we'd hired at the company, all in the name of further improvements to our airships. Since I was interested in seeing how their work would play out, I gave permission for them to use more resources and assets if needed.

"Lord Kuro, the alchemy division would also like to expand by hiring Ann and some of the others from our branch locations—"

"The engraving division needs to hire more employees as well! Please, Lord Kuro!"

"Our research and development division has finally reached the point where we are collecting ideas that could be sold as products. If possible, we hope to test sales here at the main branch and move into mass production."

The heads of various departments began clamoring with reports and requests for permission.

I gave the OK to almost all their requests, with only the occasional suggestion to guide them in the right direction.

If anything went south, I was confident Manager Eluterina or Secretary Tifaleeza would put a stop to it for me.

Once I finished my work at the Echigoya Company, I paid a visit to the night owl Hikaru and joined her for a late-night drink in the royal capital manor, where she caught me up on the status of the boarding students who were staying with her from the Labyrinth City orphanage.

Even the kids who had tried to be the picture of politeness at first were now so attached to Hikaru that they called her "Hika," and Hikaru herself was also smiling much more happily than before. I guess I made the right call in asking her to be the dorm mother to the visiting students.

Hikaru gave me the latest news from the royal capital, too.

Torriel, who'd started the rebellion in Vistall Duchy, had been disinherited and was living under house arrest in the countryside. As payment for his crimes, he'd been charged a hefty war expenditure to pay to Duke Vistall, as well as having several of his rights transferred to the kingdom.

Former Shiga Eight member Sir Gouen would be departing to the Azure Lands with the criminal slave unit Violet in the middle of the following month.

The Shiga Eight had also decided on two new members: the Scarlet Nobleman Baronet Jelil and "Windblade" Bauen Ganriu. Evidently, the eighth and final seat was staying empty, not going to Sir "Whitelance" Kerun as I'd expected. The next selection wouldn't be for another year.

When I told Hikaru about the demon lord in Parion Province, she wanted to come help as well, but I talked her out of it by promising to contact her for aid if Hayato couldn't handle it. Then I gave her a few of the potions I'd made that night, retrieved Pippin from the Echigoya Company, and returned to Parion Province.



"Plum porridge is just the thing for when you're getting over an illness."

Hayato was heartily digging into a large porcelain bowl full of rice porridge made with dried plums.

The day before, I'd asked on my way out if there was anything he might want for breakfast; his response was either white rice or porridge, which Lulu and I made for him.

I was confident that it was a top-tier porridge, as I'd already taste-tested it with my crew to ensure that it had the perfect texture and salt level.

Mia loved it, of course, and even the carnivorous Tama and Pochi gave it high marks.

"Palif bean paste and yogurt are fine and all, but as a Japanese person, I've just gotta eat rice, y'know?"

Clearly Hayato was a big rice fan.

I'm sure he was starving for a taste of his homeland; it had been years since he was summoned to the Saga Empire.

"I made rice and salt-grilled mackerel, too. Would you like some?"

"Hell yeah, I would!"

Hayato handed the now-empty bowl to a maid and took the tray I offered him, looking delighted as he cracked a raw egg into the rice in traditional Japanese fashion, then added soy sauce. This elicited strange expressions from some of the audience, like the maids and Princess Mariest, although they refrained from commenting.

He was excited to put soy sauce on the seaweed I provided, too. It was a hidden specialty of Ganika Marquisate that I acquired from Baron Jeetbert before I left the royal capital. I would have to thank him next time we met.

For a while, the only sounds in the room were the clacking of chopsticks and groans of "Mmm!" from Hayato the Hero.

"Thanks for the meal."

Hayato pressed his hands together in appreciation, looking satisfied.

All that was left on the mackerel plate were white fish bones, thoroughly picked clean. He'd eaten every last bit of the skin, and even the grated daikon radish. I was glad he seemed to enjoy it so much.

Incidentally, I hadn't seen any signs of someone plotting to poison him yet; maybe the Saga Empire people were on top of it. Even if I was just being paranoid, I still assigned Pippin to keep an eye on things from the shadows, figuring it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Anytime. I'm glad you liked it."

With that, I handed Hayato the *houjicha*, or roasted green tea, that Lulu had prepared.

Once the hero had drunk his tea and taken a short rest, we talked about our next steps.

"I'd like you to come to the meeting we have this afternoon, Satou."

“A...meeting?”

“Yeah, you heard me. The Dens of Evil are a huge network. Even with help from Ryukken and the rest of the Saga Empire scouting party, we can’t find the demon lord on our own. So we’re also getting help from some Parion Province soldiers and intelligence agents.”

He explained that this meeting was to work out the details of all that.

“Mari and Lilo will do most of the negotiating—all you need to do is listen in.”

I was surprised to learn that Miss Ringrande wouldn’t be participating in the negotiations.

When I asked why, he laughed and said that “Rin has no patience for idiots.” She would probably end up picking fights with some stubborn person or other.

“Hayato, it’s perfectly fine to leave the negotiations to us, just do try not to sleep during the meeting this time.”

“I make no promises.”

“Really! If you fall asleep, you’re going without rice for a week.”

“C-c’mon, anything but that. No coffee is one thing, but I can’t function if I don’t eat rice at least once a day...”

Hayato wilted under Princess Mariest’s threatening glare and promised not to fall asleep during the meeting.

I couldn’t blame him, though. It’s hard not to get sleepy during an unproductive meeting.



“...and as I said, the most we in the third priest corps can offer is two small squadrons.”

“What?! The priests’ district is a perfectly safe area! We have our hands full of troublemakers in the artisans’ district, yet we are providing *four* squadrons. Shame on you!”

“If we only need keep watch that the demon lord does not emerge, could we not simply hire watchmen from the nearby villages?”

“You fool. If Sandstorm Soldiers come out of the Dens of Evil, ordinary villagers won’t stand a chance!”

“Better to sacrifice a few villagers than to lose any priest soldiers, no?”

“How could you say such a thing?!”

Without the ability to settle things via phone or e-mail beforehand, meetings in this world were a mess of increasingly heated arguments that kept straying further from the main issues.

Incidentally, the priest soldiers offering assistance were primarily to keep watch on the countless entrances to the Dens of Evil.

“Enough of this nonsense!”

Clad in gaudy armor, the head of the Temple Knights slammed his hands on the table and stood.

He was a handsome macho man, and like the other Temple Knights that protected our caravan from the Sandstorm Soldiers before, he had a high level and a great deal of skills.

“The number of squadrons each group contributes will remain the same as we discussed before. I already have His Grace’s signature. Any further objections should be submitted to the cathedral’s head priest.”

Under his intense glare, the captains of the priest soldier squadrons straightened up in their chairs and turned pale.

“Now then, hero.”

The captain of the Temple Knights turned his harsh gaze on Hayato next.

“We of Parion Province are offering some one thousand soldiers to aid your cause, to say nothing of the countless provisions given us by our loyal followers. Despite demanding so much already, you would ask us to assist in smoking out vermin and keeping watch like scarecrows?”

“Your Excellency Mohkiris, if I may—”

When Secretary Lilo attempted to speak, the Temple Knights’ captain shouted her down.

“I did not ask the opinion of a mere servant! I am speaking to the hero!”

Princess Mariest moved to stand up and intervene on her behalf, but Hayato held out a hand to stop her, standing himself instead.

“That’s right. We’re the ones who Goddess Parion entrusted with the mission to defeat the demon lord. I’m grateful for all of you helping us out, but there’s no need for you to sacrifice your men for no good—”

“Are you mocking us?! We do not fear any demon lord!”

The captain of the Temple Knights was practically frothing with rage.

“The Holy Woman has bestowed us Temple Knights with Goddess Parion’s protection. Defeating a demon lord would be child’s play for us!”

Holy Woman?

That keyword caught my attention.

Having heard enough of the insult-slinging, I turned my attention to my map search and discovered one person with the “Holy Woman” title in the Holy City of Parion: an elderly priestess.

The phrase “Holy Woman” always brought to mind a beautiful young girl like Sara of the Tenion Temple, but in this world it seemed like the title usually belonged to an old lady like the head priestess of Tenion Temple. Still, I supposed she was certainly deserving of the title.

“Hmph. Rich words from a paper dragon who knows little more than play-fencing.”

As I turned my attention back to the meeting, the black knight made an unnecessary comment that stoked the flames of the knights’ captain’s rage just when he finally seemed to be calming down.

“A bumpkin knight who only wears rustproof black armor has no right to talk!”

“This blacksteel armor is crafted with cutting-edge technology of the Saga Empire! How dare you compare it to ordinary rustproof iron?!”

The black knight was just as quick to take the bait. Clearly, this guy had a short

temper.

Incidentally, while I didn't really understand what they were talking about at the time, Miss Ringrande explained to me later that impoverished knights who couldn't properly maintain their iron armor coated it with a black rustproofing substance.

The "blacksteel" the black knight referred to was a recently developed alloy, a special steel alchemized with rare adamantite. Supposedly, it was even tougher than the mithril alloys that were more widely available.

"That's quite enough, both of you. His Grace Cardinal Dobbunaf has deigned to join us."

The cardinal and a bishop arrived and primly took their seats.

At some point, the sage had arrived and taken a seat, too. Once again, he wore a black hood that hid his face from view. Although I'd guessed from the wrinkles around his mouth that he might be an older man, my AR display indicated that he wasn't as old as I thought. Maybe the wrinkles were a characteristic of his race, which was apparently "monkeyfolk."

He had an impressive skill list, largely combat-oriented: the rare Shadow Magic, all four basic elemental magic skills, Practical Magic support skills like "Chant Shortening" and "Meditation," and even physical skills like "Stickfighting" and "Evasion." Overall, his skill composition was that of a mage or magic soldier, albeit with more skills than average.

His titles included "Sage," of course, as well as "Adviser to the Pontiff," "Seeker of the Truth," and others befitting his role. As far as I could tell from my AR display, he didn't seem to be a member of the demon lord-worshipping cult Light of Freedom.

If there's time after the meeting, I should try asking him about Raito's father.

"Secretary, summarize the proceedings thus far to His Grace and myself," the bishop ordered pompously.

This was Bishop Shippunas, who I suspected of being a member of Light of Freedom.

I had better be mindful of his words and actions.

“The secretary has briefed us on the circumstances. Hero, Parion Province wishes you to allow six elite members of our Temple Knights to participate in the defeat of the demon lord.”

“Cardinal, sending the province’s most valuable defenders to die in vain would be—”

“Not in vain, my boy. It is our province’s highest directive to fight demon lords and protect world peace.” The cardinal interrupted Hayato. “A demon lord has appeared in the land named for the great Goddess Parion. For our holy Temple Knights to refrain from participating would be a discredit to our honor.”

Okay, I see what the cardinal’s saying, but he’s not the one whose life is going to be on the line.

“But—”

“Not one of our Temple Knights would value his own life above the province’s good name. Much less turn tail from the crusade against the demon lord.”

This time it was the Temple Knights’ captain who interrupted the hero’s protests.

While he himself was free to volunteer, I didn’t like the idea that some of his Temple Knights might be pressured into participating in the dangerous battle.

“Our best knight, Sir Mezzalt, has been honored with the Holy Sword Blutgang. Surely he will not hold you back, Sir Hero.”

The cardinal shot a haughty look at Hayato.

“Your Grace, I do believe that our great sage makes an excellent point. Should we not at least leave the Holy Sword wielder Sir Mezzalt to protect the pontiff?”

The bishop’s seemingly moderate suggestion sounded off to me when I considered that he might be a member of the demon lord–worshipping cult.

Was protecting the pontiff just an excuse to keep the Holy Sword user, who seemed next most likely to be effective against the demon lord after the hero, from joining the fray?

“Don’t be foolish. A Holy Sword wielder ought to be on the front lines against the demon lord. Why, if we were to leave anyone behind, it would make more sense for Captain Mohkiris here to stay with the pontiff, as he excels at defense and protection.”

“Your Grace...”

A vein twitched in the Temple Knights’ captain’s forehead at the cardinal’s words.

“Yes, I know. We would never be so moronic as to leave you behind. If we are to fight, we ought to bring all our might to the battlefield at once. Surely you realize that divvying up our forces into small waves would produce far more casualties, do you not, Sir Hero?”

The cardinal appeared to be both a religious leader and a strategist.

“I will say it again. Parion Province wishes to send six of our Temple Knights into the battle against the demon lord.”

With that, the cardinal glared at the hero.

Princess Mariest whispered something in his ear, and Hayato nodded gravely.

“All right. We accept.”

“Excellent. Then we shall arrange for the healing priests you requested to be sent out to the joint bases along with guards of their own.”

The cardinal smirked in satisfaction.

As he sat down, my “Lip Reading” skill told me that he mouthed to himself, “This will be perfect to get the opposing faction off our backs.”

Using a situation like this to his faction’s advantage seemed more like the move of a politician than a holy man.

The bishop, on the other hand, looked displeased. Noticing my gaze, he cleared his throat deliberately and put on a more neutral expression.

The Parion Province side seemed to be divided into two factions: the cardinal’s, which wanted more prestige for Parion Province, and the sage’s, which wanted to keep the holy city and the pontiff protected. The Temple

Knight seemed to belong to the former, while Bishop Shippunas belonged to the latter, try as he might to appear neutral. Even the hero side was split into two factions: Hayato's and the black knight's.

I know it's human nature to divide into cliques, but I wish we could at least all be on the same side when there's a common enemy—especially when it's a demon lord.

The meeting carried on while I was lost in thought.

"Sir Hero, I am told that the Saga Empire's scouting party suffered serious losses in the last investigation. Will you not need additional support on that front?"

"Absolutely not! My men don't need any help!"

The black knight jumped in to answer the sage's question.

"Allow me to respond on behalf of the hero. If we investigate the Den of Evil caverns one by one, our group can function without any issues."

"One by one? Unless you luck out and find the demon lord in the very first cavern, there's no telling how long that might take!"

"Exactly! How long do you want our troops to stand around outside the entrances?!"

The temple soldiers' side spoke up indignantly at secretary Lilo's explanation.

"Then allow Parion Province to provide a survey team as well. The Temple Knights can easily protect them from any monsters that might appear during the investigation."

"Hmph. Says the would-be swordsman."

"Be quiet, you rustproofed old knight!"

The black knight and the Temple Knights' captain started bickering again.

Even the sage and Mariest couldn't get them to settle down. In the end, it was outraged shrieking from the cardinal that put a stop not just to their arguing but to the entire meeting.

Under the circumstances, I couldn't exactly pull the sage aside for unrelated

business. I decided to wait for my next chance instead.

Eventually, Lilo the secretary was sent running around to coordinate and fine-tune the plans, until finally it was decided that two more scouting parties would be formed, made up of the cardinal's recommended scouting squad, the sage's "gofers" (who were really his spies), and some explorers who investigated the caves for a living.

When I wondered aloud why they didn't just entrust it all to Lilo in the first place, Ringrande said that it would take too long to get things in order that way.

The plan that everyone ultimately settled on was something like the following:

1. Place temple soldiers at all the Den of Evil entrances to keep watch.
2. Send search parties into three of the five largest, most likely Den of Evil sites.
3. The hero's party re-explores the areas where they previously saw the demon lord.
4. Once the demon lord is found, notify the hero, black knight, and Temple Knights' captain, who will work together to defeat him.

"Satou, you and your party will come with us. If you think you can handle it on your own, we can split the Den of Evil areas and search that way."

I nodded at Princess Mariest's words.

"And if you do find the demon lord, don't try to fight him without us."

"Ha-ha, you know I wouldn't do anything so reckless."

I laughed off Miss Ringrande's joke.

"If only everyone could be as humble as you, Satou..."

"I bet anything Ryukken would try to take it on himself."

"That Temple Knights' captain seemed risky, too."

Weeyari the archer, Rusus, and the others all shook their heads.

“People like that couldn’t care less about their subordinates’ lives if there’s something in it for them, ya know?”

“Surely they’d at least report the sighting first.”

“Yes, let’s hope so. We’ll have to be ready to summon the *Jules Verne* and come running at a moment’s notice in case we receive a report.” The priestess Loleiya smiled darkly. “I want to be sure to rescue those idiots’ subordinates, although the idiots themselves can die for all I care.”

While I wasn’t exactly sure how strong this demon lord was, he had to be stronger than a greater demon or a lesser dragon. If a group tried to take him on without a hero, they might very well have been wiped out completely.

My best bet was to check out the Den of Evil areas those groups were exploring ahead of time to see if the demon lord was there so that I could come running as Nanashi the Hero, if it came to that.

Searching the Den of Evil

Satou here. When I think about an enemy that's quick to flee, I automatically picture that rare metal enemy from a famous RPG series. You can't help but like those slimy little guys since they give out a great reward if you manage to beat them, though.

"This is the Den of Evil where we last fought the demon lord."

The next morning, Hayato the Hero was totally recovered, and we joined his party on the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* to travel about two hours away, hovering above a Den of Evil entrance.

Arisa and the rest of my crew came, too, of course.

"Hey, it's Seina."

Rusus and Fifi pointed at a small figure hopping up and down and waving wildly on the ground, next to two black midsize airships that appeared to belong to the Saga Empire. The short human woman was apparently Seina the scout.

"That was fast. They must have had a space mage use Return to get them out faster."

Normally, it took at least three days to get back from the depths of the Den of Evil where the demon lord was last seen. The hero party had summoned the *Jules Verne* to the very deepest part, jumped on board, and made their escape.

While they were explaining all this to me, Weeyari steered the *Jules Verne* into a smooth landing.

"Hayato!"

The airlock-style hatch opened with a swoosh, and Seina the scout hopped inside.

Like the rest of the party, she had a well-proportioned figure.

“Glad you’re okay.”

“Sorry to worry you. This is Satou, who’s gonna be helping us with the search.”

Casually sliding out of Seina’s immediate embrace, Hayato introduced us.

“Nice to meetcha. You’re pretty young for... Wait, what’re these kids doing here?”

Seina’s eyes fell on the youngest members of my group.

“Purple hair... Could you be the famous ‘Honey’? Did you kiddos come on a little field trip to watch the big brave hero at work today?”

Seina immediately identified Arisa as the object of Hayato’s semi-obsession.

She wasn’t wearing a wig like usual, since everyone on board the dimensional submarine was a friend.

Unlike Hayato’s “Divine Analysis,” her “Analyze Character” skill didn’t seem to be able to see through my group’s Recognition-Inhibiting items.

“No, this isn’t a field trip. We’re here to help Sir Hayato.”

“Ugh, Hayato, you’re way too soft on little kids...”

Seina pressed a hand to her forehead in a gesture of hopelessness.

“Don’t underestimate my honey and her friends, Seina.”

“What d’you mean? Are these kids actually good for something?”

Seina raised her eyebrows at Hayato’s remark.

“Yes, sir. Pochi is a pro explorer, sir.”

“Tama’s a pro scout, tooo?”

“Pro...?”

“They’re experts, basically,” Hayato clarified.

As Seina looked at the girls doubtfully, Tama and Pochi flexed their biceps and struck muscleman-like poses. It was adorable, if not very convincing.

“You can’t tell with your analysis skills, Seina?”

Hearing Hayato's whispered question, I removed Pochi's and Tama's Recognition-Inhibiting items.

"...Level fifty-four?! That's higher than me!"

Seina exclaimed in surprise when her skill revealed their level.

Incidentally, she was level 52.

"Are you two fairy folk in costume or something?"

"Bzzzt?"

"Pochi's ears aren't a costume, sir."

"Can I touch 'em?"

"Okaaay?"

"Go ahead, sir."

Once the pair gave permission, Seina reached out and touched their animal ears.

"That tickles, sir!" Pochi and Tama wriggled happily.

"Oooh, so soft! These are way better than Rusus's and Fifi's scratchy ears."

"Say what?!"

"Hey, my ears are silky-soft, okay?!"

"No fightiing?"

"She's right, sir. We should all get along, sir."

Tama's and Pochi's earnest reactions to the friendly banter put a smile on everyone's faces.

Before long, Seina the scout was getting along with my group just fine.

"Satou, this is a map of the Dens of Evil."

In a large tent that reminded me of a battlefield HQ, Hayato showed me a map of what they'd explored so far, using the Picture Recorder spell. It showed all the locations of the Dens of Evil within the province, not a guide to navigating them.

The map also noted the dates of exploration and a symbol for scale.

Five of the Dens of Evil were marked with colored pins.

“These pins show where we’ll be searching, right? What do the colors mean?”

“Black means a den where the demon lord was spotted. White means no demon lord so far.”

A blue pin indicated the den we were currently about to explore.

These five Dens of Evil were significantly larger than the rest and were known as the “Five Major Dens of Evil” in Parion Province. They were numbered in order of size, a system that went up to around a hundred.

“Hayato! Ryukken and his subordinates went out to search without meeting up with the scouts they left here first.”

We learned that a majority of Saga Empire soldiers were left here at supply stations and were currently on their way back toward the surface.

“Getting a head start, huh? Typical Ryukken.”

“This is bad. Splitting up their forces like that will mean far more losses.”

“Those poor saps, getting dragged along with their boss’s stupid ambitions...”

So the black knight was in it for his own personal gain? Here I thought he was just really eager to beat the demon lord...

“Yeah, no kidding. Seina, go tell the communicators to give the order for them to get on standby aboveground, please.”

Agreeing with Miss Ringrande’s sympathetic remark, Hayato sent Seina out on a scouting mission.

Oh, right. This might be a good time...

“Sir Hayato, do you mind if we take a quick look inside the Den of Evil?”

“Yeah, go for it. There’s not much to see, though—it just looks like a regular cave.”

Thanking Hayato for his permission, I brought my group into the Den of Evil.

There were two sentries stationed at the entrance, each holding some sort of

magic tool that looked like a large cane with bells.

Initially, they stopped us from approaching; when I told them we had Hayato's permission, though, they believed us after only a quick glance at the youngest members of the party. I guess the Saga Empire soldiers all knew about the hero's peculiar inclinations, too.

"Mew? There's a drawing heeere?"

Tama, who was always quick to adjust to the dark, soon spotted a Holy Magic barrier.

The holy symbol of the Goddess Parion was visible floating on its surface.

Seeing that my AR display identified it as an anti-monster barrier, I checked that it was safe myself before calling the rest of the group to follow.

The radar in the corner of my AR display changed to an unexplored area. My map gave it the name "Evil God's Prison Labyrinth: Ruins."

As I looked at this information, I used "Search Entire Map" from my magic menu.

It was larger than I expected: only a little smaller than the Kuvork Kingdom labyrinth, though still only about the size of about six sections of the Celivera Labyrinth.

There were seven exits to the surface, far fewer than the number I saw on the map Hayato showed me on the surface.

Evidently, any areas that weren't physically connected to this one were treated as their own map.

"Satou, thick miasma."

Mia's brow furrowed.

"Maybe that's why my body sort of felt heavier all of a sudden."

"Oui, ouiii. Feels bad, maaan?"

Arisa and Tama agreed.

Activating my "Miasma Vision" for a moment, I saw right away that the miasma all around us was several times denser than in the average labyrinth.

There was hardly any miasma within Parion Province, especially near the great cathedral, which made it seem all the more intense here.

I unleashed my usually suppressed spirit light in order to cleanse the miasma. That should make things a little better, at least.

“I didn’t notice anything outside of the Den of Evil. Maybe that barrier is there to keep the miasma from leaking out?”

“Mm-hmm.” Mia nodded.

Arisa moved to whisper in my ear, so I leaned down to listen.

“So, Master. Was the demon lord in here?”

Finding some seemingly undiscovered hidden passages and rooms, I checked inside them with the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance; however, they only contained skeletons, mummified corpses, and the occasional treasure of monetary value. I didn’t find any clues as to the demon lord’s location.

“Other than that, there’s only some Sandstorm Soldiers and other monsters that must’ve escaped the hunt.”

There were no demons to be found.

On the other hand, there were actually a lot of humans within the former labyrinth. Most of them were from the Saga Empire. Between the units that were currently on their way back from the deepest parts, soldiers dismantling the temporary bases, and so on, there were nearly a hundred in total.

I guess it was a little too soon for them all to have withdrawn already.

“There’s no light in here, just like the Celivera Labyrinth. We’ll need light sources like spells or magic tools.”

“We can use my Mana Light, I report.”

“Mmm, Bubble Light.”

“‘Spellblade’ glows, tooo?”

“Pochi can light things up, too, sir!”

Nana and Mia cast their magic, and Tama and Pochi lit their weapons with “Spellblade.”

That should be plenty of light. Besides, I had the “Night Vision” skill, and Tama excelled at enemy detection even in the dark.

“The ground’s a lot more uneven here than in the labyrinths we’ve explored before, though. Shouldn’t everyone have a light source so they can watch their step?”

“...Yeah, good point. I’ll make enough flashlights for everyone.”

I could easily make magic tools for the job using light stones. Maybe a belt light that illuminates underfoot might be handy, too?

Having easily assessed the problem, we turned back and returned to the surface.

“That was fast. How was the Den of Evil?”

“It was just a cave like you said, although the miasma was thicker than I expected.”

“Huh... Is that an elf power?”

“Yes, you’re right on the money.”

Mia was always the first to notice changes in the miasma levels around us.

“Well, let’s get moving. We’re going to check the Den of Evil where the demon lord was first spotted.”

We followed Hayato back into the *Jules Verne*, traveling to another Den of Evil about an hour away.

A few messenger scouts and one squadron of soldiers were on standby in the tent on the surface above.

According to them, the black knight and his scouting party who had gotten a head start were exploring this Den of Evil.

“Maybe they figured it’d be easy to check the demon lord’s hiding spots here, since we have a map from last time...”

“They’ve been in here for a full day already, though. Wonder if we can catch up...”

I suspected that Hayato was worried about whether we could keep up with

the pace of their search enough to catch the other party, especially since some of the younger girls didn't look like they'd have much stamina.

"Sir Hayato, please don't worry about us. Chase after them at full speed, and we'll be right behind you."

I could always use my map to keep an eye on their whereabouts, and Nana and I could carry Arisa and Mia to keep a quick pace easily enough.

"All right. Let's go!"

"I'll lead the way, 'kay?"

Seina the scout ran ahead and waved a short wand, creating three will-o'-the-wisp-like spirits that floated around her, clearly for use as a light source.

Miss Ringrande, Princess Mariest, and several of the others created their own light sources with Practical Magic, Lightning Magic, and such.

We followed Loleiya the priestess, who was bringing up the rear of the party, and entered the labyrinth.

I'd already created flashlight magic tools using the *Jules Verne's* workshop on the way here and handed them out to all my companions.

"Master?"

Arisa held out her arms, requesting to be carried. "Just don't get handsy," I warned her as I lifted her onto my back. Nana put away her large shield to carry Mia.

We proceeded through the twisting passages at roughly the pace of a marathon.

It was several feet around at the broader parts, but there were also short and narrow sections where we had to crouch.

While that was easy enough since most of us were small-statured, I bet it was pretty difficult for large, armored soldiers.

Any Sandstorm Soldiers and other small monsters on the path were usually taken out with thrown knives or stones by Seinā at the front or Rusus and Fifi, who were flanking her.

“Hayato, big one.”

“On it!”

A bigger Sandstorm Soldier, roughly the size of a demi-ogre, appeared in a limestone cavern-like area. Hayato’s glowing Holy Sword Arondight brought it down with a single slash.

“That was quite impressive.”

“Honey?! You kept up with us, Satou!”

The hero stopped in surprise when he heard Arisa’s comment.

Apparently, he hadn’t noticed that we were following right behind them this whole time.

“We’re quite all right, Sir Hero. Right, Master?”

“Yes, don’t mind us. We can follow you at this pace easily enough.”

Arisa’s formal manners and confidence weren’t quite as convincing when I was carrying her on my back.

“Besides, I’m making a map as we follow you. Even if we get separated, we’ll be able to make it back to the surface safely on our own. So there’s no cause for concern.”

Although I couldn’t see us getting separated by accident, I figured this would give me a good excuse in case I needed to “get lost” and come to the rescue as Nanashi the Hero.

Incidentally, the demon lord wasn’t in this Den of Evil.

There was, however, a level-55 Sandstorm Soldier possessed by a demon deep inside the cavern, hence the backup plan.

“Hayato, Satou and his party are all mithril explorers, remember? You don’t need to worry about them so much.”

“Right, of course. But Satou, if you need to turn back at any point, go ahead and do it. All right?”

“Yes, I understand.”

Thanks to Miss Ringrande vouching for us, Hayato finally approved our accompanying his party.

“The areas marked on the wall with glowing paint are traps. Make sure not to step near them.”

With that warning, Seina the scout kept moving.

Soon, we started running into Sandstorm Soldiers more often, as well as corpses that turned into sand and more of the paint-marked traps.

“Looks like this must be the way Ryukken and his men went, too—oh, hey, there’s a new trap here.”

There was a pit that had clearly already been found.

“No bodies inside. I do see blood, so they must have healed with a potion and kept moving.”

We peered into the trap and saw a torn mantle lying among the sharp spikes at the bottom.

“If there are new traps, then...”

“...the demon lord might have come back.”

Hayato and Mariest exchanged looks.

My guess was that the new traps were set by the demon possessing the Sandstorm Soldier in the Innermost Chamber.

We kept scattering Sandstorm Soldiers as we headed deeper into the Den of Evil.

“We should catch up to them any minute now...”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on a murmur from Ringrande.

“There they are. It’s Ryukken and his squad.”

About three hours into our exploration, we caught up with the black knight and his scouting party.

They seemed to have stopped to treat some wounded members. They must have gotten caught in a trap or battled a particularly strong Sandstorm Soldier.

The black knight was shouting at his subordinates, clearly agitated.

I saw Seina the scout break off from the rest of the group and begin moving toward the Innermost Chamber up ahead. It seemed like only Tama and I noticed her movements; maybe she was using a stealth skill.

Tama asked me in hand signals if she could follow, and I gave her a small nod.

“Ryukken!”

“Sir...Sir Hero...!”

The black knight *tsked* in a small but obvious sign of irritation when he first saw us, then smoothed his expression into a smile and approached.

“What an unexpected pleasure to have you join us. Though if I may say so, you are still fresh from the sickbed. You are the one and only honorable hero, and your life is precious. I should much prefer that you rest in the holy city until we find the demon lord, rather than pushing yourself to the extreme.”

Although his words made it sound as if he wanted to help the hero, his expression and tone said otherwise.

Clearly, he was hoping to get a head start on everyone else and claim the glory for himself.

“Yeah, that was the plan, until I heard that you had run right into the Den of Evil without giving your men any time to rest.”

“Not to worry, good Sir Hero. Unlike yourself, my men and I are easily replaceable. Please do not concern yourself with such trivial matters.”

“Everyone’s lives are precious, not just mine. I can’t sit back and let you get yourselves killed in vain. Better to take your time with the search instead of trying to rush so recklessly.”

The hero and the black knight glared at each other.

In the meantime, Loleiya and Mia were healing the wounded soldiers with Holy Magic and Water Magic, respectively.

The scouting party’s own healers appeared to have run out of mana.

“Hayato, I took a peek at the Innermost Chamber.”

“There was a big guuuy?”

Seina and Tama returned from scouting ahead.

“Hang on, Seina. You seriously took this little pip-squeak with ya?”

“She just popped up behind me, I swear. This kid’s a natural.”

After responding to Rusus, Seina heaped praise on Tama, who wriggled bashfully with a little giggle.

“Lady Seina, was the demon lord there?!”

“It looked a lot like the demon lord, but my ‘Analyze’ skill got blocked, so I couldn’t tell for sure if it’s the real thing. He woulda noticed me if I used my talisman, y’know?” Seina answered the black knight, then looked at the hero. “Hayato, it was too dark to see much color or detail. It did look like the demon lord, though. There were about a dozen medium-size lackeys roaming around nearby. I saw a few in the passage, too.”

According to my map, the lackeys were around level 30.

“Got it. Let’s see...”

Hayato looked at each of the scouting party members in turn.

He was probably checking their levels and skills.

There were twenty members in total; two had levels in the 40s, while the rest were all in the 30s.

“Let’s just handle this on our...”

“Sir Hero! I insist upon coming with you!”

The black knight stepped into the hero’s path before he could try to go in with his party alone.

“All right...” Hayato cast a glance at me.

“Since it sounds like there are a lot of enemies, allow us to join you as well,” I volunteered.

Although the hero didn’t seem to want to put us in danger, I thought it might be best if we took on the weaker lackeys so that Hayato could focus on the

demon-possessed Sandstorm Soldier. My girls all seemed raring for a fight anyway.

“But...”

“We’ll be perfectly fine, Sir Hero. If it seems as if we might not be helpful, I promise to withdraw right away.”

“All right. I trust you, honey, Satou.”

Arisa’s smooth reassurance convinced the reluctant Hayato to let us come along.

Once everyone used various Support Magics on each other and got fully prepared, we entered the Innermost Chamber.

“Welcome, indeeed.”

A large Sandstorm Soldier that looked like a cross between a human and a snake greeted us with a sinister smile.

As it spoke, the pitch-dark room suddenly lit up like a stage.

“So much for a surprise attack...”

I didn’t feel the same kind of intense pressure from it as from the previous greater demons I’d encountered, even though it was roughly the same level. It was probably just an intermediate demon that had gotten a higher level from the Sandstorm Soldier he was possessing.

“...Satou, those are all fakes,” Hayato whispered to me. “See how the skin and horns under the sand are all green or yellow? The real one would be purple there.”

Well, that made it easy to distinguish.

Hayato was probably telling me this so we could tell the difference in case we ran into one on our own.

Between the color and the way it spoke, this thing must have been related to the green greater demon that tried to take over Labyrinth City before.

“Answer me this, demon! Where did that cowardly demon lord run off to?!”

I guess Hayato held off a preemptive magic strike so he could try to get

information about the demon lord's whereabouts.

"My, oh my. If it isn't the hero himself, indeeeed."

The giant Sandstorm Soldier in the center took a step forward, sneering down at Hayato.

"However, did you survive the Great Evil God's curse? Perhaps you went crying to that foolish Parion, indeeed?"

The demon didn't seem like he was going to answer Hayato's question.

"So that was the Evil God's curse..." Loleiya chewed her lip in distress.

"Foolish, you say?! How dare you besmirch the name of the Holy Goddess Parion!"

The black knight bellowed with rage and charged forward.

The two high-level warriors he'd selected from his scouting party swiftly followed suit.

When we discussed the plan beforehand, we decided to wait to charge in until the rear guard wiped out the lackey monsters with massive magic. Obviously he'd forgotten all that immediately.

"That idiot...!"

Hayato clicked his tongue.

Thanks to his absurdly high physical prowess, the black knight was already within the range of the Area-Effect Magic.

"Well, we can't just let him die. Change of plans. We're going in!"

Hayato ran forward, with Rusus and Fifi close at his side.

"I shall fight the hero myself, indeed. The rest of you deal with these nobodies, indeeed."

On the demon's orders, the midsize Sandstorm Soldiers all thronged toward us.

Princess Mariest and Miss Ringrande canceled out the spell they had been chanting and began a new chant instead.

“Master?”

Liza looked like she was dying to join in, as did Tama and Pochi.

“Let’s take care of these underlings, shall we?”

“Understood!”

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

“Roger, sir.”

“Yes, Master. You sand-covered brutes! You ought to bathe once in a while, I suggest!”

The beastfolk girls and Nana met the charging Sandstorm Soldiers head-on.

“I suppose we’ll support the others from here, then.”

“Arrows and Wind Magic don’t work on those things,” Weeyari the archer advised Arisa. “Fire and Earth Magic are less effective, too. I recommend Water or Explosion Magic.”

She probably took it upon herself to explain, since Ringrande and Mariest were occupied with chanting.

“Otherwise, you can try and target the faint point of light underneath the sand...”

Weeyari drew her magic bow and aimed at one of the midsize Sandstorm Soldiers.

“...to shoot out their magic core.”

She fired three arrows in rapid succession, which left trails of red light as they were sucked into the Sandstorm Soldier’s chest, perfectly piercing its core.

“That was lucky. Normally it takes a few tries.”

According to my AR display, the sand-like exterior of the Sandstorm Soldiers was a sort of barrier. It was possible to get a critical hit by aiming for the small gaps in the barrier.

“...■ **Quick Burst** Haretsu!”

“...■■■■ **Piercing Bolt** Eikan Inazuma!”

Miss Ringrande's Explosion Magic and Mariest's Lightning Magic burst out and destroyed two more midsize Sandstorm Soldiers. The Lightning Magic bursts seemed to meet with more resistance, almost as if they were grounded.

“...■ **Splash Needle Suikenzan.**”

“...■■■ **Blast Bomb Gouhibaku!**”

Not to be outdone, Mia's Water Magic and Arisa's explosive Fire Magic took out a few other Sandstorm Soldiers.

“Wow, I'm impressed.”

“Heh-heh, we didn't get to be mithril explorers by accident!”

Arisa grinned back at Ringrande.

“...Since intermediate-level magic is enough to destroy them, mages have an advantage at destroying the attendant monsters.”

Weeyari grumbled, looking a little displeased.

“Want to try?”

“Yes, I'll snipe one, too!”

Lulu readied her sniper-style Fire Rod rifle and fired three shots in rapid succession.

Each of them hit their mark, and three of the Sandstorm Soldiers fell, their cores destroyed.

“I did it!”

“How...?!”

Lulu's earnest excitement struck a sharp contrast to Weeyari's near-horrified shock.

Evidently Lulu's skills were exceptional, even to an archer on her highly advanced level.

I slipped in a few shots among the scouting party members who were using Fire and Thunder Rods, making sure the Sandstorm Soldiers didn't converge too much on Nana. Since she was wearing her public-friendly armor instead of the

usual Fortress-equipped golden armor, I wanted to be extra careful.

Pochi used her small shield to serve as a secondary tank, while Tama parried attacks with her twin blades, protecting Nana on either side so she wouldn't get surrounded.

Then Liza wove her way through the chaos over to the three, destroying Sandstorm Soldier cores with sharp, precise spear strikes.

Past them, however, one of the black knight's chosen warriors was sent flying from where the hero's party was engaged in the main battle, blood flying everywhere. His leg was at an unnatural angle, and several of his ribs were broken so badly that they jutted out of his chest.

"Affection Heal!"

Immediately, Loleiya cast an advanced Holy Magic healing spell on him from a distance.

Light surrounded the warrior, and his wounds began to heal in the blink of an eye. It was on par with a high-quality potion—even better, since the ribs also righted themselves to heal in the proper position, something no potion was likely to achieve.

Several of the scouting party members ran to the warrior and carried him to safety.

"Raaaaah!"

The black knight roared out a battle cry as he blocked the demonic Sandstorm Soldier's attack with his blacksteel shield.

He seemed to be holding his own quite well, despite the considerable level gap.

"Saga Empire sword style—'Rose-Briar Enclosure'!"

The black knight used some kind of special attack.

On closer inspection, I supposed the red traces left by his Magic Sword bore a vague resemblance to rose petals. It was a bit of a stretch, though.

"Don't be reckless, Ryukken!"

“Yeah, leave the attacks to us, will ya?!”

Rusus attacked the demon-monster with her dual-wielded broadswords, and Fifi with an unusually shaped battle-ax.

Their regular attacks did just as much damage as the black knight’s special attack, possibly due to a difference in weapon abilities.

“Harrumph! ‘Rose-Briar Enclosure’ is but an opening act. Now the real show begins! ‘Death-Rose G’—agh!”

The demonic Sandstorm Soldier struck in the middle of his dramatic motion, sending him flying just like the warrior from before. The other warrior who was fighting at his side was knocked along with him.

“That’s what you get for standing still without knocking your opponent off-balance first.”

“Yeah, what an idiot...”

While Rusus rolled her eyes, Seina managed to fling a magi bomb at the demon Sandstorm Soldier’s feet, then lit it with a short Fire Rod.

“Now!”

While the demon was briefly distracted by the bomb, Hayato struck its upper body with a powerful “Shield Bash,” knocking it off-balance.

“Raaaaah! ‘Twinblade Dance’!”

“Ha-haaah! ‘Bradley Buster’!”

Immediately, Rusus and Fifi swept in and struck the demon Sandstorm Soldier on either side with their special attacks.

“<Sing,> Arondight!”

Hayato the Hero used his Holy Sword’s scripture incantation, then amplified it with his Unique Skill Unstoppable Strike.

As the demonic monster managed to swing a kick from its unnatural position, Hayato sliced its leg clean off, then used his Holy Shield enhanced with the power of his Unique Skill Immovable Shield to block an attack on his blind spot from the monster’s whiplike tail.

The end of the possessed Sandstorm Soldier's tail was sharp like a spearhead, not curved like that of a scorpion.

It looked like it could easily skewer anyone carelessly caught in its path.

"I am not done yet, indeeeeee!"

Sensing its defeat drawing near, the demon made a foothold in midair and went for a desperate last-ditch charge attack. This thing was pretty stubborn.

But clearly, Hayato was expecting this attack, too. He lowered his stance and drew back his sword, preparing to counter the charge.

"'Shining Blade'!"

A brilliant blue light arced through the air, slicing the charging demon Sandstorm Soldier clean in two.

"INDEEEEEEEEEED!"

With a rather peculiar dying scream, the Sandstorm Soldier turned into sand and crumbled to the ground.

Not good.

I spotted a black shadow in the sand. The demon had separated himself from the monster.

Hayato noticed the shadow and readied his sword.

But then, he relaxed and lowered it without ever swinging it down, because...

"Shiga Kingdom sword style—secret technique 'Cherry Blossom Flash'!"

A clear voice rang out, and a gust of wind appeared along with a beautiful woman—Miss Ringrande, who'd effortlessly sliced the demon in half.

"Spellblade" fragments that looked like cherry blossom petals scattered like a special effect, and the demon was reduced to black dust.

No matter how much I practice my imitation version of "Cherry Blossom Flash," I can never get the effects to look so fleeting and beautiful.

"Looks like they're done over there, too."

Arisa slumped onto me.

“Mmm, tired.”

Mia leaned her weight on me as well.

It looked like our battle was done here, too, though the beastfolk girls had dominated most of it.

“Loleiya, would you mind healing Ryukken?”

“Very well. Miss Mia, can you heal Hayato and the others for me, please?”

“Mmm, got it.”

Mia nodded, pulling herself up from my side.

“I wasn’t expecting the enemy to self-destruct like that. We made some careless mistakes of our own, though.”

“Yes, sir. Pochi forgot to activate her shield’s ‘burrier,’ sir.”

“Confirmed. I was too slow in using a ‘Shield Bash’ against the aforementioned self-destructing enemy, I regret.”

“Don’t worry, be happyyy?”

The beastfolk girls and Nana were already discussing what they could have done differently.

Tama, who’d managed to escape completely unharmed, was comforting the other three.

If they were getting injured against enemies with levels in the 30s, even if it was only light scratches, then it would be much too dangerous to let them fight a demon lord.

I’d have to create new public-use armor for them as soon as possible.

First, I decided to see if there was any way I could create armor on par with their golden armor, that still looked the same as what they were wearing now.

I could reuse the magic circuits and any devices that were installed in dedicated subspaces, so hopefully it wouldn’t take that long to make.

Even if I had to cut down on sleep for a while, it was worth it to ensure my friends’ safety.



Once Hayato was healed, he spoke to Princess Mariest.

“You finished off those Sandstorm Soldier lackeys pretty fast, huh?”

“Only thanks to these girls.”

“Gotcha. I guess they’re as strong as their levels imply, even if they don’t look it.”

Hayato looked at Nana and the beastfolk girls.

I couldn’t blame him. Aside from Liza, who had the look of a true warrior, the others all looked like gentle young girls and adorable kids.

“They’re even stronger than that. This girl’s accuracy is even higher than mine.”

Weeyari planted a hand on Lulu’s shoulder as she boasted about her to Hayato.

“Higher than yours, when people call you the next Holy Bow Master?”

“N-not at all! I’m still nowhere near as good as Master.”

“Don’t be modest. You’re a prodigy, Lulu. The problem is your weapon...”

Weeyari took Lulu’s sniping Fire Rod rifle and turned it over in her hands.

“...This is a good gun. But you must be reaching a point where it’s not strong enough for you. Unlike arrows, the strength of a bullet is determined by the quality of the weapon. This wouldn’t work well on enemies that are level forty or more. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re exactly right.” Lulu nodded meekly.

For enemies higher than level 40, she usually used a Fireburst Gun or laser gun.

“If you’re looking for more power, I’d recommend a Magic Bow...” Weeyari took one of Lulu’s delicate hands in hers, then shook her head. “...but I don’t think you’d have much luck trying to switch weapons now.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I was never very good with a bow.”

Lulu had been using Magic Guns from the beginning.

“Hayato, can I have the Gold Thunder Fox Gun back from your Inventory?”

“The Gold Thunder what now? Oh, right, the one you said was too inaccurate to use.”

Hayato took out a long, flintlock-style gun. The white barrel and base were engraved with gold relief carvings styled after foxes and lightning bolts. It was definitely a Magic Gun.

“Lulu, try shooting with this.”

Weeyari pointed at a rock some two hundred feet away, handing Lulu the Gold Thunder Fox Gun.

“Aim...and fire!”

When Lulu pulled the trigger, purple lightning crackled along the gun, unleashing a crackling thunder shot toward the target rock.

It looked like it was going to hit its mark at first, only to change its trajectory at the last moment, veering off to the side and avoiding the target entirely.

“Oh dear, I missed. May I try a few more times?”

“That’s fine. Just be careful—it uses a lot of mana.”

Lulu fired a second and third shot, but the thunder shots kept veering off course as if at random, missing both times.

Lulu kept going, looking deep in thought.

“It’s so inaccurate that you can’t really use it against small targets. It’s decent against a big target like a giant beast or a building, though.”

“...I see.” Lulu stopped shooting.

“Yeah, so keep using the same gun against small targets. For big targets, you can use that if—”

Weeyari seemed to think that Lulu had given up on hitting the target. However, I could tell from the glittering look in her eye that she’d figured something out.

“Aim, and...fire.”

“...Huh?”

“I hit it! Here, I’ll keep going!”

Lulu hit the rock with a thunder shot from the Gold Thunder Fox Gun, then carried on destroying more boulders with it.

Judging by the way she was carefully moving the muzzle each time, this was no fluke.

“H-how did you hit those?”

“I’m sorry? Um, by aiming at them...?”

Weeyari grabbed Lulu by the shoulders insistently. “Aiming alone isn’t enough to hit anything with that gun! It’s got a mind of its own.”

“I’m not sure how else to explain...”

Lulu shot me a distressed look, so I stepped in to rescue her.

“Please calm down, Miss Weeyari. Lulu, do you think you could explain how you aimed, exactly?”

“Yes, Master. I realized the thunder shots are easily affected by the flow of air.”

“Hang on. I can read the wind, too. But that gun changes trajectory even when there’s no wind at all.”

“Yes, you’re right. So I looked more closely. Then I realized it was affected by changes in the density or temperature of the air, too.”

“The density and temperature of the air...?”

Weeyari looked completely stunned.

I guess super-sniper Lulu can see things the rest of us can’t.

“You can see all that?”

“It’s just like reading the wind. You can tell from the slight tremors in the air.”

No, I don’t think that’s...oh.



Just as I was about to dismiss the idea as impossible, I realized I could actually see what she was talking about if I focused enough.

It was probably thanks to the “Wind Reading” skill. Still, the fact that Lulu was able to see that with the naked eye even though she didn’t have the skill could only mean that she really did have a natural talent for sniping.

“Could I borrow that for a moment?”

Once Weeyari gave permission, I tried shooting the Gold Thunder Fox Gun myself.

After missing the first two or three shots, I started to get the hang of it. After that, I was able to hit targets, too, though not as smoothly as Lulu. It was at least as strong as the Fireburst Gun, though it was a lot tougher to use.

“Not you too, Satou... I’m starting to lose all my confidence.”

“Well, Master is my shooting teacher, after all.”

Weeyari’s shoulders slumped on hearing Lulu’s odd attempt at reassurance. Then, with a smile that had a whiff of resignation, she turned to Hayato, who was watching nearby.

“I think these two might be freaks of nature.”

Hey, that’s rude.

“Don’t say that, Wee.”

“Ignore me, I was just complaining a little. More importantly, I want to give the Gold Thunder Fox Gun to Lulu. That’s okay, right, Hayato?”

Hayato nodded with a wide smile.

He seemed to be rather entertained by how things were playing out.

“Looks like it’s okay. Go ahead and take it. I’m sure it’ll be of use to you.”

Taken aback by the sudden offer, Lulu looked to me for help again. Like Hayato, I nodded. I did want to take a look at the gun’s inner workings later, however.

“I’ve finished healing Sir Ryukken. He lost a great deal of blood, so he’ll need

to rest for a while.”

“What about the two samurai?”

“Rudoruu hasn’t regained consciousness yet. Kwandoh only had bruises, though, so he can return to battle anytime.”

Pochi and Tama scurried over to Hayato and Loleiya as they conversed, gazing up at them with eager curiosity.

“What is it?”

“We heard the word ‘samurai,’ sir.”

“Tell us mooore?”

“Oh, is that all?” Loleiya the priestess brought over the less injured of the two warriors—who turned out to be Saga Empire samurai—and introduced him to the pair.

“Are you interested in samurai, young ones?”

“Aye.”

“We learned lots from Mr. Kajiro, sir.”

“Kajiro... I’ve heard that name before. Yes, I believe he was a disciple of the Zi-Gain style, like Rudoruu? At any rate, I am Kwandoh, a humble master of the Sin Kaage style.”

Kwandoh, evidently good with children, made fast friends with Tama and Pochi.

“Seina, how skilled is that cat-eared girl?” Hayato asked his scout.

“She’s fast on her feet like Rusus, and just about as good as me at finding traps, for sure.”

“Her evasion skills are excellent, too,” Ringrande added. “I’d imagine she would fare at least as well as me in close combat, if not even better.”

“If she’s got close-combat skills like yours... And what about the orangescale girl?”

“Oh, she’s extraordinary. I’d add her to our party today if I could. She might

even be on par with Sir Juleburg.”

“Juleburg—as in ‘the Unstoppable,’ first seat of the Shiga Eight?!”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, I have full faith in your judgment, Rin.”

“Well, in that case, let me add that Nana—the one with the shield—is as sturdy as the Saga Empire imperial guards or Sir Reilus from the Shiga Eight. Your little ‘honey’ has enough battle magic capability to be a match for me or Mari. And the elf child seemed to be hiding her true capabilities, but I can tell she’s got a gift for both offense and healing.”

I definitely felt proud hearing my companions being praised so frankly.

“I guess they can handle it, then... Hey, Satou?”

Hayato called me over.

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“I see now how strong you lot really are. I’d like to ask you to search a Den of Evil separately. Of course, we’ll send two Saga Empire survey teams with you, as well as a supply squad. Are you up for it?”

“Yes, you can count on us. We can handle searching on our own, though. Mia’s magic is excellent for detection.”

“Please take them along anyway. We know full well how strong you are, but there are a lot of troublemakers who won’t believe it without a third party to confirm your findings,” Princess Mariest said. “You saw that meeting, didn’t you?”

I could hardly argue with that logic.

Once the unconscious warrior woke up, and the black knight was at least able to walk, we decided to leave this Den of Evil.

While the demon lord wasn’t in the Innermost Chamber, the black knight and the rest of his Saga Empire scouting party were stuck continuing to investigate this Den of Evil as punishment for trying to get ahead of everyone else. Naturally, this wouldn’t start until after the next squad arrived.



“All right, Satou, we’re going to search this Den of Evil. I’m counting on you to check out Den Six.”

“Understood.”

The “Den Six” in question had a shady history: Several members of previous search parties had gone missing there without a trace. It was the next largest Den of Evil after the Five Major ones, though it was only about half as large as those.

As it happens, I already knew that the all-important demon lord was in a hidden area of the Den of Evil Hayato’s party was about to search, so I’d already put a marker on it and planned to keep an eye on the hero and friends to make sure they found it.

This “Sandstorm Lord” was only level 62, far lower than any of the demon lords I’d fought before.

It was also lower than Hayato, who was level 69. I was still planning on coming to his aid, though: The demon lord’s Unique Skills were not to be underestimated. We would have to proceed with extra caution, since he was stronger than his or my companions, too.

Like Arisa, the demon lord had his Unique Skills concealed so that I couldn’t even see them in my map information. All I could do was make an educated guess based on the information Hayato told me about the demon lord’s abilities.

“Are you sure about this?” Arisa asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’ll go back them up when they’re about to find him.”

My group boarded a midsize Saga Empire airship and traveled toward Den of Evil Six, along with the scouting and transport squads that had been assigned to us.

“Viscount Pendragon, may I inquire as to our search strategy?”

“For now, we’ll make a base aboveground and stay on standby for a little while.”

“Standby, good sir?”

“You and your colleagues are exhausted from searching nonstop for days on end. I’d like you to get some bed rest for three days or so.”

I couldn’t overlook the fact that the majority of the troops had the “Exhaustion” condition.

If any personnel died of overwork on my watch, I’d never get a good night’s sleep again.

“But Viscount, if I may say, the good Sir Hero did entrust us with the task of investigating under your command.”

“Yes, I know. So for the first three days, we’ll focus on a preliminary investigation of the area within a few hours of the entrance, hunting monsters and Sandstorm Soldiers. Our full-blown investigation will begin once you all are fully recovered.”

The investigation itself would be done as soon as I stepped inside anyway. I figured I’d let my companions enjoy some hunting-slash-training while I went to the elf village to produce more elixirs and new public-facing equipment for the girls.

After a few more questions, the survey team leader—Mr. Kwandoh, the Sin Kaage-style master who Pochi and Tama already adored—finally accepted my plan of action.

“All right, we’ll be back soon.”

“Please do be careful, Sir Viscount.”

We waved at the worried-looking Mr. Kwandoh and headed into Den of Evil Six.

Right away, I used “Search Entire Map.”

...*Yikes.*

“What’s the matter, Master?”

“Danger?”

Seeing my expression, Arisa and Mia looked up at me with concern.

“Looks like this place is a base for the demon lord—worshipping cult Light of Freedom.”

While I was told that it was only about half the size of the Five Major Dens of Evil, there was actually a very large area concealed beyond a few hidden passageways. There were also several secret entrances that weren't shown on my map.

There was also a cultist possessed by a demon beyond one of the hidden passages, as well as some kind of altar. This might actually be a pretty important place.

Maybe the people who went missing here stumbled on one of the hidden passages, or the cultists.

“Should we go take them down?”

“I think I'd rather wait until we have plenty of backup. We don't know what kind of demon is possessing the cultist, and there are too many possible escape routes.”

There were way too many members here for a solo surprise attack to be a very practical plan, either. It'd all be for nothing if the cult leaders got away while I was dealing with the lesser cultists, whose numbers were near a thousand.

For now, I decided to put markers on the strongest and highest-ranking cultists and leave it at that.

“Let's stick with the plan. Go ahead and hunt some of the Sandstorm Soldiers and monsters closest to the entrance, please.”

I gave Arisa the map of Den Six, marking the locations of the hidden passages and warning them not to go near.

“Safety first, everyone.”

Once I told them they could put on their golden armor as long as no one else was around, I borrowed Arisa's soul shell garland and teleported to Bolenan Forest with Unit Deployment.

Sadly, I had no time to flirt with my beloved Miss Aaze, the high elf of the

forest. Instead, I went to Trazayuya's research lab, which I was still borrowing, to produce elixirs.

This time, I only had to do the final stages of production, since I'd asked the elf alchemists to take care of the early and middle stages in advance.

Even then, it would take more than a full day, so I'd be traveling back and forth all three days.

During breaks between steps of the elixir creation process, I set about making new public armor for my companions with the help of some of the elf artisans. I kept working through the nights while everyone else was sleeping, since it didn't seem like I'd finish in three days if I only did it in breaks between alchemy sessions.

It was worth the extra work, though. By the end, I had finished several elixirs and some lovely new equipment that might best be called "silver armor."

The silver armor was only about 80 percent as powerful as the golden armor, but I was able to equip Nana's with the Fortress function, and the other girls' with a new disposable defense system I called a "Phalanx."

A key feature was that it didn't look nearly as flashy as the golden armor. The rearguard armor matched the vanguard, instead of being dress-style armor like the gold versions. That was the easiest way to disguise the orichalcum fibers and giant monster fish scales sewn within.

While everyone was changing into their new armor, I asked through the partitioning screen about events while I was gone.

"How'd the survey go?"

"We beat a lot of monsters, but they were so weak that we haven't leveled up."

Aside from the Sandstorm Soldiers, they encountered other monsters like giant scorpions, poisonous snakes, giant worms and scarabs, mummies, and more.

"We actually found quite a lot of treasure, though."

"And thieves."

“Thieves...?”

“Yeah, my Space Magic detection picked up on thieves coming back from outside. We knocked them out and handed them over to the soldiers.”

Evidently, they had a hideout in this Den of Evil.

I wasn't sure if the thieves were connected to the Light of Freedom or not. Hopefully, they wouldn't leak word of our plan to take down the cultists' base.

“There are plenty of coins and jewels, I report.”

“Instruments. Sheet music.”

“There were spellbooks, too...although they're in a language I can't read. Do you think you can?” Arisa asked.

“Probably,” I told her.

I took the books Arisa handed me over the partition screen and flipped through them.

“It's mostly Parion Province text. They all seem to be beginner spellbooks. There are some spells I don't recognize, and theories that differ from Shiga Kingdom's, so I'll translate it for you sometime soon.”

If we found anything useful, that would be a lucky break.

“Ta-daaa?”

“Shiiiiing, sir!”

The group emerged from behind the partition, fully changed into their new armor.

They all looked great.

“These are rather stylish. And it's so light, I can't even tell I'm wearing metal armor.”

“Cuuuute?”

“Very adorable, sir!”

“New favorite.”

“Yes, Mia. I wish to register it in my bookmarks, I declare.”

Presumably, Nana's odd phrasing meant that she liked the new armor, too.

"Am I really fit to wear such elegant armor?"

"You look wonderful, Liza."

For Liza and Nana, I went for coolness over cuteness, emphasizing their more mature figures. Miss Ringrande's armor was part of my inspiration. My armor matched theirs, too, though the breastplate area was more standard.

"You look very cool, too, Master. You ought to wear armor more often."

"Thank you. I'll be sure to wear it when we fight strong enemies."

Light as it was, it still felt like an impediment if I was moving at high speeds. The circuits I used from the floating shield design made it feel lighter but didn't actually change its mass or inertia.

"Master, the barrier of this new Fortress is smaller, I report."

"It's folded up when you first deploy it," I explained to Nana. "You can expand it in all four directions, although you can't move the point of origin."

It was worth noting that it couldn't be folded back up once it was expanded.

"It doesn't have as much output as the golden armor Fortress, either. I'd keep it folded up when you need to block especially strong attacks—it's twenty percent stronger when it's folded up, and thirty percent weaker when it's expanded."

"Yes, Master. I understand how to use the expansion switch. I will now commence practicing with open mode and closed mode."

I created a few golems to aid Nana in her experiments.

"I'll teach the rest of you how to use the new equipment. The Phalanx is an expendable emergency defense barrier."

This invention came from cutting down on Fortress's functionality in exchange for increased deployment speeds.

"When you activate it, it expands like this. Make sure there aren't any allies in range when you activate it—it's a little wide on the left and right."

I activated it as a demonstration.

“Wow, that was fast.”

“I was particular about the activation speed, since it’s for emergencies. But be careful, because the trade-off is that it only lasts for a few seconds.”

As I explained this to Arisa, I stepped away from the Phalanx. Since it was created using theories from “Dimensional Pile” and “Deracinator,” it stayed in place where it was activated.

“It stays like this. Be careful if you need to move around.”

Since it ate a lot of energy from Holytree Stone Furnace when activated, I warned Lulu that she wouldn’t be able to use it right after firing the Acceleration Gun.

“It can only be used twice in a row. If you use it a third time, the circuits will fry, which means your armor’s Assist functions will stop working, too. Try to think of that as a last resort.”

Everyone nodded seriously.

Of course, if I was with them in a dangerous situation, I could always just move everyone to safety with Unit Deployment. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Next, I gave everyone their new weapons for public use. I basically turned the equipment they used in secret into Magic Swords. Although Liza would use the Magic Cricket Spear as usual, I gave her a spear I made with a claw the lesser Evil Dragon family gave me in the labyrinth’s Lower Stratum, processed with the Bonecraft spell to be straight and sharp.

I figured it might be useful for her, since it had higher piercing ability than an ordinary Magic Spear, even if it couldn’t pierce anything like a true dragon spear.

I gave Lulu some new throwaway weapons, like a Magic Gun and Acceleration Gun. This Acceleration Gun could only produce three acceleration magic circles, not over a hundred like the one she used in private. The Magic Gun was still as powerful as a small warship cannon, so it should still be useful enough.

That being said, they both came out nearly as cumbersome as a portable

cannon from the Warring States era—hopefully they weren't too hard to use.

"I don't think this has the same reach as my usual weapon, sir."

"Don't worry, be happy?"

"Pochi, you mustn't blame any difficulties on your weapon. Practice with it until it becomes an extension of your arm."

"Yes, sir! Pochi will do her best, sir!"

The others followed in the beastfolk girls' suits, testing out their new weapons.

Before long, they had mastered their new equipment. Starting the next day, we began investigating Den of Evil Six, along with the Saga Empire investigation squad.

Since we'd already explored with my map as a guide, the investigation proceeded swiftly, without any major incidents.

Five days after we parted ways with Hayato, when our group was probably about to find the Light of Evil base, I received word from secretary Lilo in the holy city.

The hero's party had found the demon lord.

I guess our purge of the cult hideout was going to have to wait until after we defeated the demon lord.



"Sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Hayato."

Hayato and the hero party were at the base deep in the Den of Evil, along with the black knight's Saga Empire forces, six Temple Knights, and a large number of priests and personnel. We must have been the last to arrive.

"Satou, over here."

Hayato waved me over to join a meeting around a map spread out on a table.

There were five passages to the large room the demon lord was in; the rooms connecting to each of these passages were guarded by large demon-possessed Sandstorm Soldiers.

According to my map information, each of these possessed monsters was over level 50.

That was on par with a labyrinth areamaster—a formidable enemy by most standards.

“We’ll attack all five of these spots at once. An elite team of chosen members will charge the biggest passage head-on, while the other four will need to be kept under control so the demon lord doesn’t escape.”

Hayato traced lines on the map while he explained the strategy.

“I absolutely insist on joining the elite team!”

“His Grace has ordered that we participate in defeating the demon lord. As such, we Temple Knights wish to join the elite team as well.”

The black knight and the Temple Knights’ captain focused fiery gazes on Hayato.

“Ryukken, you’ll be in charge of the third passage, in back. Rudoruu and Kwandoh will take the fourth. Captain Mohkiris, I’d like you to take the second passage.”

As soon as Hayato spoke, bellows of rage filled the base camp.

Clearly, everyone wanted a piece of the glory of defeating a demon lord.

Speaking as someone who’s fought two demon lords before, I have to say that sounded suicidal to me, even if this one probably wasn’t quite as strong, based on his level.

“All right. Ryukken and Captain Mohkiris, you can come with us, on the condition that each of your units takes charge of the passages I mentioned before.”

“Mezzalt must come, too! He has the Holy Sword Blutgang!”

“Then I wish to take my subordinate Rudoruu!”

When the pair kept vying for more glory for their factions, Hayato snapped.

“I’m not compromising any further on this. If you don’t like it, you can defeat the enemies in each of your packages and break through to join the demon lord

battle.”

I couldn’t blame him for being angry. It was ridiculous to quibble over these things when a fierce battle with a demon lord was right around the corner.

“Rudoruu will take charge for Ryukken. Captain Mohkiris, you can assign your own substitute.”

The black knight and Temple Knights’ captain, evidently sensing from Hayato’s menacing expression that it was time to back down, reluctantly agreed to the strategy.

“Satou, can I ask you to take the fifth passage? It’ll be tough.”

“Yes, of course.”

I would’ve liked to join the hero’s party to back him up, but I couldn’t bring myself to hassle him with more personal requests.

Princess Mariest handed out bell-like magic tools to the commanding officers of each squad.

She explained that they would tell us when it was time to start the operation or retreat.

Once we carried out a quick test to make sure the bells were functioning, each of the squads began to move toward their assigned destinations.

The squad that was in Den of Evil Six with us was going to join us for this operation as well, aside from their leader Kwandoh, who was assigned to a different squad.

“Master, I’ve connected us with Tactical Talk. Are we really just going to stick with containment?”

“No, I want you to prevent the demon lord from escaping with your Space Magic, Arisa. We’ll make quick work of the large Sandstorm Soldier and move forward.”

“What about the smaller Sandstorm Soldiers? We’re not supposed to use any big spells until Hayato’s group gets to the demon lord, right?”

Any major magic that might alert the demon lord to our presence was strictly

forbidden during the strategy meeting so that he wouldn't run away again.

I'm guessing that Hayato also agreed to let the black knight and Temple Knights' captain join him because they might act out on their own otherwise.

"The scouting party and I will take care of those. You guys can just focus on defeating the big one."

While there were around fifty smaller ones in total, I was willing to bet we could beat them all in a matter of minutes.

Of course, it would only take seconds with my Remote Arrow, but in my hands, even that spell was too powerful and loud.

Tama and I stealthily took out the Sandstorm Soldiers patrolling the passageways, and soon we managed to reach the fifth passage without causing any major fuss.

Rudoruu's squad, though a little slower, would probably be ready in less than an hour.

We took a short break, and I handed out some hot soup and stuffed bread to everyone.

"Mmm, that's good."

"Your cooking really is the best, Lulu."

"Hey, she's a Shiga Kingdom honorary knight. You should call her 'Miss' or 'Lady.'"

"Just Lulu is fine," Lulu reassured the friendly scouting party members with a smile.

None of them ever made any rude comments about Lulu's appearance. It probably helped that they'd all seen her take out a Sandstorm Soldier with self-defense techniques on our first day together.

"Viscount Pendragon, won't the monsters smell all this food?"

"Don't worry. We have a wind spirit suppressing the smell for us."

The small sylph Mia had summoned chimed in with a whooshing sound, striking a confident pose.

Just as we finished our short break and prepared our equipment, the bell rang.

This pattern meant “all squads are in position, be prepared.”

We all waited with bated breath for the next signal.

As the silence deepened until every breath or rustle of clothing felt deafening, finally, the bell rang a second time.

“It’s time to begin the operation. Nana, move to the forefront. Scouting party, please protect the rear guard from smaller Sandstorm Soldiers.”

I reiterated our strategy as I moved between the front and rear guard.

My main weapon for the day was a crimson Magic Bow. My quiver was loaded with blacksteel arrows, which I got from the Saga Empire supply squad. I figured I’d use these to slaughter some Sandstorm Soldiers.

“Sandstorm Soldiers! Sand to sand, and monsters to corpses, I declare!”

Nana shouted an unusual twist on “ashes to ashes.”

The “Taunt” skill she used along with her shout lured the Sandstorm Soldiers to rush toward her immediately.

“Let’s remove the weak ones from our path first.”

“Roger, sir.”

“Aye-aye, siiir.”

The beastfolk girls kicked and sliced their way through droves of small Sandstorm Soldiers, clearing the way toward the large demon-possessed Sandstorm Soldier.

When a demi-ogre-esque midsize Sandstorm Soldier tried to block their path, Lulu and I shot out its core.

Arisa used Deracinator to block off a lizard-like Sandstorm Soldier before it could try to trample Nana.

“Bweh-heh-heh, what delicious-looking little children, indeed.”

The large Sandstorm Soldier shrieked in a creepy voice. Like the demonic one

we fought before, this, too, looked like a combination between a scorpion and a human.

“Careful! One little spark can start a fire!”

Shouting a corny line, Arisa used Blast Shot to burn the Sandstorm Soldier’s face.

The large monster blocked the attack with its arm, which kept it from taking much damage—but that attack was just a distraction anyway.

“Look out below, I declare.”

Nana struck the large Sandstorm Soldier square in the chest with a “Shield Bash,” then followed up with her special attack “Blast Armor” while it was off-balance, destroying its defenses.



“Pochi doesn’t taste good, sir!”

“Tama’s not yummyyy?”

As the large Sandstorm Soldier lashed out desperately with its claws from its precariously bent-backward position, Pochi and Tama dodged the attacks easily, darting around and slashing the scorpion-like beast’s thin legs.

The Sandstorm Soldier’s segmented tail whipped around to try to skewer Tama and Pochi, closing in on their blind spot.

“Yeah riiight?”

Tama dodged acrobatically in midair, then used that momentum to slice up the demonic monster’s Achilles tendon.

Even as the creature lost its balance, the tip of its tail still plunged toward Pochi.

“Fallanks—plus ‘Vanquish Slicer,’ sir!”

Pochi used her new Phalanx equipment to block the tail. Then, using “Blink,” she closed in and unleashed a special attack on another of the creature’s legs.

Meanwhile, Liza used “Skywalking” to charge the Sandstorm Soldier head-on, destroying the core in its chest with a speedy “Helix Spear Attack.”

As the monster crumbled like sand, the demon that had been possessing it slithered out in shadow form.

“Aim...and fire!”

Lulu hit the demon dead-on with a thunder shot from her Gold Thunder Fox Gun.

Even then, the demon lord kept trying to crawl away, but a second and third shot struck him and turned him into black dust.

We ran on ahead toward where Hayato and the others were fighting, leaving Mia’s sylphs and the scouting party to handle the remaining small Sandstorm Soldiers.



STWAAAAYBYAAAAHK!

I climbed the cliff at the end of the passage to peer into the cavern and saw the demon lord howling.

He looked very similar to the scorpion-like large Sandstorm Soldier we'd just defeated.

The hero's party seemed to be unable to get into the cavern, their path blocked by a huge number of Sandstorm Soldiers, far more than were there before.

A glittering light flashed near the demon lord.

GOOOOORHWAAAAAY!

DANGER.

My "Sense Danger" skill told me to scoop up Tama and Pochi and hop down from the cliff.

A moment later, there was a sequence of terrible explosive noises behind us, and a cloud of sand that smelled like ozone blew into the passage.

"Mia!"

Covering my mouth, I called out to Mia, and whooshing sounds surrounded us as the sand was swept back out.

Mia's sylphs had changed the airflow for us.

Checking my map, I saw that most of the countless new Sandstorm Soldiers had been wiped out, and Hayato and his party were running toward the demon lord.

That attack was apparently from Princess Mariest and Miss Ringrande.

I climbed back up the cliff.

The demon lord is still going strong.

Giant plates of shimmering purple light—Reflective Scales—were floating around him.

That must be how he blocked that magic attack.

STWAAAAYYBHAAAAAAHK!

Overlapping magic circles formed beneath his feet.

“Rin! Don’t let him get away!”

“...■ **Break Magic Mahou Hakai!**”

Miss Ringrande ran past Hayato and waved a Magic Invocation Staff, destroying the magic circles with a sound like shattering glass.

“Arisa, can you block the demon lord’s teleportation from here?”

“But of course! I’ll show you what the great Space Magician Arisa is really made of!”

I brought Arisa up onto the cliff to have her use magic.

In order to expand her range of effects, I also gave her permission to use her secret equipment, the Clearbough Staff.

“I’ve put up a barrier. Now we just need Hayato and friends to defeat the demon lord.”

“Thanks, Arisa. Let’s hunt the demon lord’s lackeys from up here.”

I called Mia and Lulu up to join us, and we started shooting down the large Sandstorm Soldiers that tried to block the hero party’s path.

“Très bieeen?”

“Rusus and Fifi are very very strong, sir!”

While we used long-range weapons and items to hunt the Sandstorm Soldiers, the ever-curious Tama and Pochi climbed up to watch.

Liza and Nana were behind them as well.

“The hero of Saga Empire is truly something to behold. His fighting is a cut above the others’, and it would be very difficult to get even one attack past those defenses.”

“Yes, Liza. Blocking his attacks would be a near insurmountable task, I assess.”

Um, hello?

Why are you talking like you’re going to fight the hero?

“Master, look...!” Lulu exclaimed.

I turned my attention back to the battle in time to see the hero and company engaging the demon lord in close combat.

Those metallic purple scales of light were blocking Rusus’s and Fifi’s attacks easily; even the hero’s Holy Sword Arondight, enhanced with its scripture, and Hayato’s Unique Skill Unstoppable Strike were struggling to break through.

The latter could pierce several layers of the Reflective Scales at once, yet he still didn’t seem to be able to reach the demon lord.

Mariest’s and Ringrande’s individual attack spells were being repelled, too.

Weeyari the archer aimed at a gap between the scales, only for her arrow to be blocked by a sandstorm-like barrier around the demon lord.

“Does that demon lord specialize in defense, perhaps?”

“No, I think that’s both his offense and his defense.”

The black knight and the Temple Knights’ captain charged in and were promptly attacked by a flurry of the Reflective Scales, slicing through their shields and parts of their armor.

“They’re zooming around, sir.”

“Looks hard to dooodge?”

“I wonder if Phalanx could hold up to that?”

“It’d probably be able to withstand one or two hits, anyway.”

Judging by the way the Temple Knights’ captain’s armor was torn up, it probably wouldn’t last much longer than that.

...*Urk.*

Rusus got too close in an attempt to back the pair up and got her leg sliced off by the Reflective Scales. When Fifi tried to come to her rescue, her armor got majorly ripped up, too.

“Looks ouchiiie.”

“Time for the emergency rescue squad, sir!”

“Not so fast, you two. They have a powerful priestess on their side.”

Liza stopped Pochi and Tama as they put on their paramedic armbands and moved to dash onto the battlefield.

Fifi helped Rusus retreat from the battlefield.

“I want to help, but with the amount of power it would take to break through those scales, I’m afraid I’d hurt our allies, too...”

“Well, there are some openings.”

I decided to help out a little until Rusus and Fifi recovered so that the attacks wouldn’t focus too much on Hayato.

Drawing my Magic Bow, I shot at the demon lord.

“Bull’s-eye.”

“Another classic Master moment! Of course you would manage a pinpoint shot like that.”

Mia looked up at me excitedly, while Arisa made fun of me a little.

“It should at least annoy the demon lord, even if it’s not doing much damage.”

I fired a few more times until I saw Loleiya’s Holy Magic activate.

Rusus and Fifi returned to the battlefield, their missing leg and major injuries respectively healed.

“Amazing, Priestess.”

“That’s as potent as an advanced healing potion.”

I saw Loleiya start her next chant right away.

Since Holy Magic chants took a long time, she was probably preparing spells in advance, based on what she thought she’d need.

“Master, backup Sandstorm Soldiers are arriving from another passage, I report.”

“All right, let’s hunt them down and let the scouting party keep our passage’s entrance protected.”

The rest of my group cheered enthusiastically and ran into the fray.

While we headed toward the new Sandstorm Soldier reinforcements, a group of Temple Knights went dashing past us. They obviously wanted to get a piece of the demon lord action instead of supporting the hero by taking out Sandstorm Soldiers as instructed.

“Honestly. They could at least take down the monsters they were assigned first, instead of dropping their work on someone else.”

“Agreed.”

Arisa and Mia scowled at the knights.

We watched as they charged at the demon lord, shouting self-introductions. The Temple Knights’ captain, who’d been trying to keep the black knight in check and vice versa, joined his men and ran toward the demon lord as well.

“More importantly, if we don’t clear these Sandstorm Soldiers out fast, they’ll start going after Hayato and the others.”

“Good point.”

Just as we turned our attention back to our own battle, there was a guttural scream behind us.

...Geh.

The Temple Knights’ captain had been sliced in half.

Four of the other Temple Knights were mortally wounded as well. Only the one with the Holy Sword Blutgang stood unharmed.

The black knight, who’d been trying to take advantage of the moment and close in on the demon lord himself, hastily scurried back.

“I’m going to go bail them out.”

With that, I ran toward the knights.

NWOOOMWAAOOOORH!

Sneering down at the halved body of the Temple Knights’ captain, the demon lord glowed with dark violet light and howled at the ceiling.

“‘Shining Helix Slash’!”

Hayato’s Holy Sword Arondight closed in on the demon lord’s undefended body, glowing with blue light.

Just before it touched the demon lord’s body, the demon lord vanished like a mirage.

“How in the world?!”

“I guess he broke through your Teleportation barrier...?”

“No, he didn’t. That wasn’t Teleportation Magic. He disappeared with some other technique.”

“Some other technique...a Unique Skill?”

“Yeah, probably. It might be something like your Unique Skill, Master.”

I tested it out by using Unit Deployment to move a short distance to one side and was able to teleport without even the slightest sense of resistance. Arisa’s guess was probably right on the money.

“Well, now we’re back to square one. We’ll have to track the demon lord down all over again.”

“First, we should really find a way to stop him from—”

As I spoke, I checked my marker list for the demon lord’s location.

...Seriously?

“What’s wrong?”

“I know where the demon lord is. It’s the hidden area of Den Six.”

“Hidden area? You mean the Light of Freedom hideout?”

I nodded at Arisa.

If the demon lord could only flee to that hideout, it would certainly make things a lot easier.

The Demon Lord's Counterattack

Satou here. Everyone has things that are precious to them. When I was small, I had a little box decorated with colorful paper that I used to collect acorns, cicada shells, and that sort of thing in. Even if it looked like trash to an adult, at the time, they were real treasures to me.

“Under the clouds.”

“I can see the holy city, I report.”

Mia and Nana reported back from the observation window.

After the demon lord escaped, we were on our way back to the holy city to report the death of the Temple Knights' captain.

The dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* emerged from the thin clouds and began to descend. There was a docking area at the edge of the holy city.

“I didn't know Parion Province had their own airships.”

“They look pretty different from the ones from Shiga Kingdom or Saga Empire, right?”

“Tee-hee. They're adorable, like *dogu* figurines.”

Arisa joined in on my and Hayato's conversation with a ladylike affect.

The hulls, which were relics of the Flue Empire era, did indeed bear a resemblance to Jomon-era clay figurines and pottery, with sails on masts that stuck out like wings. There were four of them in total moored at the airship dock; laborers were in the midst of loading cargo onto one of the midsize ones, which had two bodies like a twin-fuselage airplane.

Following the signals from a flag-waving official, the *Jules Verne* pulled up to the dock, where four Temple Knights carried their captain's body out through the lower hatch.

The black knight and the others who stayed behind would make their way back to the surface on foot, then board their own airships back to the holy capital.

Since they'd already been contacted in advance, a line of Temple Knights and priests was waiting to receive the body.

A gong-like sound rang out. It must have been the funeral bells of the city.

"Sir Hayato, welcome back."

When Secretary Lilo arrived, we followed Hayato out of the ship.

Once everyone had disembarked, Weeyari did something with the Divine Talisman. The *Jules Verne* let out a high-pitched sound and produced ripples in the air like it was diving underwater, then disappeared into another dimension.

It must have been convenient not having to leave anyone to guard the ship.

"Lilo, has anything changed while we were gone?"

"...No, nothing."

The secretary paused for just a moment before answering.

"Gotcha." Hayato held Lilo's gaze for a moment, then whispered in her ear as he passed. "Just let me know if it's too much to handle alone."

Lilo's face turned beet red. Obviously, she was infatuated with Hayato.

"...Let's go back to the manor and plan our next steps against the demon lord."

"Yes, Sir Hayato."

Lilo hurried after the hero, clutching paperwork to her chest.

The rest of us followed them to a terminal at the other end of the dock.

"...Geh. Not that snarky creep again."

"Damn, he came all the way to the dock just to snark at us? Get a life."

A cardinal was waiting at the terminal, clad in expensive-looking accessories and flanked by high-ranking priests.

"Be polite, you two. He's still a cardinal of Parion Province. It would reflect

poorly on Hayato if you're too rude to him."

Princess Mariest put Rusus and Fifi in check, then hurried over to help Hayato deal with the cardinal, who really was already snarking at him.

"The demon lord got away *again*? And you come strolling back here after we gave you all of those reinforcements and supplies, with only the death of our strongest knight, Captain Mohkiris, to show for your efforts...? You heroes certainly have some nerve, I must say."

In fact, this was more like verbal abuse than just snark.

"Hmph, not our fault the guy tried to attack the demon lord from behind and got cut down in one go."

"We tried to warn him that those scales were bad news."

"That's enough, you two."

Mariest shot a sharp look at Rusus and Fifi, who reluctantly stopped grumbling.

"Agreed. It's not right to speak ill of the dead, even if it is the truth."

"The captain was just unlucky. All the other Temple Knights survived."

Weeyari and Miss Ringrande made somewhat snide-sounding attempts to smooth things over. They were probably also annoyed with the cardinal for insulting Hayato.

"Hmph. You ought to discipline your little servants better."

The cardinal glared dourly at Hayato.

"I offer my sincere condolences for the loss of Captain Mohkiris, truly," Hayato told him seriously. "But lives are always on the line in a battle against a demon lord. Anyone who joins the fight has to be prepared to pay the ultimate price."

"And yet not a single one of your party or those little tagalongs died?"

Are we supposed to be the "tagalongs"?

I'll just ignore that comment since I'm well aware that we don't look very impressive.

“We’re only safe because of Loleiya’s exceptional Holy Magic. If she’d been any slower to heal us, our lives would’ve been in danger, too. Surely you know that much already, Cardinal?”

After all, Hayato himself was severely wounded by that curse in the previous demon lord battle, as the cardinal must have been aware.

“Hmph. I’d much prefer that you hurry up and get rid of that demon lord already, instead of bragging about your own survival.”

Since he was obviously fighting a losing battle, the cardinal spat out one last insult and left.

“We can’t help it if the demon lord runs away ’cause he’s scared of Hayato.”

“Yeah, no kiddin’. It’s gonna be tough to finish him off if he keeps running away when he’s in trouble.”

In trouble?

I suppose he did teleport away right before Hayato’s special attack was about to hit, but thinking back, it didn’t seem like the demon lord was particularly trying to avoid that or anything.

If anything, the demon lord had the upper hand, and he fended off the backup from the Temple Knights easily. Why did he decide to flee at that moment?

“Still, I was shocked that the magic circles at his feet weren’t actually for running away.”

“Did he use Space Magic without a chant, perhaps?”

Hearing this exchange, Arisa contacted me via the Space Magic spell Telephone.

“Master, can I tell them that the demon lord didn’t use Space Magic to run away?”

“Sure. Is there any way you can do that without telling them about your own Space Magic, though?”

“Don’t worry, I have an idea.”

Since she seemed confident, I went ahead and gave her permission.

“Lady Mariest, might I interject for a moment?”

“What is it?”

“The demon lord didn’t flee by way of Space Magic.”

“And how d’you know that?”

“I didn’t sense the disturbance in space that happens when someone teleports with Space Magic.”

“Disturbance? You can pick up on stuff like that, little miss ‘honey’?”

Rusus and Fifi didn’t look convinced.

“No, not me. My elder sister Lulu can see even the slightest shifts in the air.”

“I see. That doesn’t surprise me.” Weeyari nodded, looking satisfied.

“Aah, the one who was hitting targets with the thunder shots. But if it’s not Space Magic, what could it be?”

“I believe it might be a Unique Skill of the demon lord’s.”

“That would explain why Break Magic can’t stop him.”

“We’ll have to come up with a whole new strategy, then.”

“We’ll have to find a way to predict when he’s about to flee, or else figure out where he’s fleeing to and cut him off. Either way, we’ll probably need help from Parion Province and Saga Empire.” After gathering opinions from his party, Hayato turned to Arisa. “Thanks, honey.”

“Predict it, huh?” Seina the scout muttered. “I wonder why that demon lord even runs away in the first place...”

“Mew?”

“You can’t tell, sir?”

Tama and Pochi tilted their heads, looking up at Seina in confusion.

“What, you mean you kiddos *can* tell?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Demon Lord hates fightiing?”

Tama and Pochi nodded.

“Whaaat? That can’t be right.”

“Yeah, he sure looked happy about cuttin’ the captain in half to me.”

“I heard he was attacking villages with Sandstorm Soldiers before we showed up, ya know?”

Seina, Rusus, and Fifi immediately objected.

“But Mr. Demon Lord was really scared, sir?”

“What makes you think that?” Hayato asked.

“He said stuff like ‘go away’ and ‘stay back’?”

“And when he killed Mr. Captain, he screamed ‘no more’ and ran away, sir.”

On hearing Tama’s and Pochi’s answers, the hero party all looked at each other.

“Master, did you hear any of that?”

“No, I wasn’t really listening. I assumed it was just plain howling.”

Next time we encountered it, I’d have to pay more attention.

Maybe we could even resolve things with the demon lord peacefully instead of through fighting.



A moment later, Tama and Pochi suddenly looked up at the sky.

“Meew?”

“I hear a bell far away, sir.”

Listening more closely, I could just barely make out something that sounded like an alarm bell.

“Master, look!” Lulu cried. “The cathedral’s in danger!”

I looked up in time to see the top of the great cathedral collapsing, and a cloud of black smoke rising.

“It’s the demon lord!”

Activating his Flying Shoes, Hayato raced across the sky toward the cathedral.

Checking my map, I saw the demon lord’s marker at the cathedral.

I was about to run after him without thinking when Ringrande grabbed my sleeve.

“Wait! You’ll never catch up with him on foot.”

Miss Ringrande jerked her chin at Weeyari the archer, who raised the Divine Talisman.

There was a ripple in the air like something breaking the surface of water, and the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* shimmered into view.

As soon as the upper deck appeared, Rusus and Fifi jumped on board, with Miss Ringrande close behind.

Automatically following suit, I jumped up, too, and Nana and the beastfolk girls followed.

Everyone else hurried on board through the hatch.

As the *Jules Verne* sped up so quickly that it threatened to throw us off, I grabbed on to the handrail and used Magic Hand to support the rest of my group.

Zooming through the sky, we soon caught up with Hayato.

“Hayato!” Ringrande called out to the hero, and we quickly closed in behind him.

Hayato reached out, and Ringrande caught his arm, nearly getting dragged off by inertia before the rest of us caught her and pulled them both onto the deck.

The *Jules Verne* didn’t slow down, speeding straight toward the cathedral.

I tried to assess the situation by getting a bird’s-eye view of the area around the demon lord with the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance.

In a room that was littered with corpses, the demon lord was facing off with Temple Knights that were protecting the pontiff.

The demon lord reached toward the pontiff.

A blue barrier that was probably produced by the City Core was destroyed by an onslaught of attacks from three Reflective Scales, and the demon lord mowed down a Temple Knight that moved forward to stop him.

I was nearly thrown from the deck by an abrupt stop. The beastfolk girls caught me and helped me regain my balance.

Directly before us was a huge hole in the ceiling of the cathedral.

Hayato jumped in, and I followed right behind.

We reached Pontiff Zarzaris's side in the Heavenly Room, just in the nick of time.

If only we'd gotten here a little sooner, I could have spent more time enjoying the view of the sky through the glass dome, or the mythology that was depicted on it in stained glass.

GWIIIIIBBAAAAAAAH!

The demon lord howled.

Shadowy tentacles wrapped around his arm, stopping him from grabbing the pontiff.

Huh...that looks like the Shadow Magic spell Shadow Bind.

"Begone, demon lord!"

"This is the holy dwelling of those blessed by Goddess Parion! There is no place here for the likes of you!"

The sage and the Holy Sword-wielding Temple Knight Mezzalt rushed into the room.

Those tentacles must have been the sage's magic.

"Well, this saves us the trouble of hunting you down."

Hayato stepped in front of the pontiff to protect him, his Holy Shield at the ready and glowing with blue light.

He must have used his Unique Skill Immovable Shield.

Rusus and Fifi quickly moved in behind the demon lord, cutting off his escape path.

“The demon lord is level sixty-two, though I cannot see his skills. Temple Knights, protect the pontiff and let Sir Hero handle the demon lord!”

The sage brought the pontiff behind him as he gave orders to the Temple Knights around him.

“I do not need you to tell me that.”

Instead of arguing like I’d come to expect at this point, the Temple Knight Mezzalt readily moved to protect the pontiff.

With the sage and knights surrounding him, the pontiff began chanting a Holy Magic spell I’d never heard before. Judging by the swell of magic power around him, it must have been an advanced spell or even a forbidden one.

“Sir Hayato, I’ve got your back.”

I drew my fairy sword and stood close behind the hero’s shoulder. Nana and the beastfolk girls took up battle-ready positions around me, too. I’d already warned them to stick to keeping the enemy in check, not going on the offensive outright.

“Satou, be careful. This is a demon lord we’re dealing with.”

“I know my place, don’t worry. We’ll focus on supporting you.”

Hayato was in the leading role today.

DWOOOOORRRRLLLLH!

The demon lord howled again, as if trying to intimidate the hero.

A dark purple light enveloped the demon lord’s body, and more Reflective Scales appeared, slicing through the floor and furniture.

Rusus and Fifi, who’d been trying to sneak in an attack from behind, were forced to back off some distance.

Although it sort of seemed like the demon lord had done this to fend the two off, to me it was more like a child throwing a tantrum.

“He’s talking about a doll, sir.”

Pochi translated the demon lord's words.

GIBBAAAAAAAAAHK!

Twisting around, the demon lord lashed out with his tail to try to take us all out at once.

“Fortr—”

Nana's Fortress wasn't going to make it in time to defend against the demon lord's unexpectedly quick attack from such a short distance.

I used “Warp” to dodge to one side, then activated “Magic Power Armor” only around my legs and feet to kick the painful-looking segmented tail away.

The tail grazed over us close enough to flutter my hair, even slicing off the decorative tip of a helmet on one particularly tall temple soldier.

The pontiff's advanced magic activated. It turned out to be a support spell that enhanced all of our strength and speed.

“What did the demon lord say just now?” I asked Tama and Pochi, who had flattened themselves against the floor.

“‘Gimme snack,’ I thiiink?”

“No, sir. He said, ‘Give it back,’ sir!”

So if you combine the two...“give back the doll”?

“Doll? ...It can't be!”

Looking as if he'd just realized something, the sage whirled to look at the pontiff.

The demon lord's nail clashed against Hayato's Holy Shield and the folded-up Fortress on Nana's large shield.

Liza parried the tip of his tail as it swung back toward us; a Reflective Scale tried to cut her down, but Pochi and Tama blocked it with Phalanx. Arisa sneakily supported the pair with the Space Magic spell Deracinator.

As the Reflective Scales bounced off those defenses, I kicked them away head-on.

Since they didn't break from my kick, they must have been at least as strong as Nana's Fortress.

"Grrr?"

"A for-dimmable foe, sir."

Even as the hero's party and the beastfolk girls pummeled the demon lord with attacks, his claws, tail, and most of all those Reflective Scales—which really were offense and defense rolled into one—kept them from dealing any serious damage.

That was probably inevitable: It was an off-the-cuff battle without any time to prepare or cast buffs, and they had to protect the pontiff at the same time.

Lulu and Mia were attacking from the back, along with Princess Mariest and Miss Ringrande, although they, too, were struggling to break through the automatic defenses of the Reflective Scales.

"Your Grace! Did you receive a doll from someone recently, by any chance? A doll woven out of grass?"

"Ah, yes, it's on that shelf there."

The sage and the pontiff were discussing something behind me that I didn't quite catch, too focused on the demon lord.

"■■■■..."

Suddenly, the sage abandoned protecting the pontiff and started sprinting toward a cabinet on the other side of the room. I heard a faint chant as he went.

Not bothering to open it, the sage simply smashed the glass door with his fist, pulling out a doll-like object and shouting at the demon lord.

DWOOOOOOOORLLLLLLL!

The demon lord abandoned his dogged efforts at reaching the pontiff and charged toward the sage instead.

"If this is what you want, catch!"

DWOOOOOOOORLLLLLLL!

As the doll flew through the air, the demon lord leaped to grab it.

“...Shadow Jail!”

The sage activated the Shadow Magic spell he’d store.

Jet-black tentacles shot out of the demon lord’s own shadow, writhing around him and attempting to drag him down to the floor.

ISBWAAAAAAHK!

The demon lord clutched the doll to his chest almost protectively.

He made no further attempt to resist as he was dragged deeper into the shadow—then vanished.

“Did you capture him?!” Hayato cried.

“No, he got away.” The sage shook his head. “I can scarcely believe it, but he escaped just a moment before I had him completely. I suppose I should have expected no less of a demon lord...”

I opened my map and checked the demon lord’s location.

Perfect.

He was in Den of Evil Six, same as the last time he fled.

While this was only two times, it was probably still safe to assume that the demon lord could only escape to Den Six when he teleported away. I’d have to tell Hayato later so we could come up with a strategy.

“Meeew, the shadooow?”

I closed my map and looked up to see Tama feeling around on the floor where the shadow and the demon lord had vanished.

She must have just been surprised to see a shadow moving on its own.

“Your Grace! Is the pontiff safe?!”

A group of priests came tumbling into the room.

“I am quite all right. Sorry to worry you.”

The pontiff greeted the priests calmly and thanked everyone who had protected him, with their own lives on the line.

“Your Grace, from whom did you receive that doll?”

“Sir Sage! His Grace is tired. At least wait until tomorrow to ask him questions!”

A priest who seemed to serve as a sort of chamberlain swiftly rejected the sage’s question.

“Just a moment.” The pontiff turned around, waving the chamberlain off. “Is this question of great importance, Sorijeyro?”

“I believe so. Someone may have been trying to use the demon lord to eliminate you.”

“I received that doll from a young boy after today’s healing ceremony. He certainly didn’t seem like he was hiding any ill intent.”

“Thank you, O wise pontiff. No doubt the boy was only being manipulated by someone behind the scenes.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound safe. Perhaps a case worker would be able to identify the boy. Sorijeyro, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could you make sure the boy isn’t being put in danger by meddling adults?”

“Anything you wish, Your Grace.”

The sage bowed deeply to the pontiff.

Once the pontiff had left the room, the sage murmured a quiet chant and sank into a shadow, vanishing from sight. He must have used the Shadow Magic spell Shadow Portal.

No doubt he was on his way to ensure the safety of the boy.

An image of Raito flashed through my mind, though it was highly unlikely that he was the boy in question.

“Mew!”

This time, Tama patted the shadow the sage had vanished into.

Something about all this Shadow Magic seemed to have struck a chord with her.

She pressed her face against the floor, mumbling things like “I can’t go iin?”

and furrowing her brows so much that they practically touched. Considering how naturally talented she was, I wouldn't be surprised if Tama figured out a way to sink into shadows with her Ninjutsu sooner or later.

On the way out, Hayato got caught by a high-ranking priest and pulled into some kind of conversation, so the rest of us waited in a corner of the Heavenly Room. I was more than happy to admire the impressive stained glass for as long as it took.

"Mr. Demon Lord was very, very strong, sir."

"Regreeet?"

"Yes, I feel as if I've been reminded anew of my own inexperience."

"Yes, Liza. I see now that I have become too dependent on my armor and equipment, I declare."

The vanguard seemed to have a lot of thoughts after their close encounter with a demon lord.

Fighting on the front lines of such a dangerous battle seemed to have earned them something, too: Their experience gauges were visibly higher, even though they hadn't actually defeated the demon lord.

"My lesser spells were getting canceled like crazy, and even the intermediate ones kept bouncing off his scales. Judging by Miss Mari's attacks, even advanced magic was bouncing off if it was cast solo."

"Forbidden."

"Yeah, I think forbidden magic would be able to destroy the scales. They're so powerful and far-reaching that I'd be worried about friendly fire, though."

I'd already told Mia and Arisa about the forbidden spells and curses I acquired in the forbidden library at the royal castle.

"You haven't tested them out yet anyway, right?"

"Not yet. The chants are so long that I'm not sure I could pull them off perfectly."

"Chant failure, dangerous."

Mia formed an X in front of her mouth with her two index fingers.

“We’ll have to master them before we fight a demon lord.”

“Mmm, training.”

Arisa and Mia nodded at each other.

“What did you think, Lulu?”

“The scales moved so quickly that it would be difficult to aim for the gaps with the Gold Thunder Fox Gun or a Fire Rod rifle. I think I might be able to manage with a laser gun, but even then, the sand barrier beneath would probably block it.”

“Think the Acceleration Gun might work?”

“Yes, if I can only learn to predict the scales’ movement patterns.”

Lulu nodded at Arisa.

Just in case, I gave her permission to use the throwaway Acceleration Gun if we wound up face-to-face with the demon lord.

I ruled out the regular Acceleration Gun in this case because it required the user to stay in place while it was firing, making it difficult to dodge dangerous attacks like the ones from the Reflective Scales.

“Satou, we’re calling it quits for today.”

Hayato came back from his conversation with one of the high-ranking Temple Knights.

“You guys must be worn out from all those battles, too, right? Get a good night’s sleep and recharge your strength.”

That was all well and good, but I had to tell him something important first.

“Sir Hayato, if you could lend me an ear for a moment...”

I told the hero a key piece of information.

“...Are you sure?”

“Yes, I saw it for myself in Den Six.”

I met Hayato’s doubtful gaze earnestly, padding the truth with help from my

“Fabrication” skill.

“Got it. Then we’d better act as fast as we can.”

Thank goodness. He seemed to believe me.

“I’m real glad I asked you to help out.”

Hayato held out his fist, and I returned the gesture, bumping my knuckles against his.

Interlude: Deep in the Darkness

“Demon Lord, it was quite foolish to attack on your own without bringing any minions, indeed.”

While the demon lord crouched at an altar deep in a Den of Evil, a dark green greater demon sat with his legs crossed casually, criticizing without an ounce of respect.

However, the demon lord didn't seem to be listening in the slightest.

DOOOOOOOWWRLLLL!

The demon lord rubbed his cheek against a beat-up doll woven out of grass.

Suddenly, a man emerged from a dark corner that had been empty just moments before.

“Lord Green, how fares the Sandstorm Lord?”

“See for yourself, indeed.”

The green demon skillfully shrugged his four shoulders.

“The doll belonged to his daughter who died. It must be important to him.”

“Died...? Don't you mean she was killed, indeed?”

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAASHURWAKAOOOOOOOO!

The demon lord let out a scream at the word “killed.”

While the greater demon made a show of plugging his ears with his fingers, a serpentine tongue flicked out of his half-smirking mouth. He appeared to be deriving some twisted pleasure from the scene.

“This creature is amusing enough, but he hardly seems fit to take on the hero, indeed.”

The greater demon crossed his arms and tapped his foot.

“The Sandstorm Lord’s job is not to fight the hero.”

“No, indeed? I thought he was going to slaughter humans and spread delicious despair, conflict, and curses for us, indeed.”

“Your personal preferences aside, Lord Green, His Majesty has his own goals.”

“His *Majesty’s* goals, indeed...”

The man made no response to the apparent implication that the goals were really his.

“I suggest you ask the *Holy Woman* to put him into a new vessel, indeed.”

The greater demon stretched out his neck and whispered to the man, putting special emphasis on the words “Holy Woman.”

“If only it were that easy.”

The man didn’t seem to approve of the demon lord much more than the demon did.

“Why not, indeed? If you make him serve the Holy Woman, then you would just need to transfer the ‘master’s Fragment’ into a different vessel, indeed?”

“He cannot be made to serve her. The Sandstorm Lord’s demon lord transformation has progressed too much for a false Geist to enslave him. The best we can do is use the Geist that is already on him and the ‘Charm’ skill to reinforce the demon lord army.”

“‘Reinforce,’ indeed...”

The green demon smirked, as if to tell the man that he was well aware that this “reinforcement” was only a front.

“If you wish to *reinforce* it, why not create another demon lord? Simply find one that is still an egg and take out his Fragment, then put him into a savage criminal to incubate, indeed.”

Thick drool formed in the demon’s mouth; an acidic drop fell and ate through the floor.

“No doubt it would create delicacies the likes of which this world has rarely seen, indeed.”

“Unfortunately, the violet-haired ones are scarce. I searched the neighboring land and only acquired a single one. And that one’s ‘function’ is not suited for battle.”

“Ah yes, that one...just imagine the people’s beloved saint turning into a demon lord before their very eyes. What a rare and delectable scenario, indeed. I can scarcely contain myself just thinking about it, indeed.”

“That is reserved for the very end. We cannot waste it so indiscreetly.”

“A shame, indeed... Very well, then. I shall go forth in search of a new egg, indeed. Please do save the lavish feast for when I return, if you would be so kind, indeed.”

“Lord Green, before you leave, I wish to borrow some underlings.”

“Very well, indeed. I should hate for the demon lord to be destroyed before I return, indeed.”

The greater demon waved an arm, and a string of ominous magic circles appeared around the altar, summoning demons of all shapes and sizes. Though many were lesser, there were a fair number of intermediate demons, too. A few even seemed close to a greater demon in power.

“Lord Green, thank y—”

“This does not seem quite enough, indeed.”

Interrupting the man, the greater demon produced a black core from a separate dimension.

“...Lord Green, wait!”

The demon ignored his panic and tossed the black sphere above the demon lord.

BELHOOOOOVVVD...

Black threads of miasma unspooled from the core and coiled around the demon lord, ripping through his skin and burrowing beneath.

GRAAAAOOOH!

The demon lord howled and thrashed, trying to tear off the threads, but they

slipped through his fingers and delved deeper into his body. Sickening sounds of gurgling and smacking filled the altar room, along with soul-rending screams.

As the demon lord thrashed in agony, the doll he had treasured so much was crushed in his hand, the cloth that bound its shape ripping to pieces.

The demon lord's eyes fixed on the pitiful sight.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAASHURWAKAOOOOOOOOO!

The greater demon looked on delightedly as the demon lord screamed in regret and despair.

Before long, the purple skin that had been hidden under the sandy exterior was stained with miasma, turning into a festering black substance like tar.

"Lord Green..."

"What seems to be the trouble, indeed? Now the demon lord is many times stronger than before, indeed. I can scarcely stay still just imagining the hero and his brave friends being slaughtered by the demon lord with the blessing of the great Evil God, indeed."

The greater demon began dancing about with his demon underlings, ignoring the man's objections.

Of course, the man knew perfectly well that the demon lord was stronger now.

But because of that, his plan to control the demon lord to release the seal on the Evil God's Prison was going to be even more difficult.

"No need to worry, indeed. Even if he does fall, the corruption we've been growing within the demon lord will spread throughout the prison and plunge it all into the depths of delightful miasma in a matter of moments, indeed."

"Is that true, Lord Green?"

The man turned to the greater demon.

"But of course, indeed. However, his sense of self will be utterly consumed by the corruption, so it might be best to bring him close to the seal as soon as possible, indeed?"

“Understood. I shall take him there at once.”

“Very good, indeed. The rest of you, do your best to protect the demon lord, indeed.”

With that last order to his underlings, the greater demon transformed into a dark green wyvern and flew away.

Battle Strategy

Satou here. In a mystery story, sometimes characters who seem really suspicious when they first appear are actually just red herrings to throw you off the scent. In reality, though, a lot of the time they really are the culprit.

“You know where the demon lord’s escaping to? Are you sure, Satou?!”

After I told Hayato what I knew, we moved to the meeting room on the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* to discuss it with the rest of the hero party. My group came along, too, of course.

“Yes, we found a hidden passage in the area we were assigned to search, Den of Evil Six. There was a demon lord–worshipping cult hideout deep inside, and I overheard them talking. ‘The hero is setting out to kill the demon lord again.’ ‘Then prepare the altar so that our great demon lord can return at any time.’ That’s what they said.”

With help from my “Fabrication” skill, I fudged a bit of evidence to back up my theory that the demon lord could only teleport to Den Six.

In truth, I figured this out by checking the demon lord’s location in the marker list on my map, but that would be hard to explain without revealing my Unique Skills, hence the improvisation.

“Wait. So you made a point of using the *Jules Verne*’s meeting room because...”

I nodded at Princess Mariest.

“Aah, I get it...well, that’s a bit of a problem.”

Ringrande seemed to have caught on to the implication as well.

Most of our other party members looked like they understood, too.

“What’s that mean?”

“Beats me.”

Rusus and Fifi frowned.

“You two are the only ones who don’t get it.” Weeyari rolled her eyes.

“Huh? No way.”

“For real?”

“Pochi doesn’t know, either, sir.”

“It’s all Greek to Tama, tooo?”

When Pochi and Tama agreed with them, Rusus and Fifi only looked even more horrified.

“Satou’s worried that the demon lord has a spy in Parion Province.”

“Oh, *now* I get it.”

“I knew that. Really, I did.”

“Tama didn’t knooow?”

“Pochi didn’t know, either, sir! Fifi is amazingly amazing, sir!”

Fifi winced, clearly unable to admit that she was lying when Tama and Pochi looked so impressed.

“Satou, question.” Weeyari raised her hand. “I know that what they said about the altar implies that they were preparing a teleport point. Don’t we need to investigate whether that’s true or not first, though?”

“Yes, of course.” I nodded. “That’s why I had an intelligence expert of mine stay behind to keep watch.”

“You’ve got an intelligence expert?” Hayato cut in.

“I do. I’m afraid I can’t introduce you because they’re pathologically terrified of being seen by other people, but I can personally vouch for their skills.”

My “Fabrication” skill was really getting a workout.

“According to their reports, not long after our encounters with the demon lord in the Den of Evil and the Heavenly Room, the demon lord reappeared at the altar in question.”

“For real?!” Rusus exclaimed.

“Yes, there’s no doubt about it.”

“Then we’ve finally got the demon lord by the tail.”

At my response, Fifi grinned with a very Hayato-like declaration of triumph.

“Wait, before we celebrate, there are a few things we need to clear up.”

“Huh? Like what?”

Princess Mariest looked at me.

And completely ignored Hayato’s question.

“Satou, you’re saying the demon lord can’t teleport anywhere else?”

“Although I can’t say for sure, I think the likelihood is very high.”

“On what basis?”

“The demon lord didn’t use teleportation during the attack on the holy city.”

“Sure he did.”

“Didn’t you see him escape when the sage had him caught in that shadow?”

“No, what I mean is...”

“Satou’s talking about how he got into the cathedral in the first place.”

“Yes, Lady Ringrande is exactly right.”

The wall of the pontiff’s Heavenly Room had been broken. When I looked for eyewitnesses to the demon lord’s arrival, they confirmed that he had appeared from the desert beyond the airship docking area and charged toward the cathedral in a straight line.

I explained all this to the others.

“That answers one question, then. The other one being...”

“Is it, how are we going to get Sir Hayato to Den of Evil Six after the demon lord has teleported away?”

“No, that won’t be a problem. We have the Divine Talisman for that.”

Princess Mariest explained that Parion had given each of them an item that

could summon the hero to his companions' sides.

Well, that's convenient. If I can figure out how to make them, I'd love to give one to each of my party members, too.

"Then what was your other concern?"

"The fact that we'll have to chase him into an enemy stronghold. If we get interrupted by Sandstorm Soldiers over level fifty or high-ranking demons in the middle of fighting a demon lord, we're the ones who'll have to run away."

"How come?" Rusus asked on behalf of the others. "Why's that any different from fighting the demon lord in the middle of a Den of Evil?"

"A completed base is very different from one that's in progress, that's why."

A base in progress...?

"Lady Mariest, you think that the demon lord has been going to other Dens of Evil because he's trying to create new bases?"

"Yes, I believe he's been making 'pawn points' to mass-produce more Sandstorm Soldiers."

"...Ah, you mean spawn points."

Hayato corrected Princess Mariest's malapropism.

"Spawn points" are locations in games like MMORPGs where monsters reappear.

In this case, it must have been a magic circle or device that produced more Sandstorm Soldiers.

"What do you think the demon lord is trying to do by making more spawn points?"

Arisa, who'd been listening quietly, grabbed my sleeve with a wide-eyed expression.

"Well, that's obvious!"

"The demon lord's building an army to take over the world!"

"Danger, dangerrr?"

“That’s very very bad, sir!”

“Master, we must quickly strengthen my sisters and the Pendora fighters to do battle with the demon lord army, I declare.”

I had to reassure several members of my group who took Rusus and Fifi’s joke seriously.

Let’s just pretend I didn’t snicker a tiny bit because Tama’s exclamation reminded me of an incoming boss warning from a retro shooting game.

“Well, it can’t be anything good, that much is for sure.” Summing things up, the hero steered the conversation back on track. “The real problem is how we’re going to tackle this base.”

“We could bring some people with us on the *Jules Verne*, like the sage and that Holy Sword user?”

“I don’t think that’ll happen.”

Mariest shook her head at Weeyari’s suggestion.

“Aww, why not?” Seina the scout asked.

“Since the demon lord attacked the cathedral, the cardinal will want to keep as much protection as possible for the holy city and the pontiff.”

“Who cares? There’s a demon lord spy in Parion Province anyway, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. I’d rather handle it ourselves than get stabbed in the back.”

“Right, there is the spy problem to contend with, too.”

Hearing Rusus and Fifi, Lilo the secretary wrote *spy problem* on the whiteboard.

“We can bring Ryukken as backup or something.”

“Maybe Rudoruu and Kwandoh could help, too, even if they’re a little low level?”

“Ryukken and them would help in battle, yes...but we’d likely have more losses, too.”

“...Right, since we’ll be fighting the demon lord for the second time in a row,

in an enemy base.”

Miss Ringrande and Princess Mariest sighed unhappily.

“...Sir Hero.”

As a grim atmosphere filled the meeting room, Arisa, who’d been listening quietly and politely, stood abruptly.

“Please, leave all of the other enemies in the base to us.”

“To your group, honey?”

Hayato looked at Arisa, then shifted his gaze to me.

“Yes, just as Arisa says, we can handle the rest of the base. No matter how great their forces, we won’t let any of them near you and your party. So please defeat the demon lord without worrying about anything else.”

Hayato stared at me with a stunned expression for a moment, then suppressed a few snickers, and finally burst out laughing.

He was practically rolling around on the floor.

I guess maybe that sounded a little overconfident, especially for me.

“Ha-ha-ha...all right, I believe you, Satou.”

As I was trying to figure out how to convince him, Hayato finally stopped laughing and nodded.

“Hayato, are you sure?” Miss Ringrande asked.

The hero nodded. “I’m not sure why...but if Satou says so, I feel like I can trust him.”

Hayato wiped away the tears of laughter from his eyes.

“Then I’ll do everything in my power to live up to your trust.”

“Yeah, please do.”

Hayato held out his hand, and I shook it. Then Arisa put her hand on top of ours, and the rest of both our parties followed suit, swearing to defeat the demon lord.



“Sir Hayato, take this.”

Not wanting to forget, I handed the hero a list of demon-worshipping-cult Light of Freedom members in the holy city.

“What the...? Satou, where did you get this?”

“Shiga Kingdom has talented spies in many places.”

My “Fabrication” skill helped me give a vaguely convincing excuse.

“Mari, contact Bishop Shippunas and have his justice department prepare to...”

No, not him.

“Wait a moment, please.”

I stopped Hayato.

“What’s up? With my ‘Divine Analysis,’ I’ll be able to tell whether they’re Light of Freedom members in no time.”

As Hayato looked at me in confusion, I told him about the incident in the Shiga Kingdom royal capital in which Cardinal Hozzunas summoned the Evil God’s Spawn.

“Yeah, I heard about that. It was big news even in Parion Province.”

“And you’re saying that has something to do with stopping this investigation?”

I nodded at Miss Ringrande and explained that the cardinal had a divine recognition-inhibiting tool that could fool any analyzing skill.

“Don’t you know about Hayato’s ‘Analyze’ skill, Satou?”

“Yes, I’m aware. Sir Hayato, you’re familiar with the reason behind Arisa’s purple hair, are you not?”

Arisa once told me that Hayato was the one who taught her about the hidden features of the “Self-Status Check” skill she received from the gods, so he must be aware that she was a reincarnation.

“Who, honey? Of course... Ah, I getcha.”

Hayato's expression of uncertainty quickly turned to understanding.

He must have figured out from my reference to Arisa's purple hair, proof that she was a reincarnation, that there were some reincarnations whose "Self-Status Check" skill could rival even the hero's.

"You have it, too, right, honey?"

"Why, yes, Sir Hero."

Arisa put on her most ladylike demeanor as she nodded.

"And even she couldn't see through Cardinal Hozzunas's falsified status."

"So you're saying there are some people who might be able to fool even my 'Analyze' skill?"

"Yes, my preliminary investigation suggested that Bishop Shippunas in the justice department has the same kind of device as Cardinal Hozzunas."

"Shippunas, huh? Well, that's not good."

"Agreed. Having the device doesn't necessarily mean he's a member of Light of Freedom, but it's certainly grounds to suspect him."

Hayato and Princess Mariest grimaced.

"What's it really matter, though?"

"What do you mean?"

Weeyari tilted her head at Fifi's comment.

"If we hand in the report and the bishop lets the guys on the list get away, we know he's a bad guy. If he captures and punishes them, he's a good guy... probably. Either way, it works out fine, doesn't it?"

"That's true..."

Loleiya the priestess nodded thoughtfully.

"Whoa, Fifi actually made a good point. Wonder if there's gonna be a rainstorm in the desert today..."

"scuse me?!"

Fifi chased the teasing Seina out of the room.

“Then we’ll hand the list of members in to Bishop Shippunas, like Fifi says. Lilo, if you wouldn’t mind, could you make a copy of the list? I’ll have Ryukken lend us some scouting party members who are good at tracking and surveillance.”

With that, Princess Mariest began setting things in motion.

I left the rest to her, though I did put markers on all of the cult members just in case they escaped.

“Then Loleiya and Rin and I will get ready to put a survey team together.”

Hayato looked around at the rest of his group.

“Hmm, what should I do?”

“I’ll tune up the *Jules Verne*. Want to help, Rusus?”

“Nah, I’d probably end up breaking something. I’ll go outside and get in a workout.”

Weeyari chose to maintain the ship, while Rusus chose training.

“Pochi wants to train, too, sir!”

“Tama will do ninja practice, tooo?”

“Lady Rusus, could I ask you to spar with me?”

“Totally! It’d be good to practice with someone new for a change.”

“I wish to participate, too, I declare.”

“Let’s go, then!” Rusus led the beastfolk girls and Nana out of the room.

“They’re all such hard workers!”

“Practice, perfect.”

Arisa and Mia followed, and Lulu and I left the room as well.

Come to think of it...

What exactly was that doll that the demon lord came to get back?

The sage seemed to know something, and I needed to talk to him about Raito anyway. Maybe I should track him down.



“Leggo! Lemme go, I said!”

“Quiet, you dirty sand-brat!”

I parted ways with everyone and went to see the sage in the rear garden, where some kind of ruckus was unfolding.

It was none other than Raito, being seized by a group of soldiers.

“Mr. Noble!”

Raito spotted me and reached out for help.

Whatever was going on here, I couldn’t just ignore him. I went over to get to the bottom of things.

“Do you know this boy, Viscount Pendragon?”

“Yes, I was his personal guarantor when he entered the city.”

Conveniently enough, the soldiers seemed to know me, saving the trouble of introducing myself.

“Now, what did he do to warrant this treatment?”

“I didn’t do nothin’!”

Raito answered my question before the soldiers could.

“I just gave a thank-you doll to the pontiff ’cause an old lady with a bad leg asked me to.”

Ah, so it really was him who gave the demon lord’s doll to the pontiff.

“It seems you were used by some bad people, then.”

“Really? The old lady didn’t seem like a bad person to me. My ‘Intuition’ didn’t react, either.”

If Raito’s rare “Intuition” skill didn’t respond to her, there was a good chance that the old lady was just another harmless citizen being used by the real mastermind.

“Could I ask you to try to find this elderly woman? The real culprit might try to silence her.”

“Understood. I’ll bring someone who can draw a likeness.”

One of the soldiers ran off toward the station next to the cathedral.

“I’ll take the boy into my care until you find the elderly woman he described. Is that all right?”

“W-well, I suppose—”

“It most certainly is not!”

A shrill voice interrupted just as the soldiers were about to give me permission.

It was Bishop Shippunas from the justice department, the very same suspect who was using an item to disguise his status even to my AR display.

“...Take him away. Torture him within an inch of his life until he confesses the culprit.”

The soldiers saluted and restrained Raito again.

If I let them take him away now, he would almost certainly die in prison.

But before I could move to block their path, someone else stopped them instead.

“Sir Sage, why do you hinder us?”

It was the sage who blocked the soldiers’ path.

Behind him was Hayato’s secretary Lilo.

“The boy knows nothing. He was only being used, just as Sir Pendragon says.”

The sage must have overheard our conversation from nearby.

“Whoever targeted His Grace’s life would be someone who would benefit from his death, surely.”

That would certainly include his number two, the cardinal, or the person in the next position down—the bishop himself.

The bishop clearly caught on to this implication. “Are you accusing the cardinal or myself of making an attempt on the pontiff’s life?!”

“I said no such thing. However, you have many subordinates of your own,

bishop.”

“None of my subordinates would ever aid a demon lord–worshipping cult!”

You’re just making yourself sound even more suspicious...

“The Light of Freedom can be cunning. In the past, they have forced people to aid them by taking their families hostage, have they not?”

“W-well...”

The bishop bit his lip.

“So, is it all right if I take him into my care now?”

“That is another story entirely. We have not enough evidence to trust you completely.”

I tried to take the opportunity to rescue Raito and was promptly shut down.

I guess I got a little carried away because the poor kid looked like he was about to cry.

“...Your Grace. I cannot imagine that a vice-minister of tourism who has come to deepen the bond of friendship between Parion Province and Shiga Kingdom would belong to the Light of Freedom cult.”

For some reason, the sage backed me up.

“If you still refuse to trust him, let the hero take the boy for now. His secretary Miss Lilo is always in the holy city, so you can question him at any time if needed.”

The sage looked to Lilo for confirmation, and she nodded.

“Wait just a moment! I have approved no such thing! We know for a fact that this boy gave the doll to the pontiff. We cannot give him up to anyone until he has been thoroughly interrogated!”

The bishop was being very stubborn about this.

“Have you not analyzed the boy’s skills, Your Grace? He is no trained secret agent. If you torture him, like as not he will give you false information simply to escape the pain.”

The bishop growled in frustration at the sage's logic.

"Better, then, to let him go and capture whomever tries to silence him," the sage whispered to the bishop. "I intend to assign one of my subordinates to watch him. If that is not enough, you are free to assign one of your own as well. Or do you have some other problem with letting him go?"

"What if someone silences him and simply escapes?"

"I do not intend to assign a guard who would be unable to act in such a situation. You are familiar with my subordinates' skills, are you not, bishop?"

The bishop went on grumbling but was unable to object; the sage's subordinates must have been very skilled indeed. In the end, he left with one last indignant declaration.

"If they do get away, it will be on your head, Sir Sage! Do not think you can do as you please forever just because you have the pontiff's favor!"

"I will take that to heart."

"...Hmph!"

After the bishop stormed off, the sage settled the matter and put Raito in secretary Lilo's care.

The sage headed to the cathedral to report all this, and a sketch artist arrived to take Raito's description of the old lady while I stood by.

I wanted to go see the sage once this was done, but according to my map information, he was in the pontiff's room. My questions about the demon lord's doll and Raito's father would have to wait until next time.



"Sir Hero, I understand you wish to search for the demon lord once again. But what if you track him down, possibly with great sacrifice, only for him to escape just as before?"

The next day, at a meeting with Hayato, the cardinal immediately opened with the same line of questioning we were expecting.

Secretary Lilo explained the countermeasures we had discussed beforehand.

“...A device that prevents teleportation with Space Magic?”

“Yes, Sir Pendragon borrowed it from an elf village.”

Although that did sound like the kind of thing they would have in Bolenan Forest, in this case it was just a front.

“We’ve already tested its capabilities and installed it on the *Jules Verne*. If Parion Province wishes to conduct tests as well, you are welcome to bring in your own Space Magic users.”

“What do you think, Sir Sage?”

“No need. I see no reason that Sir Hero would lie about this. You tested it with Saga Empire’s Space Magic users, correct?”

Hayato nodded.

“And this will really prevent the demon lord from escaping?”

“Yes, Bishop Shippunas, without a doubt,” Lilo replied. “As long as we can keep him within the range of its effects.”

“Is this just an excuse in case it fails?” the cardinal countered.

“We are dealing with a demon lord here. There are no guarantees. If Sir Hero trusts in this device, we ought to do the same.”

The pontiff quietly intervened on our behalf.

“If you believe you can prevent the demon lord from teleporting away, then I will join the fight as well.”

“S-Sir Sage? But we cannot say for certain that this device will work. And have you forgotten the demon lord’s attack just the other day?! If you are not here, who will fight the demon lord and protect the pontiff?!”

The cardinal sounded panicked.

“There is nothing to fear. His Grace has excellent Temple Knights at his disposal. It was they who protected him until I arrived in the recent attack.”

The sage’s response silenced the cardinal.

“If you are concerned, let the Temple Knights stay in the cathedral, save for

Sir Mezzalt and his Holy Sword. He should be sufficient to earn glory for Parion Province, should he not?”

“No, Mezzalt should stay with His Grace as a last line of defense against the demon lord.”

“Cardinal, please! Surely you must realize that a Holy Sword is better suited for attack than for defense!”

Mezzalt, the Holy Sword wielder in question, nearly knocked over his chair in his haste to stand up and protest that he should stay on the front lines.

“Peace, Mezzalt,” said the bishop. “I agree with the cardinal.”

I had a feeling that he just wanted to keep the Holy Sword in the city under the guise of defending the pontiff because it was a threat to the demon lord, though.

“Your Grace, please give me permission to join the battle.”

“Mezzalt!”

“Enough!”

The cardinal and bishop shouted at the Holy Sword wielder as he appealed to the pontiff directly.

“...Your Grace.”

The pontiff nodded at the sage, then looked in turn at the knight, the cardinal, and the bishop.

“Dobbunaf, Shippunas, I truly appreciate your concern for my safety and that of the holy city. And yet I wish to grant Mezzalt’s request to go into battle against the demon lord with the hero, Sorijeyro, and company.”

“Your Grace!”

“Please reconsider!”

The cardinal and the bishop cried out in protest.

“Once the hero and company have set out, I shall use Goddess Parion’s protection and the power of the cathedral to protect the city with a holy barrier. Even the demon lord will not be able to break through so easily.”

Everyone listened respectfully to the pontiff.

“And I believe Miss Lilo here, who will remain in the holy city, would be able to contact Sir Hero for aid if we have need of him.”

The pontiff looked at Lilo, who nodded.

“But if we put all the city’s power into protection, the crops and water sources...”

“Yes, it will be difficult to maintain them all. But we are at war. The people of Parion Province must support the hero, himself a chosen servant of Goddess Parion, such that he might battle the demon lord with all his strength. I believe this is precisely what the goddess would ask of us.”

On hearing this logic, the cardinal and bishop bowed their heads and accepted the pontiff’s ruling.

Still, the cardinal looked like he was glumly absorbed in the possible financial losses, and the bishop seemed bitter that he’d failed to weaken the anti-demon lord forces.

“Now then, Sir Hero, please continue...”

At the pontiff’s prompting, the meeting proceeded with the formation of the squads.

For the most part, it was the same as last time, with our group and the sage joining the hero’s team.

We were joining at the hero’s suggestion, while the sage was joining at his own personal insistence. I tried indirectly to get the sage to join the Temple Knights’ squad instead, since his sharp-eyed presence would make it more difficult for me to go all-out in case of an emergency; unfortunately, the Holy Sword wielder and black knight were on the sage’s side, so I was outvoted.

Incidentally, once we found the demon lord, Seina and I were going to rush to Den of Evil Six.

Then, once Hayato and company got the demon lord to flee, Seina would use the Divine Talisman to summon Hayato and the rest of the group on the *Jules Verne*.

We decided to set out in three days' time, once the troops had rested and the funeral rites for the slain Temple Knights' captain were completed. In the meantime, we would take a short rest as well.



"What's with the crowd over there?"

After the long meeting, Hayato and I went out through the back of the cathedral and saw a large crowd.

I heard the sounds of metal clashing against metal amid the tumult.

"Sounds like some kind of sparring match."

As we drew closer, I saw that my girls were training against some of Hayato's party and the Saga Empire warriors.

"...■ 'Quick Burst'—plus secret technique 'Cherry Blossom Flash'!"

"It's poor manners to use attack magic and secret moves in a sparring match, I declare."

"You say that as if you didn't block them all anyway."

Nana was sparring with Miss Ringrande.

She seemed more serious than when she'd sparred with Sir Ipasa and me on the ship back to the old capital.

"Wow, nice moves. She might even be on par with the 'Holy Shield' Reilus of the Shiga Kingdom."

Hayato followed Nana's movements closely.

"Nana!" he called. "Your evasion is top-class. But your blocking still needs work. Try lowering your weight a little in the moment you receive a strike. That'll let off some of the attack's power. If possible, try adding another layer of 'Body Strengthening' right before you receive the attack, too. It'll use more magic power, but it's better than getting knocked back and hurting one of your allies."

"Yes, Hayato. I shall put your teachings into practice. Ringrande, Explosion Magic, I request."

Nana promptly put Hayato's advice to good use.

"What a quick learner. She's already getting the hang of it." Grinning, Hayato walked closer to the fray. "You can use 'Spellblade,' right? Then instead of blocking lesser magic and individual shots, you should try cutting them away with your sword."

Hayato had Miss Ringrande use Fire Shot and sliced it out of the air with his Holy Sword.

"Well? Think you can pull it off?"

"Yes, Hayato. I shall resume training, I declare. Ringrande, I request your assistance."

"I know, I know. I'll help you out."

Nana began practicing cutting down magic spells, getting knocked back by Ringrande's magic countless times in the process.

"How long does it usually take to learn?"

"It won't be overnight. Rusus and Fifi got the hang of it pretty quickly, and even then it took around ten days. Rin was closer to half a month."

Incidentally, aside from Hayato and three of his party members, there was apparently no one else who could master it completely.

While Nana was quickly able to get the hang of just scattering the magic with her sword, completely canceling out its power was a lot harder.

Still, I hoped she would master the technique, since it seemed very useful.

After watching Nana train for a while, I looked around to check in on the other girls.

"Very impressive, dodging my Zi-Gain-style slash!"

"Rudoruu! That girl's a fierce one—she held her own against me in combat. Don't let your guard down, or you'll regret it!"

"Pochi is a sword-drawing pro, sir!"

Pochi was training with a Saga Empire samurai, while Liza was fighting Rusus nearby.

“Whoa, damn! Your strikes are as solid as Hayato’s.”

“Rusus! Hurry up and trade with me! I wanna fight Liza again, too!”

“Shut up! You can wait your turn till I’m good and done!”

Liza was holding her own against Rusus, maybe even edging out on top.

From the sound of things, she must have had a good bout with Fifi, too.

“Ho-ho, she’s got a serious gift, too.”

Hayato strolled over to the three and started teaching Liza some tricks.

Rusus and Fifi protested the loss of their exciting new sparring partner, until they were awed into silence when they saw the fiery face-off that soon began between Hayato and Liza.

Even if Hayato was holding back considerably, I was still impressed that Liza was able to keep up with him. Although I was a little worried that one of them might accidentally use one of their special moves in the heat of the moment, like when I sparred with the hero in the old capital.

Some distance away from Liza, I found Weeyari and Lulu sitting in the shade of a tree.

At a glance, the sight of a Japanese-style beauty and an elfin-eared girl seated under a tree together was so lovely that you might expect them to be reading poetry or something, but my “Keen Hearing” skill told me that their conversation wasn’t quite so delicate.

“Lulu, how do you read the air like that?”

“I just look very carefully. When the target is far away, I sometimes use Practical Magic for support.”

“Yeah? How so?”

I was a little curious about ace sniper Lulu’s shooting secrets, but I could always ask her about that some other time.

Next to them, Mia was playing a tune on the lute, while Arisa leaned against the tree trunk, engrossed in a book of forbidden spells.

“Hey, using a Fire Magic tool is playing dirty!”

“Not a tooool?”

“What d’you mean?”

“It’s Ninjutsuuu.”

Tama was sparring with Seina the scout.

Tama had mastered the “fire shield jutsu” she learned on the journey to Kuvork Kingdom, which made use of fire stone powder, and the “wind shield jutsu,” which used wind stone powder. She was starting to get the hang of other ninja techniques, too.

“What an interesting technique.”

The sage was standing next to me; I hadn’t even noticed his approach.

“Is it a magic skill of some kind? I have never seen the like.”

“It’s a skill called ‘Ninjutsu.’”

“Is it? It is nothing like the Ninjutsu I know of...how very fascinating.”

Since the sage had the “Analyze” skill anyway, there was probably no harm in telling him the name of the skill Tama was using.

He watched Tama intently, as if he didn’t want to miss a single move.

Oh, right.

This was the perfect chance to ask about the demon lord’s doll and Raito’s father.

“About the doll incident from the other day—were you able to find the elderly woman the boy mentioned?”

“The bishop did not tell you? We were able to identify the person who hired the old woman, but they were killed before the justice department could reach them.”

I guess someone had to take the fall...

“And the woman...?”

“Is fine, not to worry. His Grace was worried about her, so I had one of my associates ensure her safety. She should be working as a maidservant in the

cathedral now.”

Thank goodness. I’d hate for an innocent person to be killed over that.

“Do you know what that doll was exactly, Sir Sage?”

“I know not, nor did I sense anything strange about it. I suspect it was not a magical object but something that was of personal import to the demon lord before he fell.”

It was still precious to him after he became a demon lord...?

Something about this scenario bothered me, but I couldn’t quite remember what. Even with my ridiculously high INT stat, I still can’t recall details that I wasn’t paying much attention to at the time.

I should’ve marked that doll while I had the chance, though.

“Sir Sage, about the boy who gave the doll to His Grace...”

I explained that Raito had come to the holy city looking for his father, and that it was the sage who summoned his father to the holy city initially, finally asking if the sage himself knew where the man might be now.

The sage thought for a moment before responding.

“I am sorry to say that I do not recall. I traveled to many neighboring lands and recruited many talented individuals. Most of them came to the holy city. If he is not here, then either he returned to his village or received a role that sent him out of the city, I must imagine.”

Apparently, this guy had been headhunting all over the place.

“If it is not urgent, you could make an arrangement with the gatekeeper. I shall even put in a good word for you if need be.”

I appreciatively accepted his offer.

Thanking the sage, I went to relay this information to Raito, who was in Lilo’s care.

I explained that they might not find him right away, but that they should contact him as soon as his father returned to the holy city. He practically jumped for joy as he thanked me.

Evidently, he was currently working as a sort of messenger boy for Lilo.

After I slipped the gatekeeper some bribe money to contact us when Raito's father showed up, I went to Bolenan Forest to craft some items for the upcoming demon lord battle.

I was able to complete just about everything, although I was sadly too busy to spend more than a few minutes flirting with my beloved Miss Aaze.

In the time leading up to the operation, all the Light of Freedom members on the list I provided were captured, except for two. Their collaborators were all exposed as well.

The two who escaped were high level, and had skills like "Disguise," "Charm," and "Spirit Magic" that could be dangerous in the wrong hands.

Secretary Lilo's spy and the pontiff's own masked investigators confirmed that Bishop Shippunas arranged for the pair to escape, and he was arrested as well.

This also brought to light his possession of the Brace of Stolen Divinity (counterfeit) disguise item, which led to a thorough search to determine if anyone else had one, though it yielded no other results. The disguise item was handed over to the pontiff, who sealed it away in a highly restricted location that only he could access.

All the Light of Freedom members, including Bishop Shippunas, were executed by hanging at the holy city's public execution site.

Just seeing their dangling silhouettes from a distance was enough to upset me for a while.

Evidently, the two members that the bishop helped escape were found by the sage's secret agents and executed as well.



The night before the operation was to commence, the hero's party had a motivational feast for the defeat of the demon lord.

"I-it can't be! Is that...CURRY RIIIIICE?!"

As soon as the hero saw the curry laid out on the table, he jumped up and shouted at the top of his lungs.

I wished he would keep the volume down a little bit, even if we did have the whole inn rented out for ourselves.

He whirled to look at me so fast that I thought he might break the speed barrier, so I nodded.

“Yes, it’s the real thing. I made *katsu* curry in keeping with tradition.”

In Japan, people often ate *katsu* curry or *katsudon* before a big match or test, since the word for “cutlet” also sounds like the word for “win.” I even used imported pork from the Saga Empire, not boar meat, making it a true *tonkatsu* curry.

“Oooh, you’re the greatest, Satou! A fellow man of culture!”

Since the hero looked like he was ready to burst, Arisa quickly pressed her hands together and signaled the start of the meal with a “Thanks for the food!”

“Aaaaagh, real live curry!”

The hero was outright moved to tears as he scooped the curry rice onto his spoon.

I was a little worried that he might fling it everywhere in his eagerness, but I guess I didn’t need to worry.

“YUMMMMMM!”

Bellowing after his first bite, the hero promptly began shoveling it down like there was no tomorrow.

“See? Curry is totally a beverage.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

Before Arisa smugly lured me into a debate, I urged the rest of the hero’s party to eat as well.

“What is it, some kind of strange-smelling stew?”

“It’s spicy but damn good.”

“I can’t do spicy food...”

While Weeyari and Rusus seemed to be enjoying the curry, Fifi took one sniff

and pushed the plate away. The smell must have been too strong for her wolfish nose.

“Oh, really? But it’s delicious.”

Loleiya tucked her hair behind her ear and daintily nibbled on the curry.

Her gestures were oddly provocative.

“If you’re not gonna eat yours, gimme it.”

The hero swiftly stole Fifi’s rejected plate.

Um, I’d give you seconds if you just ask like a normal person.

“Aah, so this is the legendary curry!”

“The illusory dish that the first hero spent a lifetime pursuing, and it’s ours for the tasting...”

Miss Ringrande and Princess Mariest seemed so struck with awe that they couldn’t bring themselves to take a spoonful.

“Miss Fifi, if you don’t like spicy food, please take this instead.”

“Ooh, now that smells good.”

I held out a normal-flavored *omurice*, and Fifi’s wolf ears twitched with interest as she peered at the plate.

“Hmm? An egg-based dish? It looks like the omelets they make in Saga Empire.”

“Omelets! Wh-what do you suppose this red sauce is? Carrots?”

Seina and Lilo, who had already finished eating their curry in the hero’s shadow, sped over impressively fast to surround Fifi and peek down at her dish.

“B-back off, this is my meal!”

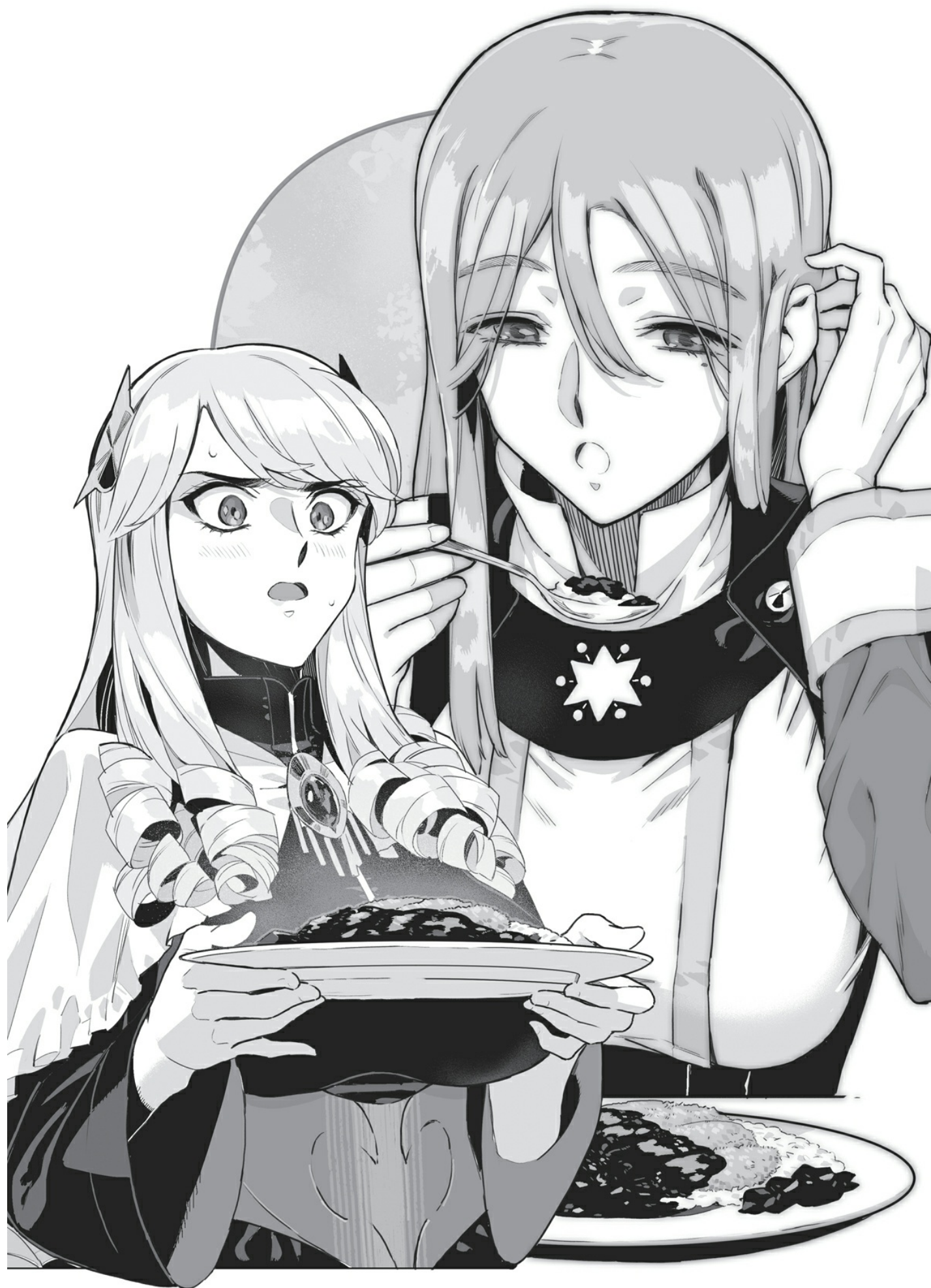
Alarmed, Fifi covered the *omurice* plate protectively with both arms.

“Fifi, please give me just one bite.”

“I want one, too!”

The secretary and scout pressed closer to Fifi.

“I can’t trust you guys’ ‘one bite.’”



“How rude! Seina is one thing, but my bites are small and adorable.”

“Heeey, my bites are cute, too, ya know!”

It was nice to see that their party was so close.

“All readyyy?”

“Seconds here, sir.”

My enjoyment of the three’s fierce exchange was sadly cut short when Tama and Pochi arrived with more plates, bringing the battle to an end.

“Looks like there’s seconds for the *omurice*. Would you two like some as well?”

“Yaaaay!”

“You have a mean streak yourself, Sir Pendragon.”

Seina immediately dug into her dish, while Lilo cast me a short glower before calmly taking a bite from her own plate.

“This isn’t carrot, is it? What sort of sauce is this?”

“Tomatooo?”

“Catch-up, sir!”

“Tomato catch-up, you say?”

Lilo seemed to have taken Tama’s oddly fluent pronunciation and Pochi’s more stilted addition as a single term.

“It’s a sauce called ‘ketchup,’ which is made from tomatoes. They’re a local specialty of Lady Ringrande’s homeland, Ougoch Duchy.”

“...A local specialty? Satou, I’ve never heard of this sauce.”

Miss Ringrande looked confused by my explanation.

“Mmm, Satou.”

“Master developed it, I explain.”

“Wow, I guess that’s the ‘Miracle Chef’ for you.”

At Mia and Nana’s explanation, Miss Ringrande called me by a nostalgic title.

“Thank you for waiting. The next course is Ohmi beef *sukiyaki*.”

Lulu and Liza brought in a trolley with a large *sukiyaki* pot.

“*Sukiyaki*, you say?!”

Having leveled his fifth plate of curry, Hayato swiveled toward Lulu as Loleiya wiped the brown sauce from his face.

“Yes, it’s another dish from your homeland, Sir Hero.”

Lulu didn’t seem too nervous talking to the hero.

I imagine she probably saw anyone who enjoyed her food so enthusiastically as a friend.

“Would you like a raw egg, sir?”

“Yeah, sure!”

Liza, on the other hand, looked uncharacteristically nervous as she handed Hayato a small plate with raw eggs.

At least I hoped that her hand was shaking out of nerves, not eagerness.

“M-meeeat?”

“It’s meat, sir. But we were ordered to stay, so we have to wait, sir.”

Tama and Pochi drooled as they admired the beef in the *sukiyaki* pot.

Hmm? I didn’t give them any orders...

“I thought we should let Hayato and the others eat first.”

Apparently, Arisa was the culprit.

“Well, don’t worry about that. I prepared more than we could possibly eat.”

In case three whole Ohmi cattle weren’t enough, I also had the meat of a gigantic ox-like monster that was in a floormaster area. While not quite as top-quality as the Ohmi beef, it was good enough that you couldn’t tell the difference in a heavily flavored dish like *sukiyaki*.

“Besides, I also asked Lulu to prepare another dish. That should be coming out soon.”

Even as Arisa finished speaking, the door opened and several maids carried out hamburg steaks and deep-fried food.

“Hambuuurg?”

“It’s the real Mr. Hamburg in the flesh, sir!”

Tama and Pochi looked to me with silent pleas for permission; I nodded.

“Yaaay?”

“Pochi’s battle has only just begun, sir!”

Tama, Pochi, and the other girls all began eating, too.

“Is that stuff any good?”

“But of cooourse?”

“Gimme some, too, please.”

“Of course, sir! Mr. Hamburg is generous, sir!”

Having finished their curry and *omurice*, Fifi and Rusus offered their services in the battle to conquer the hamburg mountain range.

Meanwhile, as Liza fought on the *yakitori* front, she found backup from Seina and Loleiya, the latter of whom had acquired a bottle of dragonspring liquor.

The mushroom and veggie dishes that we cooked at Mia’s suggestion thoroughly captivated Weeyari and Lilo.

“Young Master.”

A waiter whispered in my ear.

He was actually the former Phantom Thief Pippin in disguise.

“I’m here on Lord Kuro’s orders. Some idiot tried to poison the food, so I took care of it. He’s tied up in the linen room now if you wanted to deal with that, preferably soon.”

With that, he left as seamlessly as he’d entered.

I was glad that I brought him along as a last line of defense against poisoning. He seemed to be doing his job well.

I took the non-drinker Kwandoh along with me to retrieve the would-be poisoner, and put him and his subordinates in charge of dealing with the culprit.

“Satou, want some?”

“Yes, please.”

Miss Ringrande offered me a glass as I watched my party and the hero’s peacefully intermingling.

It appeared to contain Saga Empire whiskey.

“Thanks for this, Satou. Hayato’s been brooding over the failed attempts to defeat the demon lord lately. I was worried about him.”

“Yes, he finally seems to be back to his usual self. You were just the reinforcement we needed.”

Although I could barely tell the difference, his companions must have been worried about his recent state of mind.

“I’m honored,” I responded to Miss Ringrande’s and Princess Mariest’s flattering words. Then, with a brief toast, I drained my glass.

...Whoops.

As soon as I drank the last drop, I regretted it.

I should have taken my time and savored it more.

“This is excellent liquor.”

“Yes, well, it is the only whiskey to be given the ‘Saga’ epitaph, which means only the royal family can drink it.”

“Are you sure you should have given me something so valuable?”

“Yes, it’s still more common than the dragonspring liquor Loleiya is keeping all to herself.”

That made sense. No amount of money could buy more dragonspring liquor.

“Would you like some, too?”

I produced another small bottle from Storage by way of my breast pocket.

“I smell some very tasty liquor.”

I felt a soft sensation against my back, coupled with a sultry and slightly slurred voice.

Turning around, I found Loleiya's flushed face directly next to mine.

She was trying to reach for the bottle over my shoulder, making for a very pleasant feeling.

"Loleiya, calm down a little, will you?"

"You're bothering poor Satou."

Princess Mariest scolded Loleiya, and Miss Ringrande took my hand and pulled me away from her attack.

"Oh?"

"Eek!"

I wound up getting pulled face-first into Ringrande's lap, dragging Loleiya along with me, possibly thanks to some kind of pervy god's blessing.

Of course, I could have avoided it if I really wanted to, but I decided to respect what was clearly a divine will and enjoy the softness that surrounded me on both sides. The iron-wall pair seemed to be busy enjoying their food and chatting with the hero, anyway.



As the night grew late, the feast began to turn into a drinking party, and I sent my kids off to bed so the adults could enjoy a little social hour.

Arisa attempted to join in as a chaperone, only to accidentally drink some alcohol and get shipped off to dreamland along with Liza.

"Satou, you think we can win?"

As Hayato gazed out the window at the night sky, I saw a trace of anxiety in his profile.

"Of course. We've got you on our side, Sir Hayato."

This next Den of Evil venture was supposed to put an end to the demon lord for good. We had to win, no matter what.

As long as we could prevent the demon lord from escaping, I was confident that Hayato and his party were strong enough to defeat the demon lord.

“Yeah? Well, in that case, I feel like we’re gonna win this thing for sure!”

“That’s why you’re the hero of the Saga Empire.”

“Yep, you know it!”

The hero’s bright smile lit up the whole room and relaxed the rest of his party as well.

With everyone in such high spirits, defeating the demon lord would be a piece of cake.

Surrounding the Demon Lord

Satou here. In a famous manga I read a long time ago, during a scene where they're fighting some seriously strong enemies, the way each member of the party stayed behind one by one to let the others move forward made my hands sweat as I clutched the pages. I love it when the party members who stayed behind show up at the last minute to back the hero up, too.

"The Sandstorm Soldiers seem kinda strong, don't they?"

Hayato frowned as he watched the scouting party fighting Sandstorm Soldiers.

My party and the Saga Empire scouting party were taking turns fighting off enemies in the Den of Evil so that the hero party wouldn't wear themselves out before the two successive battles against the demon lord.

And yes, the demon lord was in the Den of Evil we were exploring.

I detected him leaving Den Six two days prior, and arranged things so that the hero party would be exploring the right den.

"You're right. It appears they're being strengthened with Support Magic."

It was hard to tell, since it was only about a 20 percent improvement, but that was fairly impressive for Support Magic.

"Allow me to offer some aid, then."

The sage chanted in a low, hard-to-hear voice, and cast Shadow Magic that hindered the Sandstorm Soldiers' movements.

"This spell only causes the foot to slip when it steps down, and increases resistance when the foot is raised, yet it is surprisingly useful when both sides are otherwise equally matched."

Sure enough, the tides of battle quickly changed, and the scouting party

defeated the Sandstorm Soldiers.

“Wow, you can use lesser obstruction spells, too?”

“I tend to lean toward Support Magic since it is harder to resist, and yet Obstruction Magic can be even more effective if only you know when best to use it. Any mage would do well to learn a few such spells.”

“Makes sense.”

In truth, Arisa already used Space Magic in similar ways, like making opponents trip and fall. Nevertheless, she politely nodded at the sage’s advice.

“Obstruction...”

Mia seemed to have some thoughts on this, too: She flipped through the pages of a spellbook.

The Water Magic spell Entangling Aqua might have been a good pick for her.

“There’s an ogre type. Let’s go, you two.”

“Aye-aye, siiir.”

“Roger, sir!”

The beastfolk girls sprang at a demi-ogre-style Sandstorm Soldier that approached from deeper in the passage.

““Blinding Jutsuuu’?”

Tama blew a “wind shield jutsu” at the Sandstorm Soldier that contained chili powder.

DEZZZZERYTT.

The Sandstorm Soldier covered its face and howled.

“Hi-ya, sir!”

““Helix Spear Attack.””

Pochi’s thrust and Liza’s special attack tore into the monster’s undefended sides.

DEZZZZERYTT.

The Sandstorm Soldier's health gauge plunged downward, though not quite enough to defeat it.

In desperation, it shot high-pressure sprays of sand out of its palms at Pochi and Liza, who kept their distance and dodged easily with a backstep.

"Tama is a sneaky little headhunter?"

Using "Skywalking" to get up close to the Sandstorm Soldier's neck, Tama slashed the area where its carotid arteries might have been.

The monster tried to crush Tama with its hand, but—

"Aim...and fire!"

...Sniper Lulu's Gold Thunder Fox Gun blew it away.

"'Shield Bash,' I declare!"

Nana used "Warp" to put herself directly in front of the Sandstorm Soldier and struck its wide-open torso with her large shield to send it tumbling backward.

Then, Mia's Water Magic spell Splash Needle and Arisa's Fire Magic Blast Shot finished the job.

I had instructed them to hold back their Spirit and Space Magic in front of the sage.

"Fast ones behind the ogre!" someone cried from the scouting party.

A swarm of leopard-like Sandstorm Soldiers came leaping onto the battlefield.

"Nuh-uuuh?"

"You won't catch Pochi by surprise, sir!"

Tama and Pochi ran up the wall and began taking down the leopard Sandstorm Soldiers.

Lulu took aim at them with the Gold Thunder Fox Gun as well, but they quickly avoided her shots. It probably didn't help that it took such precise reading of the air to be able to hit with that particular gun.

"Grr..."

Lulu bit her lip.

It must have hurt her sniper's sense of pride that she couldn't hit them.

Lulu's eyes darted, following the leopard-style soldiers as they leaped off the walls.

"I get it..."

She fired again, and the leopard monsters evaded her thunder shots as before.

This time, however, the thunder shots veered off course as if they had a mind of their own, cutting off their path and hitting them dead-on.

"How?"

"Hee-hee, I just read ahead of the flow of the air and fired so the shots would go in the direction where they fled."

Lulu beamed at Weeyari.

"I wouldn't call that 'just reading ahead'..."

For some reason, the archer shot me a look that seemed to say, "Is this your doing?"

Lulu's skills are the result of her own hard work and natural talent. Just compliment her instead of accusing me, please.

"Watchin' these kids fight makes me want a piece of the action, too."

"Yeah, you said it. Mari, can't we fight a little?"

"Oh, all right. Just don't tire yourselves out."

"Me too."

Rusus, Fifi, and Weeyari thus entered the battle rotation as we worked our way toward the Innermost Chamber where the demon lord lurked.

"You, cat-eared child."

During one of our short breaks, the sage approached Tama and Pochi as they were happily munching on some hydra jerky.

"Mew?"

Tama hid behind Pochi with her ears flat, looking up at the sage.

For some reason, she didn't seem to like him much. I put down the cup of coffee I was drinking and stood up, walking over to Tama's side in case she needed help.

"Did you need something with Tama?" I asked.

"I apologize if I frightened the girl. I was simply curious about her techniques," the sage replied to me. "From what I witnessed, it seems she uses the likes of fire stone and wind stone powder. But what of the other attribute stones?"

"Attribute stooones?" Tama tilted her head.

"He means like the fire stones and wind stones," I explained.

"For instance, could you not use thunder stone powder to create lightning attacks? ...Like this."

The sage produced a thunder stone from a pouch and handed it to Tama, then used the short chant for Little Lightning as a demonstration.

It seemed he was also able to use types of magic he didn't have skills for, like Arisa.

"I'll tryyy?"

I gave Tama a file and dish for grinding up the thunder stone.

Tama's powers of concentration are incredible when something catches her interest. She tried and failed several times, exclaiming "tinglyyy" when she got an electric shock, or "owie, my eeeyes" when a sudden flash caught her off guard, then got distracted with Pochi by using static electricity to make their hair stand on end.

Yet in spite of all that, during a break the very next day...

"Tama's amazing, sir!"

"I did iit?"

...she produced a tiny flash of lightning.

"Oh-ho, you did, did you? Why not try making it into a blade like 'Spellblade' next?"

“I’ll tryyy!”

Evidently, Tama had gotten a knack for this now. She was able to produce lightning around her “Spellblade,” making something like a thunder blade.

“There’s this, tooo?”

Next, she used fire stone powder to produce fire around “Spellblade” for a sort of flame blade.

“I see, very impressive...”

The sage peered down at Tama, intrigued.

“Tama, make the sword go all wiggly, sir!”

Pochi flailed her arms and body like an octopus to illustrate her request.

“Aye.”

Tama promptly warped the flame blade and lightning blade, making them move like a whip or a segmented tail.

“WHAT?!”

The sage exclaimed in surprise at the unexpected development.

“...The mind of a child is truly a wondrous thing.”

Collecting himself and clearing his throat awkwardly, the sage then plucked one of the black stones out of his staff and held it out to Tama.

According to my AR display, it wasn’t a dark stone but a shadow stone, which was an attribute stone I’d never seen before.

“Let me give you this.”

Tama looked at me, unsure whether she should accept it.

“Are you sure? It seems quite rare.”

“Go on. I am curious to see what wonders this child might produce with a shadow stone.”

I guess it’s fine, then. I nodded at Tama, and she held her hand out hesitantly, accepting the stone from the sage.

“Shadow stones aid in Shadow Magic, which meddles with shadows. Try using it on a shadow.”

“Aye.”

Tama used a bit of shadow powder and produced a small ripple in her shadow.

“Wow, fantasticooo?”

Beaming excitedly, Tama continued splashing around with her shadow.

“Amazing, sir! Pochi wants to be fantastico, too, sir!”

Tama gave Pochi a bit of powder, and her eyes sparkled as she scattered it over the shadow enthusiastically.

“...Oops.”

Pochi and Tama plummeted into shadow.

Quickly, Liza grabbed them both by the collars and pulled them out.

“Th-that was close, sir.”

“Pochi, I hope you’ve learned your lesson.”

“Yes, sir. Pochi’s not ready for ‘fantastico’ yet, sir.”

Pochi struck a regretful pose that she had probably learned from Arisa.

“...More monsters from the right-hand path! The fast kind again!”

A magic soldier called out from a sentry post.

Several of the leopard-like Sandstorm Soldiers came charging in from a passage so small that one would have to crouch to pass through.

I’d already sensed them on my radar and was ready to take them out with a few swift kicks. The sage reached out and stopped me, though, so I decided to let him handle it, out of curiosity.

“...■ **Shadow Whip** Kageben.”

A dark tendril emerged from the Sandstorm Soldiers’ own shadows and ensnared them like a net.

Tama tried and failed to imitate him with her shadow stone powder.

“It’s haaard?”

“I suppose it won’t happen overnight. Practice hard.”

“Aye.”

The sage looked at the nodding Tama with satisfaction.

Behind him, the scouting party ran over and finished off the immobilized monsters.

Then, on the third morning, Seina returned from her scouting mission and reported that she’d spotted the demon lord in the Innermost Chamber.

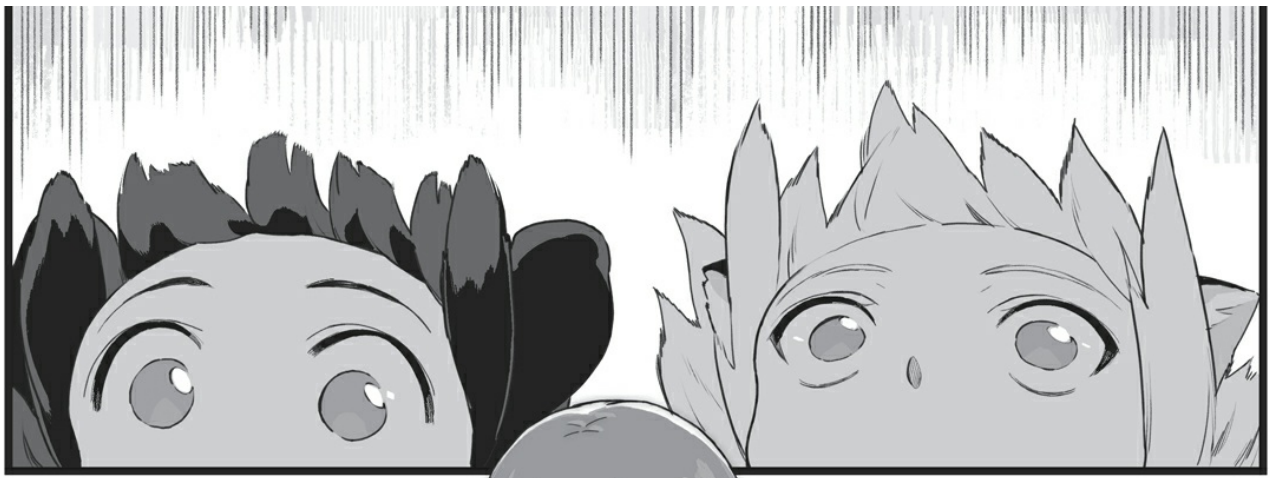


“Something’s off about the demon lord.”

After receiving Seina’s report, Hayato and I removed our armor in order to keep quiet and snuck over to see the demon lord for ourselves.

“He’s wearing armor...?”

The demon lord was entirely protected with jet-black armor.



“His outline is blurred. There must be high-density miasma around him.”

“We’d better be careful not to touch him, then.”

“Yes, although I don’t think it’s as dangerous as the clump of miasma he threw at you, Sir Hayato. It would still be best to avoid grappling with him directly for long.”

From what I could see of the demon lord’s face and body through the gaps in the armor, his muscle fibers were raw and exposed, as if he had lost his skin.

I was strongly reminded of the red-rope monsters that had been exposed to the vestiges of the Evil God’s Spawn.

“Let’s make sure we include anti-miasma protection in our Support Magic before the battle.”

As he spoke, Hayato stared intently at the demon lord, probably using his “Analyze” skill to check the demon lord’s stats and abilities.

“...For real?”

“Is there a problem?”

I was asking just to be sure, although I already knew from my AR display of the demon lord’s information what he must be surprised about.

“The demon lord’s level has gone up. It was lower than me before, but now it’s higher than me.”

Hayato’s brow furrowed.

I couldn’t blame him. It was very strange that the demon lord had gone from level 62 to 72 in just a matter of days.

That said, since Hayato was level 69, it wasn’t a fatally large difference or anything.

“Did he defeat his own Sandstorm Soldier minions to level up?”

“I doubt it. The higher your level, the more EXP you need to get to the next one. The difference in EXP needed when your level is in the fifties versus the sixties is exponential. I bet it’s multiplied even more once you reach the seventies.”

Hayato explained as we made our way back from the Innermost Chamber.

It was easy to see how unusual the demon lord's sudden increase in level was with just one look at Hayato's stats. He hadn't leveled up once since we last met in the old capital, even though he'd been slaughtering tons of Sandstorm Soldiers in the Dens of Evil all this time.

"I think it's got to be that weird orb the demon lord threw at me before."

Hayato put a hand over his arm.

...Now I remember.

Come to think of it, the giant mutant rat that was taken over by the Evil God's Spawn vestiges went from level 20 to around level 50.

If that orb was made of the same stuff, it would certainly explain why the demon lord leveled up so quickly.

"When that orb was eating away at my arm, I felt horrible pain, fear that felt like a tight grip on my heart...and a sense of latent strength, too."

Hayato seemed to be talking more to himself than to Seina and me.

"If I'd accepted that strength, maybe I'd be strong enough to take him down..."

"Sir Hayato." I interrupted him, as his thoughts seemed to be straying down a dangerous path. "Between you and your party, I'm sure you'll be able to win."

"Satou..."

Hayato looked at me, and I nodded.

"And for what it's worth, my party and I will gladly help you, too."

"Yeah, come on, Hayato. We're gonna make sure you win no matter what. Have a little faith, will ya?"

"You're right, Seina. I guess I lost heart for a second there."

Seina's gentle teasing finally brought a smile back to Hayato's face.

"It's Rudoruuu?"

"And Kwandoh, too, sir!"

Two days after the demon lord was first spotted, the black knight Ryukken and the Saga Empire samurai joined us.

“I am glad to see you two doing well, Pochi and Tama.”

“How have you been, little ones?”

The two samurai high-fived Pochi and Tama.

I guess they became good buddies when they were training together.

“Ah, you’ve finally arrived to fill your quota. Now we can begin taking down the demon lord at last.”

“Say that again, you temple dog!”

“I need not repeat myself for some rustproofed knight.”

The Holy Sword-wielding Temple Knight Mezzalt and the black knight Ryukken immediately began bickering.

Incidentally, the Temple Knights had only arrived about five hours earlier.

“Hurry up and get ready! Don’t keep us waiting any longer!”

“Sir Mezzalt, the operation doesn’t begin for another three and a half chimes.”

Princess Mariest coolly shut down the fervent Temple Knight.

“Don’t waste your energy, either, Ryukken. Get some sleep with the other guys who just got here and rest up for the real battle.”

Hayato placated both sides and sent them to take a break.

“Let’s go, Satou.”

Seina came over to collect me.

She and I were going ahead to Den of Evil Six, where the demon lord would flee to later.

“Understood... Okay, I’ll see you all later.”

“Master, don’t do anything reckless.”

“Same to you, Arisa. Make sure no one gets hurt.”

Once I'd given a simple warning to my group, a Space Magic user from one of the succeeding squads brought Seina and me back to the surface. There was one in Hayato's squad, too, but if we took away their only Space Magic mage, they wouldn't be able to escape in case of an emergency, which is why we waited for the other squad to arrive.

"...Ugh, that feels gross. I still can't stand teleportation..."

Seina looked like she had motion sickness.

In this case, I had to agree. Since this sensation didn't happen when Arisa or I used it, it must have been due to the user's low skill level.

I thanked the Space Magic user nonetheless, and boarded a high-speed Saga Empire airship along with Seina.

As it was already prepared for departure, the airship took off before we had even closed the hatch behind us completely.

With a roaring sound, the airship ripped through the dry air and sped toward Den of Evil Six.



"Satou, this is a race against time from here on out."

"I know. Follow me, please."

I ran through Den Six as fast as I could without leaving Seina the scout behind.

According to the original plan, we should still have had plenty of time. Unfortunately, the black knight had insisted on cutting short the rest time that was supposed to be three and a half chimes—or seven hours—to only four hours. Thanks to him, we were stuck rushing to the meeting place at top speed.

Fortunately, we got the message right before the high-speed airship reached Den Six by way of a communication device, so we should still have been able to make it just in time.

I eliminated a few unlucky Sandstorm Soldiers who happened across our path by kicking their cores out, and kept running without slowing down.

"Ah-ha-ha, wow. No wonder you're a friend of Hayato's, huh?"

“Looks like you’re having no trouble keeping up, hmm? I’ll increase the speed a little more, then.”

“Wait, no! I’m barely keeping up as is! I can’t go that faaaaast!”

Despite her protests, I figured if Seina still had enough energy to complain, I could go even faster.

Thanks to these efforts, we managed to get to the hidden passage before Hayato and the others even began their battle.

From this point on, stealth was of the utmost importance.

After all, there were members of the Light of Freedom cult lurking around.

“Let’s go over the plan one more time.”

I was using the Space Magic spells Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to monitor the hero party and company.

Since Arisa’s Tactical Talk couldn’t cover this much distance, I had to rely on my own Space Magic this time.

“First, Mari and the rear guard will hit with their attack magic. That should wipe out all the lesser Sandstorm Soldiers. For the five big ones that’ll probably survive, we’ll have Team Ryukken, Team Mezzalt, Team Honey, and Team Hero take ‘em out.”

Hayato looked at each team in turn as he spoke.

“I’ll hold off the demon lord until you’ve all beaten the big Sandstorm Soldiers. Don’t forget to help the other teams with theirs once you’ve taken care of your own. We won’t start taking down the demon lord until we’ve gotten rid of all his minions first.”

Hayato stared especially long at the black knight and Temple Knight squads, probably to remind them not to ignore the plan and run in recklessly again.

“Let’s defeat the demon lord and make sure everyone comes home safe!”

With that, the demon lord stepped out onto the cliff that overlooked the Innermost Chamber.

“Magic Team, begin chants. Wait for Mari’s signal to finish your spells.”

Princess Mariest was using the Divine Talisman during her chant.

She was probably preparing a forbidden battle spell. Arisa and Mia began readying advanced Fire and Water Magic spells respectively, while the sage was chanting some kind of advanced Earth spell as opposed to his usual Shadow Magic.

“Satou?”

I was so focused on the sights and sounds coming in through my Space Magic that I jumped a little when Seina called me.

“There are footprints here that look like a patrol came through. They’re pretty fresh.”

“Let’s communicate with hand signals from here on out, then.”

I couldn’t tell Seina that I was avoiding the cultists using my radar, so I responded in what seemed like a safe way.

Even as I did so, the magical assault on the demon lord began.

A cloud of dust filled the Innermost Chamber, followed by a torrent of flames that likely came from Arisa.

The steam and fire began to clear the dust, revealing a glimpse of the battle situation within. The demon lord was surrounded by stone pillars that the sage seemed to have produced out of the ground; three of the large Sandstorm Soldiers were just barely hanging on, though visibly injured.

The demon lord looked relatively unharmed in spite of the forbidden spell. I assumed it was thanks to the Reflective Scales.

The sage’s Earth Magic seemed to have a large area of effect. There were thick stone pillars everywhere, impaling a fair amount of the midsize Sandstorm Soldiers.

“Let’s go! Follow me!”

Following the plan, Hayato the Hero charged at the demon lord, while the rest of the teams took on the remaining three large Sandstorm Soldiers.

The hero’s party took on the one in the center of the room, the black knight

and other Saga Empire soldiers took the one on the right, and the Temple Knights tackled the one on the left.

My group worked as a reserve squad, helping out anyone who seemed to need it most.

As I watched them battle, Seina and I forged onward while avoiding the Light of Freedom security net.

“Satou, are we there yet?” Seina pressed. “Hayato and the others have started fighting the demon lord.”

Evidently, she could send and receive basic signals through her Divine Talisman.

“Almost there.”

I glanced at my map.

We were definitely getting close.

GZYGABBBBO.

The demon lord howled, surrounded by Reflective Scales.

“Raaawr?”

“Can you tell what the demon lord is saying? I inquire.”

“Tama can’t tellll?”

“Pochi can’t really tell, either, sir.”

I listened to my companions’ exchange as we proceeded.

From the sound of it, resolving things peacefully with the demon lord was no longer an option, if it ever was before. The demon lord transformation seemed to have gone too far, rendering communication impossible.

“Satou, there’s someone up ahead.”

“It must be a Light of Freedom member. Let’s wait for a minute, then go through that passage.”

The other passages would be too roundabout. Instead, we waited in the shadows for the cultists to pass by.

In the meantime, the other group defeated the remaining three Sandstorm Soldiers, leaving only the demon lord.

“Rudoruu! Damn you, demon lord!”

One of the samurai was taken out of combat by a swipe of the demon lord’s claw, while a Temple Knight who was caught in the demon lord’s grasp withered away like a mummy, letting off black steam.

The demon lord was clearly far stronger than the last time we’d seen him, and not just in level. It had clearly gotten even more dangerous.

The Holy Sword wielder and the black knight were actually faring better than I expected, but Hayato, with the help of his party, seemed to be the only one who could land telling blows.

Liza thrust her spear into the demon lord’s arm.

In that moment of stillness, the Reflective Scales rained down on her.

“Liza!”

“I will protect you, I declare!”

Nana used her shield with the folded-up Fortress to guard Liza from the scales.

“Dangeryyy?”

“Thank you, Tama, sir!”

Tama’s Phalanx shield protected Pochi from a strike of the demon lord’s tail.

My palms were sweating as I cheered my friends on from afar.

At that moment, the demon lord unleashed a blast of sand in an effort to bury them all at once.

*“...■ **Pile-Up Wall** Sekisou Kouheki!”*

The wall the sage’s spell created only blocked the sand for a few seconds before shattering, but in those few seconds, everyone escaped to safety. The sage was surprisingly helpful in battle. If he’d been a little slower, I might have ended up using Unit Deployment to get my girls to safety, even if that was ill-advised.

The sage seemed to be focusing on support, using obstruction and defense spells to back people up, regardless of faction.

However, since he was doing so without saying a word, his support occasionally came across as a hindrance, at least according to the black knight's shouted insults.

"Is this the place? It's huge..."

While I watched the demon lord battle, we arrived at our destination.

It was ten or more times larger than the Tokyo Dome. In a space this big, we could easily attack with forbidden spells right away.

The ceiling and floor were jagged and uneven, like a limestone cavern, creating plenty of cover. I made note of a few areas that seemed like good spots for the rear guard to set up camp.

There were pools of sand scattered throughout, crawling with poisonous insects.

"Is that the altar?"

Seina pointed.

The structure was in a pit-like area in the center of the room.

It was adorned with an evil-looking statue, with stone pillars standing around it at uneven intervals.

Though I couldn't see them well in the dark, the dimly lit pillars were engraved with faces carved in expressions of anguish. It was the kind of thing I'd probably see in my nightmares if I looked at them for too long.

"Yes, so it would seem."

That was the spot I had marked on my map.

Around the altar, some Light of Freedom cultists were chanting something like a sutra as part of an arcane ritual; thirty-two Sandstorm Soldiers that were possessed by demons lurked outside the pillars.

Most of them had levels in the 30s, though two were in the 50s and one in the 60s.

I figured I'd leave one of the level 50s as EXP for my companions and destroy the other three strong ones in the midst of the opening barrage of magic attacks. It's always better to eliminate uncertain variables if possible.

While I was thinking about this, I kept watching the main battle by way of Space Magic.

All that was left to do was wait until the hero drove the demon lord into a corner, then followed him here when he fled.

"You think the demon lord's really gonna come?"

"For sure."

I was so distracted with worry about my friends that I gave a half-hearted answer to Seina.

Meanwhile, the hero's party landed a combo attack followed by special moves from the Holy Sword wielder and the black knight, then Hayato's special strike enhanced by his Unique Skills and scripture sliced through the Reflective Scales and pummeled the demon lord.

GZYGABBBBO.

As one of its arms was lopped off, the demon lord screamed, then disappeared.

"...Whoa. It really came."

As soon as it vanished from the other area, the demon lord appeared at the altar.

According to my AR display, it was down to about 60 percent of its health.

"Now it's your turn, Miss Seina."

"I know."

Seina pulled out her talisman, which flashed faintly.

"Looks like they're ready over there... Here we go, Satou."

I nodded at the tense scout.

"O Great Goddess Parion, hear my prayer! I offer up my wish and my life span

to summon the hero.”

Seina closed her eyes and held the talisman to her chest.

“I am Seina, a loyal follower of Hayato the Hero!”

The talisman let out a flash of blue light in response to her wish.

At the altar, the demonic Sandstorm Soldiers and scimitar-armed Light of Freedom cultists whirled to look at us.

“Yeah, I figured they’d see that...”

Despite Seina’s usual light tone, I could see that she was covered in sweat. Summoning the hero must have taken a considerable toll.

“It was a beautiful sight, though.”

The light from the talisman, that is.

“Aww, c’mon, you’re making me blush. But my heart and life belong to Hayato, ’kay?”

The cultists who’d performed the ritual and the demon lord who’d just teleported here were still kneeling around the altar—it didn’t look like they’d be moving anytime soon.

However, the Sandstorm Soldiers and armed cultists who were on standby around them were surging toward us to attack.

“This might be kinda bad, huh...?”

Seina used her multishot crossbow, which was automatically supplied with arrows, to shoot at the speed-type Sandstorm Soldiers that were coming out ahead of the rest. Her aim was shaky, probably due to exhaustion.

I drew my bow as well, shooting at the wings of the flying-type Sandstorm Soldiers and the knee joints of the speed-type ones.

The larger ones, too, were practically on top of us in a matter of seconds.

“I can’t die until Hayato gets here, y’know.”

“You’re not going to die, Seina.”

I knew that for a fact.

Because a true hero always shows up in the nick of time.

Hayato the Hero

I've traveled the world to carry out the young Goddess Parion's holy mission. The demon lord we finally found has escaped us several times, but now we finally have it cornered. All that's left is to put our strength together and take it down. (Hero Hayato Masaki)

"Your hero has arrived!"

With a ripple in the air, the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* returned to this world.

There.

In the gloom of the cavern, I saw the demon lord glowing with purple light.

It's not that I didn't believe the reports from Satou and Seina; still, it's only now that I saw it with my own eyes that I finally felt like we had the demon lord cornered.

I spotted Seina and Satou out of the corner of my eye.

"Looks like I'm just in time!"

Sandstorm Soldiers and creepy cultists with curved swords were closing in on the pair.

"Main battery, fire!"

I shouted into the speaking tube—like communication device, and the already-prepared main guns of the *Jules Verne* mowed down the Sandstorm Soldier swarm with laser beams.

Satou and Seina took this opportunity to quickly retreat farther back.

Nice, you guys catch on quick.

"Rin, now!"

""Hell Thunder!""

On my signal, Mari and Rin unleashed the joint magic they'd been keeping at the ready.

Thin bolts of lightning formed between the ceiling and floor of the giant cavern, entwining around the Sandstorm Soldiers and the demon lord. After this unassuming opening, loud rumbling and bright flashes filled the room, followed by a massive cloud of dust and a strong smell of ozone.

No matter how many times I see it, the power of this spell always blows my mind.

The torrent of dust sent Seina and Satou flying, and even pushed back the floating *Jules Verne*.

I tried not to worry—knowing Satou and Seina, they'd pull through just fine.

“There's about seven big ones left.”

“Maybe they're possessed by demons? Those ones are always stubborn.”

I counted the shadows I saw through the dust.

For some reason, I couldn't seem to find those two particularly strong ones. I thought they were around level 60-something Sandstorm Soldiers like the demon lord imitators, but if they were weaker than they looked and went down easily, I certainly wasn't complaining.

“Classic Master moment... Mia!”

“Leviathan Breath!”

Honey's voice was drowned out by the little elf girl unleashing a spell.

A huge amount of mana converted into magic, and a whirling torrent of water with laser-like concentration blew off a large Sandstorm Soldier's head and careened right into the demon lord.

It was too strong to be even an advanced spell—that must have been a secret forbidden spell of the elves.

It was certainly worthy of the “forbidden” class, yet it barely did any damage to the demon lord, who used layers of Reflective Scales to knock the torrent off course.

The spell crashed into the ceiling instead, knocking down rocks and stalactites along with the dust.

“White Inferno!”

Without missing a beat, my honey launched a forbidden spell of her own.



A raging pillar of fire, like the advanced flame attack spell *Inferno*, except with searing white flames, engulfed the Sandstorm Soldiers and the demon lord.

While it lacked the concentrated density of the elf girl's spell, its area of effect and permeability were probably higher.

The white-hot flames licked around the Reflective Scales and burned the demon lord's body, and a torrent of hot steam shot right toward us at explosive speed.

I prepared my Holy Shield, but the force field around the *Jules Verne* protected us.

The water from the elf girl's forbidden spell must have gotten evaporated by the flames and caused a steam eruption.

"Looks like it's just the demon lord and one big one now."

Both had taken some serious damage and didn't look like they'd be moving anytime soon.

"Those kids have some serious firepower."

"No kidding. I'm scared to see how strong they'll grow up to be."

While they couldn't compete with a simultaneously cast forbidden spell from Mari and the other two using their talismans, I bet their spells combined packed a similar punch.

Honey and the elf were down for the count due to lack of MP.

Mari and the others would be focusing on recovering their MP with potions and skills for a little while, too.

That meant it was our turn.

"Sir Hero, the enemy is at our mercy!"

The moment the *Jules Verne* arrived, Ryukken the black knight went rushing into battle.

"I am the Temple Knight Sir Mezzalt, chosen by the Holy Sword Blutgang as the greatest wielder in Parion Province!"

Mezzalt ran in after him, his Holy Sword glittering with blue light.

In their eagerness to earn glory, they were ignoring the plan and charging in blindly.

“Those idiots...!”

The sage muttered in annoyance.

Seina and Satou wriggled out from under the sand and ran over to us.

“Luckily, there’s only the demon lord and one large Sandstorm Soldier. I’d like your team to take the latter, Satou. Rudoruu and Kwandoh will support Satou, just as we planned. Sir Sage, I need you to back them up, too.”

As soon as I saw everyone nod, I took off with my Flying Shoes.

In back of me, I heard Rusus and Fifi leap forward with a shout. A quick glance over my shoulder told me that Wee and Seinā were close behind.

All the way to the rear, I saw the *Jules Verne* sink back into another dimension.

Satou and the others drew off the large Sandstorm Soldier with help from the samurai and the sage, leading it some distance away so that we could fight the demon lord unhindered.

No doubt Satou and his crew would pull it off, especially with the sage’s help.

GZYGABBBBBBO.

The demon lord howled, easily fending off the premature charge from Ryukken and Mezzalt.

Despite how out of their league the pair seemed, I knew for a fact that they were no weaklings. Ryukken was an elite knight among even the powerful warriors of the Saga Empire, enough so that he was chosen for the prototype of the black knight’s armor; Mezzalt was the best Temple Knight in Parion Province, which is why he received the Holy Sword from the pontiff.

Yet even those two were being flicked away like flies.

That’s a demon lord for you. I couldn’t ask for a worthier opponent.

“Strength, come to me. <Sing,> Arondight! <Dance,> Tunas!”

I used my muscle-enhancing “Strength” skill and invoked the scriptures of my Holy Sword and armor.

Pure blue mana overflowed from the chest of my armor, coursing through me and into my Holy Sword.

Steadying my mind so that I wouldn’t give in to the intoxicating sense of power, I used the Unique Skills Parion gave me.

“Grant my sword an Unstoppable Strike and make my shield an Immovable Shield!”

Phosphorescent blue light flowed through me a second time.

The demon lord was right before my eyes. I used “Warp” to leap into its range, ready to strike at the opening that Ryukken and the others created.

“‘Shining Helix Slash’!”

I unleashed the attack straight toward the demon lord’s chest.

Blue sparks scattered as my sword pierced through the layers of protection, and the tip of my blade closed in on the demon lord’s heart.

GZYGABBBBBBO.

Metallic purple light gathered in front of my blade’s edge.

The demon lord had created more Reflective Scales.

I mustered all of the strength in my body and took a strong step forward, trying to pierce through the new protection.

It was deep and dense. While the Unstoppable Strike Unique Skill allowed my sword to pierce through all of it, there was a great deal of resistance at every layer.

And the demon lord created countless more layers right in front of my sword.

Eventually, I ran out of momentum.

GZYGABBBBBBBO.

The demon lord thrashed around, along with the Reflective Scales that my Holy Sword had pierced, throwing me off-balance.

His segmented tail closed in on my other side, where I was holding my shield.

The demon lord's evil countenance contorted with triumph. He probably thought he had won—*yeah, right.*

I'll show you who you're really dealing with here.

I kicked off into the air with my Flying Shoes, doing a flip in midair to block the tail with my shield without letting go of my Holy Sword.

Blue light clashed against dark purple, but the attack couldn't possibly pierce my Holy Shield when it was imbued with Immovable Shield.

Thanks to the force behind the tail attack, I was able to free my sword from the layers of Reflective Scales.

The demon lord quickly followed up with a slash of its poisonous claws.

Are you sure you should be focusing all your attention on me, pal?

"Raaaah! 'Twinblade Dance'!"

"Time to die! 'Bradley Buster'!"

Closing in from the demon lord's blind spots, Rusus unleashed a magnificent whirl of her dual broadswords to destroy the demon lord's barrier, while Fifi swung her enormous long-handled ax to crush his miasma armor with one massive blow.

GZYGABBBBBBBO.

By the time the alarmed demon lord brandished his Reflective Scales in the direction of the unexpected attacks, Rusus and Fifi had already jumped back to safety.

"Hi-yaaaa!"

"'Divine Punishment'!"

Ryukken's Magic Sword carved a red line in the air, while Mezzalt's Holy Sword Blutgang scattered dazzling blue light as they charged at the demon lord.

GZYGABBBBBBBO.

Not good.

The demon lord had read their attacks.

“Look out!”

Before my warning could fully reach them, Reflective Scales were already closing in.

“Nnnngh!”

“Gaaaaah!”

Despite their speedy reactions, the rain of scales still dealt them considerable damage.

Ryukken’s blacksteel armor was tough enough that even the Reflective Scales couldn’t cut through it completely in one attack, but Mezzalt’s mithril alloy armor was evidently more fragile—he looked to have lost his shield and one arm in the attack.

“Loleiya, Wee, hurry!”

Wee retrieved Mezzalt’s arm, and Loleiya’s Holy Magic managed to reattach it.

Ryukken seemed to have gotten off with only some bruises.

“Damn scales!”

“What a pain...!”

Rusus and Fifi were frantically dodging Reflective Scales.

These scales really were dangerous. Between their serious defensive abilities and offense that was strong enough to slice through armor, they were a poor matchup for Rusus and Fifi, who wore light armor and specialized in close combat.

“Ngaaah!”

Ryukken was actually helping more than I thought.

In spite of his injuries, he stayed on the battlefield as a sub-tank, giving me a little more breathing room to whittle away at the demon lord’s HP.

Once Mezzalt returned to the front lines, he held back on big flashy moves,

instead building up damage over time with simple swordsmanship.

If we could just hold on until Mari and Rin recovered their magic, we should have a good shot at victory.

“Rusuuuuus!”

Rusus failed to evade an attack and was sent tumbling across the ground, leaving a cloud of dust behind her.

“Aaaagh!”

Moments later, Ryukken’s parry fell short, and he was knocked away, shield and all.

I guess the level difference is too much to overcome...

Attacks that I could handle easily enough might very well be fatal to the likes of Rusus or Ryukken.

The demon lord was level 72. While I was level 69, most of my group were in the mid-50s, with Rin leading the pack at level 58. Ryukken and Mezzalt were both level 51.

...Still, level is just a suggestion.

The yellow greater demon that trounced us so easily was level 71, yet he was far more dangerous than this demon lord. His obvious battle experience and ability to attack our weak points with a wide array of magic made him much more difficult to deal with than raw power alone.

Even so, that didn’t mean this demon lord was weak.

I checked the demon lord’s stats in hopes of finding any kind of weakness that might give my allies an advantage.

Interestingly, the demon lord’s status said “Corrupted.” That was the same status condition I had when I was under the Evil God’s curse.

Had the demon lord somehow gotten himself cursed, too?

Or did his transformation into a demon lord just progress too far...?

“Gaaaah!”

The sage was knocked in our direction from that of the demon-possessed Sandstorm Soldier and crashed right into the demon lord's head.

"What in the world is he doing?"

"Oh, hey, this could be good."

The sage used Shadow Magic to cover the demon lord's eyes.

...An Item Box?

I saw the sage produce something from an Item Box as he hung on to the demon lord's head.

Then, just as he jumped away, there was a massive explosion where he had been.

GZYGABBBBBBO.

The demon lord howled in apparent agony.

"An explosion?"

"Did he put a bomb there or something?"

While it didn't seem all that powerful, it created a serious gap in the demon lord's defenses.

Ryukken and Mezzalt struck at the gap right away.

"Yaaaaargh! 'Black Rose Hurricane'!"

Ryukken pummeled the demon lord with a rapid-fire barrage of attacks, his Magic Sword scattering light that looked like black rose petals. It was fairly impressive.

"With <Honor>—'Arc Blazer'!"

Mezzalt strengthened his Holy Sword Blutgang with a scripture invocation, then slashed the demon lord's torso with an arc of glaringly bright blue light.

A moment after the strike flashed across the surface, sand-colored blood gushed out from the wound.

"Nice one!—'Twinblade Dance'!"

"Take this, too, bastard! 'Bradley Buster'!"

Rusus and Fifi followed with their own special attacks, knocking the demon lord's chin up and throwing it off-balance.

"Shiga Kingdom sword style—secret technique 'Cherry Blossom Flash'!"

Rin popped up from behind with "Warp" and sprinted through the sky with "Skywalking," leaving a visual effect like cherry blossom petals in her wake, and struck the demon lord's defenseless throat with her special move.

"Too shallow...!" Rin muttered, frustrated.

Her cut had only made it about a third of the way into the demon lord's neck.

"'Assassin Backstab'!"

Creeping up from behind, Seina's attack pierced the demon lord's spinal cord.

It hit the demon lord's neck directly, since the rapid-fire onslaught of our friends' attacks had broken through the barrier, but a jab from a dagger wasn't enough to do serious damage to the demon lord.

Seina escaped as the demon lord swiped at her.

"<Sing,> Arondight! <Dance,> Tunas!"

I reactivated my scriptures, which had worn off.

The blue light surrounded my body, and pure mana flowed from the chest of my Holy Armor into my Holy Sword.

"I bind thee—'Chain Arrow Circle'!"

Just as the demon lord started to move, Wee's arrow created a barrier that entrapped it.

"Nice one, Wee. You're the best."

Now it was my turn.

"...'Shining Blade'!"

I took a heavy step forward, sending up a cloud of dust, and swung my Holy Sword from behind in a special attack with maximum momentum. The blade carved a blue line through the air, creating a shimmering arc that scattered in a flash of light.

The demon lord's head was sliced clean off, and his headless body fell to the ground.

"Did we win?!" Ryukken shouted.

"Looks like he's still alive."

My "Analyze" skill told me as much.

"Shadow Jail!"

"Mana Chain Hold!"

The sage and Mari held the demon lord in place.

I strode closer, raising my Holy Sword as I looked down at the demon lord's head.

"This is the e—"

"Hayato!"

Just as Rin cried out to me, I reflexively swung my sword to cut down the thing that came flying at me from my blind spot.

"...A bundle of straw? No, a doll?"

I looked down at the thing I had slashed, puzzled.

GZIMGYBBBBO.

The demon lord's head howled.

His bloodshot eyes were utterly fixated on the halved doll.

Without a doubt, it was the same doll that the demon lord had charged into the cathedral to take back.

Why was it here? No, where did it come from...?

The culprit was on top of a cliff. It was an imp, a small demon no larger than a puppy. The thing let out a cackle like nails on a chalkboard.

"...Hayato!"

The cry this time was from Rusus, who had the "Intuition" skill.

She was looking at an area near the demon lord, where the sand appeared to

be shifting slightly.

“Get away from the demon lord!”

As I shouted, I activated another layer of my Immovable Shield skill.

Only Rusus and Fifi were able to react in time. Before the confused Ryukken and Mezzalt could retreat, a fierce sandstorm full of crackling lightning engulfed us all.

Even with my Holy Shield enhanced with a Unique Skill, the fierce winds and sand felt like they might pulverize me into nothing.

Finally, the seemingly eternal torture came to an end.

As the sandstorm began to slow, I peered out from behind my shield to check on my companions.

Behind me, Loleiya and Mari were safe. They’d protected themselves respectively with an emergency shield and a Holy Magic spell cast in advance.

Rusus and Fifi, who’d dodged in time, were covered in scratches but had managed to evacuate near Loleiya. Wee had used her Divine Talisman to protect herself. I was glad she survived, but clearly it had taken its toll—she was in a state of exhaustion.

As for my honey and her friends...

While their shield user Nana was half-buried in sand, the others were all safe behind her.

No wonder they call the Pendragon crew “Untouchable.”

The demonic Sandstorm Soldier they were fighting had been driven back to the wall but was somehow still alive, probably thanks to its blasted physical resistance.

As for everyone else...

I had to assume the sage was alive, although I didn’t see him anywhere. He probably retreated into a shadow.

Rudoruu and Kwandoh were safe, albeit with a few broken ribs or arms.

Ryukken was just barely alive. I saw Mezzalt on the verge of death near my

honey's group, his leg twisted at an unnatural angle. The two of them might have been in danger of dying if we left them alone, but I couldn't afford to send Loleiya over when they were so far away.

Luckily, Satou and his party were heading over to help them. I decided to trust that he would take care of it.

More importantly: the demon lord.

The head I'd severed was now reattached to his body, and worse, his HP and MP were completely recovered.

But it wasn't like we'd gone back to square one. No, it was far worse than that. The demon lord was twice as large as before, with two extra arms and a pair of bat-like wings.

That wasn't even that bad in itself. I've played enough video games to expect a boss to come back in an even nastier form.

The real problem was his level. Where the demon lord had been level 72 before, now he was up to 82. This might be too much even for me, let alone my companions.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

Purple light that was nearly black coursed through the demon lord's body, producing dozens of Reflective Scales.

It looked like the next round was about to begin.



GZYGABBBBBBBO.

The demon lord howled, firing off a second and third blast of sand.

Mere moments after the second round began, we were driven back to hide behind cover and rethink our strategy, unable to contend with the demon lord's rapid barrage of sandstorms.

Satou and his group had brought Rudoruu and the others to retreat to a nearby passage. The demon-possessed Sandstorm Soldier seemed to have followed them, but I was sure they could handle it on their own.

I looked into the faces of each of my companions in turn.

“From here on out, I’ll handle the front lines alone,” I said. “Rusus and Fifi, you protect Mari and the others.”

“Nah. We’re coming with you.”

“Yeah, I don’t care if it costs me my life. I’ll make an opening for you to take the demon lord down.”

“Rusus... Fifi...”

I put my hands over each of theirs.

“Mari, once we break through the demon lord’s defenses, hit him with all your forbidden spells before he recharges them.”

“...Understood.”

“Hayato...”

Mari and Rin hung their heads in sorrow.

Even though I didn’t spell it out, I guess they realized that I meant they’d have to hit *me* with the forbidden spells, too.

“Wee and Seina will shoot from afar and get Rusus and Fifi to safety when they go down.”

“Yikes, you’re just assuming we’re gonna go down?”

“That’s harsh, Hayato.”

I responded to their joking tones with an equally light “my bad,” trying to shake off the heavy mood.

I’m not sure if I pulled it off very well, though.

“Just make sure you don’t die. As long as you’re still alive, Loleiya can heal you.”

I pulled out potions from my Inventory and handed them to everyone.

“We’ll go in at full strength and defeat the demon lord before the speed potions wear off.”

“Right!”

Since speed potions have serious side effects, I would've preferred not to use them.

We never touched them during the Den of Evil investigations or in any of the previous demon lord battles. They're one of our last resorts.

We piled on as much Support Magic as we could on top of that. I used my scriptures and Unique Skills, and we jumped out from behind our cover.

“‘Shining Blade’!”

I used a special attack to scatter the Reflective Scales that came after me, and I charged toward the demon lord.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

The rest of the scales attacked us at random.

I kept blocking them with my Holy Sword and shield, cutting a path forward.

Then—a spray of blood to my right.

“Rusus! Damn you!”

Fifi cried out in despair.

Rusus had been cut in half at the waist.

I forced myself to resist the desire to rush to her side, and used “Warp” to close in on the demon lord.

“‘Shining Helix Slash’!”

With a swirl of blue light, my attack cut through the demon lord's defenses, scattering purple shards.

But this time, instead of destroying the barrier in one go, my attack got stopped.

So this is what a difference in level can do...

But I wasn't going to give up that easily.

If it didn't work the first time, I'd just repeat it again and again.

“This is for Rusuuuus!”

Oh no.

Fifi flew into a rage and fired off a special attack at the demon lord.

The metallic purple light flashed right through Fifi's body.

"Fifi...!"

The diagonal slash spewed blood, and Fifi crumpled.

Not yet. She's not dead yet.

I used "Warp" to get between the demon lord and Fifi, protecting her from his next attack.

As the Support Magic effects faded, I managed to block seven more Reflective Scales before I couldn't handle any more.

The eighth Reflective Scale cut through the side of my Holy Armor, where my Unique Skill was wearing off; the ninth cut my helmet in two.

Blood dripped down my forehead and into one of my eyes, staining half my vision with red.

The tenth Reflective Scale was knocked back by Wee's arrow and Rin's Explosion Magic.

The eleventh Reflective Scale I managed to block by dragging my Holy Sword up, but that was the last of my strength.

The twelfth and thirteenth Reflective Scales closed in on me when I couldn't possibly avoid them.

I wouldn't be able to dodge both at once.

My best bet was to give up on dodging and try to hit the demon lord with one last blow.

"AAAAAAAARGH!"

Just as I was unleashing my special attack, a new Reflective Scale appeared right in front of the demon lord's face.

My Holy Sword stuck into the scale and stopped.

Dammit, I guess this is it.

My last-ditch effort was blocked.

Even if I could get Mari to use her magic attacks, they'd be blocked by the dense barrier.

No...I refuse to let it end like this!

I looked around wildly, desperate for something to break through this hopeless situation.

...They stopped?

The Reflective Scales that were closing in on my neck from either side had stopped moving.

"What is this...? Space Magic Deracinator and Dimension Pile?"

Sir Hero. Don't worry, I'll protect you.

I heard my honey's voice seemingly from nowhere.

I'm sending the best backup ever your way.

Blue light broke through the Reflective Scales.

I saw him within the scattering fragments of light.

"That you, Satou...?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Hayato."

The backup my honey sent parried an endless barrage of Reflective Scales with a blade that glowed blue in his hands, even crashing two into each other to break them both.

"That sword..."

I recognized the sword in Satou's hand.

It was Mezzalt's Holy Sword, Blutgang.

"I borrowed it for a moment."

Satou shouldn't have been able to use a divinely gifted Holy Sword without going through the ceremony and earning the right to wield it.

Yet here he was, brandishing it without any resistance from the sword.

“I healed Miss Rusus and Miss Fifi with lesser elixirs and handed them off to Miss Weeyari and the others.”

“They’re both okay?!”

Satou nodded.

I couldn’t believe that he’d saved not just me but my friends as well. Just like my honey said, he really was the best backup ever.

“Now, I don’t know if this will work on a demon lord, but...”

Satou produced a hand-size bell from a pouch at his waist.

My “Analyze” skill told me that it was a Magic Item called the Demon-Sealing Bell.

When he shook it, it produced a clear ringing that echoed in the chamber.

I could see with my “Analyze” skill that the demon lord’s attack and defense had dropped significantly.

So it seals demon lords, too.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

Satou squared off against the demon lord, unshaken by his howl of rage.

“With <Honor>...”

Oh, come on.

“So on top of being able to wield a Holy Sword like a hero, you can even use its scripture perfectly?”

I stood at my dependable friend’s side, trying to wipe the grin off my face.

Using my third Unique Skill, Infinite Healing, I cured my wounds and began taking on the Reflective Scales along with Satou, who had begun simply destroying them instead of parrying them.

“Perhaps it’s an act of kindness from Goddess Parion.”

“Good to hear. I’m counting on you to have my back, bud.”

“Yes, of course.”

Trusting Satou to take care of any Reflective Scales that snuck up on my blind spot, I charged toward the demon lord himself.

Much to my surprise, Satou was able to keep pace and support me despite the speed potion that allowed me to move and fight ultra-fast.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

The demon lord howled, and insect-like legs burst out of his back, four more on each side.

They were four times longer than the demon lord's arms, with three joints, making it hard to tell what they would do next.

Each one ended in a nail made of the same substance as the Reflective Scales, and the damn things grew back as fast as I could cut them off.

Yet despite this seemingly disastrous new development, I was able to fight so smoothly that it didn't even seem to matter.

It was Satou.

He backed me up in a way that made it easier for me to focus on fighting.

"No way, how is Satou able to fight like that? He's only level forty-five..."

"The Holy Sword...? No, that can't be it, right?"

"Yeah, no. Its owner Mezzalt wasn't able to break the scales at all."

I heard Seina and Wee conversing as they shot off attacks to keep the demon lord in check.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

The demon lord stopped moving and drew in his arms.

He was up to something.

"Sir Hayato!"

"Satou, stay close to me!"

I activated my Unique Skill and drew Satou into the space between me and my shield.

An instant later, the sand around the demon lord whirled up into the air,

creating another lightning-charged sandstorm. This time, it was a dark and ominous black.

But it wasn't as strong as I expected.

In fact, it was as if someone was interfering with the sandstorm to prevent it from reaching me.

I still took a little bit of damage, but Infinite Healing restored me right away.

And eventually, the seemingly endless storm ceased once again.

"We survived somehow...that was crazy strong."

His attack done, the demon lord jabbed his legs into the ground around him, almost as if he were locking himself inside a cage of his own making.

"Agreed. I thought I might be done for."

"You look fine to me..."

Even with my shield and body protecting him, how was it that Satou didn't have a single scratch on him?

"Is something the matter?"

"No, it's nothing. Mari! Let's finish the demon lord off before he starts moving again!"

This was our perfect opportunity.

But there was no response from Mari and the others.

"Mari! Rin! Loleiya!"

My friends were lying on the ground, some kind of black steam rising from their bodies.

My "Divine Analysis" skill told me that it was the same Evil God's curse that had afflicted me before.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

The demon lord began moving again, his period of stillness over.

"Sorry, Satou. I got you into a bad deal here."

Now we would have to fight the demon lord just two on one, without my party to support us.

“Not at all, Sir Hayato.”

The Holy Sword Blutgang glowed blue in Satou’s hands.

“This isn’t a bad deal in the least. Besides, it’s not like you to give up so easily.”

“Not like me, huh...?”

I guess I let my fears get the best of me for a second there.

“Yeah, you’re right. I almost forgot...”

I activated my Unique Skills again.

“...I’m a hero. Hayato the Hero, chosen by the young Goddess Parion!”

Leaping in front of the demon lord with “Warp,” I began the motions of my special attack.

This was our last chance, while the Reflective Scales were gone.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

The demon lord’s insect legs closed in on me from either side to take me out.

But I wasn’t going to dodge them. I had faith that Satou would protect me.

“‘Shining Blade’!”

There was less resistance than before.

My first special attack broke right through the barrier.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Satou slice off one of the insect legs with “Cherry Blossom Flash,” then zip toward the other to use it again.

Rin’s technique was fast, sure, but I’d never seen it this fast before.

Not to be outdone, I unleashed a second attack.

“Again...! ‘Shining Blade’!”

Trailing blue light in an arc, my diagonal slash sliced through the dark black armor protecting the demon lord.

But it didn't do much damage.

"Shoot, too shallow...!"

I heard Satou mutter, sounding uncharacteristically perturbed.

He must have failed at cutting off the second leg.

"I've got this."

Wee's arrow struck the insect leg.

The nail still bore down toward my shoulder, though it was slowed somewhat by the shot.

"'Protection'!"

With Rin's shout, a barrier appeared in front of the insect leg.

I looked away from the barrier protecting me and focused on my next move.

Twisting around in midair, I used the centrifugal force to spin right into another attack.

As I turned, I saw my companions: Wee, who'd used up the last of her strength to shoot that last arrow, and Seina, who was supporting her; and Rin, who was collapsing into the sand with a satisfied expression, the Divine Talisman still clutched in her hand. No doubt Loleiya was the one who gave them the strength to move at all.

With silent gratitude for all their support, I activated another Unstoppable Strike.

GZIMGYBBBBO.

Dark purple light gathered in front of the demon lord.

It was about to form more Reflective Scales.

"...'Shining Helix Slash'!"

Just before the metallic purple light could take on physical form, I unleashed an attack at lightning speed, and pure blue light overtook the dark shape and plunged straight toward the demon lord.

But there wasn't quite enough force behind it.

I sent the massive amount of mana produced by my Holy Armor Tunas flowing into the Holy Sword.

The demon lord caught my sword with one hand and reached back with the other to rip me to shreds.

“‘Draconic Thunder’!”

I just barely heard Mari’s voice.

A spear of lightning in the shape of a dragon pierced into the demon lord’s brain.

As the burning smell of ozone filled the air, two shadows jumped into view.

“Hayato!”

“Finish him!”

Rusus’s broadswords and Fifi’s battle-ax struck down the demon lord’s arm before it could crush me. The pair then crashed to the ground, paying the price for pushing themselves too far.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

Satou’s Holy Sword pinned the demon lord’s segmented tail to the ground before it could attack me next.

Damn, I’ve got a really reliable group of pals here.

“RAAAAAAAH! ‘SHINING BLADE’!”

With my Holy Sword still thrust into the demon lord, I activated another special attack.

Blue light welled up underneath his skin, tearing the demon lord apart from the inside.

GZIMGYBBBBBO.

Even with his health at zero and his body beginning to fall apart, the demon lord didn’t go down.

Fresh Reflective Scales appeared beside him.

I’m not letting you fight back now.

“Go to hell, demon looooooooooord!”

I twisted the blade with the special attack still pulsing through it, and the blade of blue light that pierced through his body finally destroyed the demon lord completely.



The Victory Banquet

Satou here. Once a hero has fulfilled his duty, it's common practice for him to reluctantly return home, especially to a certain land of light. But outside the realm of fiction, it's often not quite so simple.

"Go to hell, demon looooooooooord!"

GZIMGYBoOooo.

Hayato's special attack burst out, and the demon lord let out a dying scream and crumpled at last into purple smoke and a vast pile of sand.

I checked the information in my log.

> **Title Acquired: Demon Lord Slayer: Sandstorm Lord**

> **Title Acquired: Right-Hand Man**

> **Title Acquired: Unsung Hero**

Yep, looks like that actually took it out.

"Sir Hayato, congratulations on defeating the demon lord."

"Yeah, we finally brought him down."

Supporting the unsteady Hayato, I looked up at the mountain of sand the demon lord had left behind.

A broken dark violet orb that had likely been the demon lord's core was visible among the rubble.

"Hayato...!"

Hearing Princess Mariest call out, I turned around to see the rest of the hero's party, with my own companions supporting them.

"We did it, guys."

"Not yet. Everyone, get your talismans ready..."

At Mariest's prompting, the other followers of the hero produced their Divine Talismans.

"There they are!"

She pointed at two small purple lights that were floating up from the area of the orb.

The God Fragments.

"Whee, wahoo, whoopie!"

"Heh-heh-heh, wah-ha-ha-ha!"

These ones were somehow different from the God Fragments I'd seen before.

Somehow, they reminded me of druggies who'd gotten high off some illegal substance.

"Divine Talismans! <Seal> the evil away!"

The hero's party thrust their Divine Talismans toward the God Fragments and shouted.

A blue lattice formed around the purple lights, and they were sucked into Mariest's talisman, which was larger than the others.

So that's how past heroes had gotten rid of the Fragments. Makes sense to me.

"H-Hayato!"

Miss Ringrande's cry of distress rang out in the enormous altar room.

Blue light was pouring down from somewhere up above, enveloping Hayato.

The exhausted-looking hero looked up at the source of the light, his lips moving.

Though it was hard to make out much with all the glimmering light around him, I could tell that the word "Parion" was somewhere among whatever he said.

Thank you.

I thought I heard a young girl's voice speak to me from the blue light.

Unless it was my imagination, that must have been the mysterious blue-haired little girl who called me to Hayato's rescue. I guess that really was Parion after all, then.

Eventually, the light faded, and silence filled the room.

Ringrande gazed at Hayato, wearing a complicated expression that seemed to say, "I want to ask, but I also don't want to know."

"That was from Parion," he said at last. "She's picking me up tomorrow morning."

Evidently, Hayato the Hero was going back to his own world.

"N-no! That's much too soon!"

Ringrande cried out as she wrapped her arms around Hayato.

"...I'm sorry, Rin."

Hayato gently stroked her hair.

"Hayato...do you really have to go back?"

Princess Mariest hesitated before she asked her question.

"Sorry, Mari," Hayato answered quietly. "I've got people waiting for me back home."

"...Right. Of course."

Princess Mariest turned away to hide the tears welling up in her eyes. She must have already known the answer.

The rest of his companions fell silent, too, and a heavy sense of sorrow filled the room.

"...Come on, let's celebrate!"

It was Arisa who broke the dismal silence with a cheerful voice.

"You just defeated a demon lord. We've got to throw the biggest banquet ever!"

"Yeah, let's party!"

"Leave the eating to me!"

Rusus and Fifi were the first to jump at Arisa's suggestion.

I could tell from the forced excitement in their voices that they were just as devastated as the others.

"Mm-hmm, I'll make Hayato's favorites—Saga beef *nikumaki* and fried rice."

"I'll bring out my best brandy, too."

Weeyari and Loleiya joined in on the cheerful chatter.

Ringrande and Mariest were clearly still brooding, but they didn't seem to have any objections to the celebration, at least.

"Mew!"

Tama's ears twitched, and she looked at the pile of sand the demon lord left behind.

The shadow it cast was shifting, forming a human shape.

"It appears I returned too late."

I was bracing myself for an enemy to appear. Instead, it was the sage.

I'd forgotten that he retreated into a shadow during the first sandstorm attack.

"Satou."

Mia tugged my sleeve, so I lowered my ear to her level.

"Miasma."

At her prompting, I activated my "Miasma Vision" and saw that the Den of Evil was filled with far thicker miasma than the last time I'd checked—maybe even a dozen times worse. The area around the demon lord's pile of sand was especially dense. Maybe the corruption that strengthened the demon lord had created this miasma.

At any rate, it probably wouldn't be safe to ignore it.

"Satou, we're heading back!"

The dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* appeared behind Hayato.

He and his party were loading the wounded in to return to the holy capital.

“Sir Hayato! We’re going to make sure the Light of Freedom cultists didn’t leave anything dangerous behind before we head back.”

“...All right. You better be back before I leave tomorrow!”

Hayato hesitated a moment before agreeing, not quite able to say it was unnecessary.

“Yes, of course. If you could send an airship to the Den of Evil’s entrance, that would be a great help.”

“Sure thing. I’ll make sure it’s a fast one.”

With that, Hayato and the others boarded the *Jules Verne* and left.

Once I was sure they were gone, I activated my spirit light to purge the miasma. Since that didn’t feel like enough on its own, I also set up some of my mass-produced Holy Stones throughout the area for good measure.

“Master, what are you doing?”

“I thought it might be good to make a gravestone.”

Even if we didn’t know what its name might have once been, I wanted to at least show respect for the life that was lost.

I mended the doll that I’d collected during the battle and placed it at the demon lord’s grave.

“Ameeen?”

“Rest in peace, sir.”

We all paid our respects to the fallen.

Since there was still some time left before the miasma was purified completely, I had everyone help me collect the Light of Freedom–related documents I found on my map.

While most of them had been lost in the battle against the demon lord, I was able to figure out that they were plotting to create more miasma in the Dens of Evil to mass-produce Sandstorm Soldiers and invade Parion Province.

“Was their ultimate goal world domination? What kind of old-fashioned league of evil villains is that?”

“Well, you probably could conquer a country or two with a demon lord on your side.”

The documents also revealed a few new hideouts. Hopefully I could get the pontiff or the cardinal to wipe out the rest of the Light of Freedom cult.

By the time I was done investigating, the combination of my spirit light and the Holy Stones had gotten rid of most of the miasma.

It helped that the place seemed to be structured so that miasma flowed more easily. Lucky for me, just cleansing the altar room reduced the miasma levels in the rest of the Den of Evil.



“Now, let’s celebrate the defeat of the demon lord! Cheers!”

“Hear, hear!”

As we opened bottles of all kinds of choice liquor, the table was overflowing with an array of Hayato’s favorite and most memorable dishes that Princess Mariest had prepared.

There were a lot of meat-based dishes, a hint at Hayato’s personal preferences.

Since my kids were forbidden from drinking, they were focused primarily on the food.

We’d returned to the holy city just before sundown, too late for Lulu and me to help with the dishes.

During the banquet, the table setting and serving was being handled by a group of gorgeous maids, courtesy of the Saga Empire.

“Satou! You drinkin’ or what?”

“Yes, of course.”

Hayato came over with a bottle of sake in one hand, pouring it into my cup.

I returned the favor by pouring dragonspring liquor from the table into his.

“I can’t thank you enough for the help. If it weren’t for you, my honey, and the rest of your friends, I don’t think we could’ve beaten that demon lord.”

“We only helped a little bit, really. You deserve all the credit for defeating the demon lord, Sir Hayato.”

It was true: We’d only taken care of the demon lord’s minions, while the hero’s party did almost all the heavy lifting in taking down the demon lord himself.

“It was more than a little bit...”

Hayato’s face was getting weirdly close to mine.

If I remembered right, he was only interested in girls, albeit on the younger side...

“...Thank you, Satou,” he whispered in my ear. “Or should I say, Nanashi the Hero?”

Huh? I don’t remember doing anything to give myself away...

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Don’t worry. I haven’t told anyone else, ’cause it seems like you’re trying to hide it. But I saw how easily you wielded a Holy Sword, and that’s only supposed to be possible for heroes or people who’ve gotten special permission with Ritual Magic. And you were an even match for the demon lord, even though his level was *supposedly* much higher.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have used the Holy Sword when I backed him up.

Incidentally, I’d already returned Blutgang to its wielder Mezzalt when we loaded him onto the *Jules Verne*.

“Come on, Satou. Did you notice that you didn’t even take a single scratch when we were fighting the demon lord? And once you started covering my back, I didn’t get injured anymore, either.”

I guess I probably should’ve taken a little bit of damage... I didn’t want to dirty my newly made silver armor, though, you know?

“After seeing all that, I’d have to be a total idiot to believe that you’re really level forty-five.” Hayato grinned, then turned serious as he continued. “Satou, I wanna ask you to look out for my party once I go back to Japan.”

“What do you mean?”

I knew he was going back to Japan, but I wasn't sure why that meant he would entrust his faithful followers to me.

Now that they'd successfully defeated a demon lord, wouldn't they be able to make a name and career for themselves in the Saga Empire or anywhere else they wanted?

“According to Lilo and Nono, there's some serious tensions in the heart of the Saga Empire lately.”

“Do you think a war is going to break out?”

“Yeah, I'd say it's likely. They might even be planning on teaming up with the eastern lands and going up against the Weaselman Empire.”

I'd heard a little bit about this before: The Weaselman Empire was known for invading or annexing some of the small human and demi-human nations nearby.

“If they start trying to recruit my friends for their interpersonal wars, please protect them for me, will you?”

“Yes, leave it to me. I can shelter them somewhere far from the Saga Empire's grasp.”

I could get Count Munro to put them up as guests, or even hide them in Bolenan Forest like the old hero Daisaku once did.

“What a relief! I know I can count on you.”

Looking like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, Hayato threw back his drink.

“Lemme know if there's anything I can do for ya in exchange. I wouldn't mind handing down Arondight to you, if you want.”

Hayato gazed at me seriously.

Perfect timing. I actually had a favor I wanted to ask him.

“In that case, when you get back to your world, would you mind mailing these for me?”

“Letters?”

“I don’t know if your world is the same as mine, but I thought it would be good to let my family know that I’m all right, if at all possible.”

I gave Hayato letters for my family, my friends, and Mr. Tubs and the rest of my coworkers.

The bundle included letters from Arisa and Hikaru, too.

“Yeah, no problem. Don’t worry—I’ll make sure to deliver them personally.”

“Much appreciated.”

Hayato pounded his chest reassuringly. I knew I could trust him with this task.

Although there was a good chance that Arisa’s would be seen as a prank, since she had died in her old world, she said that was fine by her.

“Hayato, do you have a minute?”

“Rin?”

Miss Ringrande appeared with a wineglass in one hand, letting off a seductive air.

Her jade silk dress had a decidedly mature cut; pheromones were practically flying off her.

The effect was so striking that the formally dressed black knight and other members of the scouting party kept stealing glances her way.

“Satou, I need to borrow Hayato now.”

“Please, be my guest.”

I felt weirdly like a parental figure as I watched Hayato and Ringrande leave.

“I-is this an NTR twist?”

Arisa had also been muttering things like “Hayato ‘X’ Satou... Or is it Satou ‘X’ Hayato?” for a while now. I bopped her lightly on the head.

“Don’t be an idiot.”

It was perfectly normal to want to make some final memories if the person you cared about was going away forever.

I hoped Ringrande's feelings would find fulfillment as I drained my glass.



The next morning, we gathered in the courtyard in the back of the great cathedral to see Hayato the Hero off on his journey home.

Hayato was decked out in a suit that would look perfectly at home back on Earth as he said his farewells to people from Saga Empire and Parion Province.

"Hayato!"

The crowd parted, and a girl who looked just like Lilo the secretary appeared.

"Nono, you made it! This is amazing!"

"Borrowed...imperial ship."

As she squeezed Hayato, she mumbled a brief explanation of how she'd gotten here from the Saga Empire in time.

"Congrats."

"Thanks a lot. I owe it all to you guys for supporting me behind the scenes."

Hayato patted Nono's head softly.

Just then, faint blue light engulfed his body.

"Sorry, Nono. Looks like it's almost time."

With that, Hayato stepped back from Nono and looked at each of his companions in turn.

"Mari, you've supported me from the day I was summoned to Saga Empire. Thank you so much."

"Oh, Hayato...my dear hero..."

Princess Mariest embraced Hayato and kissed him on the cheek.

In these last moments, he'd dropped the cocky tone he usually carried as a hero.

"Seina, it's thanks to you that I was able to get back on my feet after that yellow demon bastard nearly destroyed us all."

“Heh-heh, come back anytime if you need me to slap some sense into you again...”

Seina held back tears as she hugged the hero.

After that, he said his individual good-byes to Loleiya, Rusus, Fifi, Weeyari, Lilo, and Nono, until finally it was Miss Ringrande’s turn.

“Rin, when we first met, you were just an obnoxious, stuck-up noble...”

Yikes, not a great way to start, Mr. Hero.

“...but now, you’re an irreplaceable companion who understands me better than anyone else ever has, or ever will. Make up with your little sister, got it?”

“Hayato...Hayato, Hayato, Hayato...”

Miss Ringrande was sobbing as she embraced him tightly, unable to form the words.

“You don’t need to say good-bye, Arisa?” I asked.

“It’s all right,” she replied. “We said our good-byes yesterday.”

“...It’s time.”

At last, the light came down from the sky.

“Seems like Parion can only keep our worlds connected for so long. I’d better get going.”

Hayato handed his Holy Sword Arondight over to Miss Ringrande.

“Take care, all of you.”

The hero floated up into the air, beginning to fade out of sight.



Someone cried out “Hayato!” and soon all his companions were calling out his name.

Hayato the Hero kept waving until he finally vanished completely. Even then, we kept on gazing up at the sky.



“Satou, are you drinking?!”

“Yes, I’m drinking. But it seems like you might be hitting your limit, Lady Ringrande.”

After we saw the hero off, his companions invited me to a gathering where they shared their memories of Hayato. But for some reason, after the gathering, a drunken Ringrande started rambling at me.

She seemed to be something of a clingy drunk, wrapping one arm around my neck and refilling my cup over and over.

I have to say, I don’t think a proper noblewoman is supposed to drink straight from the bottle like that.

“Honestly! I went all-out with my womanly charms on full display, and that damned blockhead didn’t even try to give me a single kiss!”

“Sir Hayato is a gentleman with a strong sense of honor, after all.”

From the sound of things, Miss Ringrande’s advance the previous night had utterly failed.

“Well, a real man ought to trust his animal instincts in a situation like that!”

“I suppose it is important to let your passion guide you every once in a while.”

As I vaguely humored her, Ringrande eventually fell silent.

She must have finally drunk herself unconscious.

I turned to my own companions, who were peering in through the doorway with their faces stacked like a totem pole, and asked them to carry her to bed.

In the meantime, I sat myself back down on the sofa and drank the fruity water Lulu brought me to cleanse my palate.

“Hmmm, this is unexpected.”

“Is this about the letters?”

I nodded at Arisa as I looked at the marker list on my menu.

The letters I’d given to Hayato were on the list. Their current location read “World Line #N, Planet Earth, Japan,” with the “N” part containing an insane number of digits.

Hayato’s name was still on my list, too.

I guess Unique Skills continue to work even in other worlds.

“M-Master! You’re not going to sneak back home or anything, are you?” Arisa clutched my hand tightly.

“No, of course not,” I answered immediately. “If I do find a way back, why don’t we all go sightseeing on Earth together?”

Though I was mostly joking, I bet they would love the skyscrapers of Tokyo and the colorful subcultures of Akihabara.

“That sounds lovely.” Arisa smiled.

It would probably be difficult without the help of something like the World Connection Unique Skill that summoned Aoi and other Japanese people indiscriminately in Lumork Kingdom, or the divine hero-summoning system in the Saga Empire.

Since I could see the other world on my menu, I might even have been able to get there with Unit Deployment.

But based on the Unit Deployment page in my AR display, the location “Ichirou Satou’s Home” in Hayato’s world didn’t count as controlled territory that I could reach with that skill.

Maybe I should have given Hayato a tent that I might be able to use as a Unit Deployment destination and asked him to set it up in the other world. Or even a doghouse large enough for me to fit into, since a tent wouldn’t be ideal for permanent use.

Still, had I thought of all that and actually done it, I think it would have been

too risky.

I'd be worried that my soul vessel would break, even if I borrowed Arisa's soul shell garland before using Unit Deployment.

Any experiments with going back to Japan would have to wait until after I observed a summoning circle in the Saga Empire.



Two days after Hayato went home...

"If you're ever in the Saga Empire, please do let me know. I shall happily fulfill my promise to show you the hero temple's summoning circle."

"Thank you. We'll be sure to visit after I've fulfilled my duties as Vice-Minister of Tourism in the western regions."

We stood in front of the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne*, saying our good-byes to Princess Mariest and the rest of the hero's party.

"I'm sorry about yesterday, Satou." Miss Ringrande looked sheepish as she apologized. "Once I've finished my duties as a hero's follower in the Saga Empire, I plan to return to Ougoch Duchy, so please come for a visit sometime."

She added crossly that she still hadn't forgiven Sara, in her typical stern older sister act, but I figured she was just covering up her feelings about Hayato's departure.

"If you find any more delicious liquor, please send me some."

"Certainly," I promised the priestess. "I'll keep an eye out for something you might like."

"Once we get back to the Saga Empire, Fifi and I are going on a training journey. If you're in Shiga Kingdom, let's do some sparring, got it?"

"Yeah, I wanna spar, too. I didn't think anyone but Rusus and me could keep up with Hayato's moves when he's had a speed potion."

Rusus and Fifi grinned fiercely at me.

When next we met, maybe they could face off with Tama and Pochi to see how they'd grown.

“Satou, if you like sightseeing, you should come to the long-eared tribe sanctuary. Long-eared folk can breed with humans, so I bet they’d love a strong guy like you.”

It was Weeyari who approached me next.

I was certainly interested in the long-eared tribe sanctuary, though I was hesitant at the idea of being potentially viewed as a breeding stallion.

“See you, Satou. I’m gonna go visit you in Shiga Kingdom as a spy, too.”

“Just visit normally, please. You’d be more than welcome.”

Seina the scout made a disturbing promise.

“...Thank you...for saving Hayato.”

Nono hid behind Lilo, whose face was identical to hers, as she mumbled her thanks.

“Thank you very much for your aid, Your Excellency. You should receive a letter from His Majesty the Emperor of the Saga Empire at your residence in the Shiga Kingdom soon. I imagine it will be regarding your medal and an offer of honorary Saga Empire peerage.”

Lastly, Lilo the secretary gave me a businesslike report.

“It’s up to you whether to accept them, but please do at least take the medal as proof that you helped defeat the demon lord with Hayato—we’ll all have a matching set,” she added with a faint smile.

Once they boarded, we watched the silver ship vanish into another dimension, and the Parion Province and Saga Empire representatives disbanded.

I thanked the two samurai, the maid staff, and everyone else who had helped us, and we departed our lodgings as well.

“...Mr. Noble!”

As we walked across the vast grounds of the cathedral, the sandfolk boy Raito came running up to us, waving wildly.

Though he’d been in Lilo the secretary’s care, he’d apparently returned to his

previous job after the defeat of the demon lord.

“We found out where my dad went!”

He explained that he’d received word from the gatekeeper that the sage helped me make arrangements with.

“Glad to hear it.”

Now that the demon lord was defeated, I’d been thinking of looking for his father by using “Flashrunning” to move around Parion Province and use my map search. Evidently, there was no need for that now.

“Thanks to the sage, I’mma go to the place where my dad is, too!”

“Oh? What sort of place is it?” Arisa asked.

“They said it’s a village where people who’re ‘adept’ go to draw out their hidden powers.”

Raito was probably considered an “adept” because of his rare “Intuition” skill.

“I think the sage said it was called...the Training Village.”

“That’s a bit on the nose.”

While I agreed with Arisa, I was a little intrigued as well.

“Trainiiiiing?”

“Pochi loves training, too, sir!”

“I dunno if I like it much, but I’mma do my best so I can live with my dad!”

“I’m sure you can do it,” I encouraged the smiling boy.

With that, he dashed off toward the cathedral, saying that the sage had called for him.

We all watched him go, then Arisa turned to look at me.

“So, Master, where are we going next? Still the Saga Empire?”

“Since the demon lord disrupted most of our sightseeing, why don’t we take a proper tour of Parion Province and the western regions before we head to the Saga Empire?”

Everyone agreed to my suggestion with big smiles, and we chatted about what we wanted to see first as we walked to the main road to look for an inn.

Epilogue

“Enjoy your victory while you still can, Hero.”

A raspy voice echoed in the dark depths.

“By defeating the demon lord, you have filled the Evil God’s Prison with miasma.”

The man strode through the darkness without any source of light.

“To think that the hero who set out to save the world has only helped us release the seal on the Evil God’s Prison and unleash destruction on the world...”

This was Den of Evil Six, where the battle to the death played out between the hero and the demon lord.

“Truly, what a thrill! And now that the blasted hero is gone, there is no one left to stand in our way.”

The man trod closer to his destination.

“...What is the meaning of this?”

He’d realized that the miasma he expected to fill the altar room was far sparser than it should have been.

“Did the seal absorb all the miasma?”

With a growing sense of dread, the man began walking more quickly.

“Impossible! The miasma concentration is less than ten percent?! That’s half of what it was when our plan first began!”

Reaching the location of the seal, the man operated a magic device there and looked at the results in horror.

“How can this be? There was no time for the hero’s followers to cleanse it all. The fools of Parion’s temple could never have removed so much miasma in such

a short amount of time. Even their stocks of the evil-cleansing dragon powder would surely not be enough.”

The man howled into the darkness.

“Don’t tell me—is this the work of the hero that supposedly appeared in Shiga Kingdom?! But that would mean that the rumors that he defeated the boar lord and Doghead were not mere Shigan propaganda...”

The man and his co-conspirators had assumed that the Evil God’s Spawn that attacked the Shigan royal capital at the end of the year failed, due to the arrival of the sky dragon, Shiga Kingdom’s own guardian deity.

“Lord Green was in Shiga Kingdom for a time. I must ask him about it when he returns.”

The man scowled in frustration at his would-be ally’s untrustworthy nature.

“This setback will not stop me from pursuing my goal. I swear I shall release the seal of the Evil God’s Prison.”

He clenched his fist until blood trickled from his palm.

“For I am the true sage. I am nothing like that bumbling old fool Touya.”

He failed to notice the blood as he rambled on.

“Mark my words, unknown Shiga Kingdom hero! The Great Sage Sorijeyro’s calamitous army will destroy your land, this I swear! Prepare to weep as you watch your kingdom fall to ruin! Then, once you are in the depths of despair, my shadows shall tear you to shreds.”

He bellowed into the dark.

“And when my army of destruction has laid waste to the land, my long-oppressed people shall begin a glorious new reign. As long as we have the power of the Holy Woman and the calamitous army, victory is as good as ours. I shall lead the way to a new empire!”

His shouting finally dissolved into ominous laughter, and he faded into the shadows.

He spared not a single thought for the demon lord that had fallen for the sake

of his dark ambitions.

Only the breeze that blew through the underground chamber gradually broke down the mountain of sand, as if to soothe the deceased demon lord's soul.

EX-1: Hayato's Homecoming

At the behest of the young Goddess Parion, I was summoned to the Saga Empire as Hayato the Hero. I had more than a few brushes with death, but finally I fulfilled my mission, and now I've returned to my old beloved homeland. (Hero Hayato Masaki)

"Seems like Parion can only keep our worlds connected for so long. I'd better get going."

Gentle blue light enveloped me from the heavens.

"Take care, all of you."

As my companions and Satou and friends looked up at me, my body floated into the air, and my vision was filled with blinding light.

Faintly, I heard Rin, Mari, and the others crying out my name in sorrow.

Sorry, Rin. Sorry, Mari.

I silently apologized to my dear companions in my heart.

<Gratitude, Hero.>

I heard a staticky voice, like a radio that's not quite tuned correctly.

This adorable young voice belonged to Goddess Parion.

The images that flowed into my mind along with her voice conveyed her emotions to me.

She seemed to be thanking me for defeating the demon lord. It was a shame, I thought, that I couldn't see her girlish young form in the stark whiteness that filled my vision.

<Separation, apologies.> *Don't worry about it. I'm the one who made that choice.*

I shook my head at the goddess's remorseful communication.

<Happiness, future blessings.> *Yeah, I'll make sure I end up so happy that Rin and the others won't have to worry about me ever again.*

At that, the little goddess sent me an image of a smile.

Good. Kids are supposed to be happy!



“Where am I...?”

I awoke to find myself standing on uneven stone paving.

The grounds of a shrine...?

That's right! This is where I was when I got summoned.

“I made it back...”

I raced down the steps.

Sprinting through the red *torii* gate, I jumped out toward a road that stank of exhaust fumes.

“Eek!”

Next to me, I heard a girl scream.

I must have startled her by jumping out so suddenly.

“Sorry—Tachibana!”

“Huh? Masaki?”

When I found myself looking at the cherubic face of my childhood friend, Yumiri Tachibana, I hugged the delicate-looking girl on the spot.

“Ack, w-wait! Hayato! At least pick a more romantic spot for this...!”

Her flustered words, and that voice I hadn't heard in so long, struck my heart so deeply that I couldn't stop myself from bursting into tears.

“What's wrong? Are you hurt? Come on, Hayato, what's gotten into you?”

“Yumiri... Yumiri, I'm back. I really made it back...!”

As I sobbed pathetically, Yumiri gave me a gentle embrace despite her confusion.



“Here, I got you a Pecari. It’s your favorite, right?”

“Yeah, thanks. I can’t believe I finally get to drink Pecari again...”

As I started to tear up again at the sight of the sports drink she offered me, Yumiri pressed a handkerchief into my hands.

Her face was flushed, possibly because I hugged her like that earlier.

“...Hmm?”

“Now what is it?”

Yumiri gave me a quizzical look.

“Why are you in a school uniform?”

I didn’t remember her being into cosplay.

“Seriously, what’s with you?! We were just in school together a few hours ago!”

A few hours ago...?

I gazed into Yumiri’s eyes.

“Wh-what?!”

Yumiri crossed her arms in front of her chest, taking a guarded pose.

I was acting weird enough to look downright suspicious, but I didn’t even realize that until I went home later.

At this moment, there was something far more important to worry about.

“What’s the date, month, and year today?!”

“Huh?”

I grabbed a very confused Yumiri by the shoulders.

“Please, just tell me!”

“Um, okaaay... March third, 2013, and would you like the time as well? It’s twelve fifteen PM.”

While I wasn’t sure about the time, I knew that date without a doubt.

Today was the very same day that I was summoned.

“But I thought there was no such thing as Time Magic...”

“Oh god, you’re not going through another one of your weird role-playing phases, are you? I told you to leave that stuff in middle school...”

Ignoring Yumiri’s remark as I muttered to myself, I started patting my own face.

“Seriously, are you feeling all right?”

“A mirror! Do you have a mirror?”

“Um...yes?”

Looking increasingly concerned, Yumiri held out a small hand mirror, and I used it to look at my own face.

...It was the same as the day I got summoned.

“Wait. Why are you wearing a suit, anyway? Did you have an interview for a part-time job?”

“It’s kind of a long story...”

Basking in the happiness of the young goddess’s surprise gift, I told Yumiri about my journey to a parallel world.

Although she didn’t even remotely believe me at first, I was able to convince her by folding a coin into quarters with my forefingers alone. Once she believed me, she scolded me that destroying hard currency is a crime, which was very typical of the girl I remembered so fondly.

That being said, I only had a little bit of my power left.

I couldn’t use my skills anymore, and my physical strength was almost tragically less compared to my time as a hero in the other world, but I still had more than enough unusual strength left for a simple demonstration.

In fact, I had a hunch that I might be able to make it as a pro athlete if I trained a little.

I also had about ten pounds of gold in the form of wire wrapped around my waist that Satou had made for me, saying he got the idea from some old novel.

It might even be fun to start a business while I was still in school.

“Mm-hmm, that sounds rough. So, did you leave any lovers or a wife and kids in this parallel world of yours?”

Her tone was light.

Clearly, she still didn't entirely believe me.

Well, fair enough. If someone else tried to sell me the same story, I'd probably just laugh them off, too.

“No, no lovers or wives or anything like that.”

There's only one person for me.

I gazed at Yumiri until her cheeks turned red.

I'd better not mention my honey—I mean, Princess Arisa.

“Sorry, Yumiri, I've gotta go home and tell my little sister I'm back.”

When I stated this with a serious face, Yumiri looked oddly disappointed, then waved me off with a deadpan roll of her eyes.

“Bye, then. See you tomorrow.”

Her casual farewell brought a smile back to my face.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

“Okay!”

Yumiri looked satisfied with my response.



“You're a friend of Ichirou's...?”

A pretty woman with an energy that strongly reminded me of Satou looked at me doubtfully.

“Yes, I came to deliver a letter from him.”

“How old are you, exactly?”

“Tw...seventeen.”

I nearly blurted out my age from when I was in the other world.

“Did you meet him when you were in grade school, then?”

What does she mean...?

“No, just about a year ago.”

As soon as I gave that response, her expression went blank and cool.

“I see.” She turned away from me to head back inside. “Go home.”

“W-wait, please. At least take the letter...”

“If this is a prank, go try it on someone else.”

With that icy response, she slammed the door right in my face.

“Crap. Now what...?”

I wanted to give her the letter directly and tell her about Satou’s current status in the other world...

As I walked around looking for a mailbox, to send the letter, it started to rain. I jogged down the street at a brisk pace, looking for a convenience store, to wait out the rain, only to spot a girl in the corner of a park arranging her jacket over a soaked cardboard box. Judging by the name tag on her uniform, she was probably in middle school.

I searched my bag and found a folding umbrella. I’d forgotten that I left it in my bag back before I was summoned.

“You’ll catch a cold.”

I held out the open umbrella to the girl.

There was a puppy inside the box.

“Thanks, mister.”

The girl turned around and thanked me earnestly.

I was lucky she didn’t think I was trying to hit on her, because I really wasn’t. My virtuous nature must have shown through.

“...Aah! Hey!” the girl exclaimed suddenly. “That’s Ichirou’s handwriting!”

She snatched the letter that was peeking out of my breast pocket.

“Where did you get this?”

“Sa...I mean, Ichirou Satou asked me to deliver it to his family.”

The girl’s name was Kouhai Mitsumi. As it turned out, she was Ichirou Satou’s childhood friend, and as close to him as a family member.

When I explained to her that I’d tried to deliver the letter to the Satou family and gotten turned away point-blank...

“Ichirou went missing while he was staying at a college boarding house.”

That explained the reaction.

“Miss Kouhai...”

“Just call me Hikaru. Otherwise it sounds like I’m your junior at school or something.”

While I had to wonder why she didn’t just go by Mitsumi, I figured I would go along with her request.

“So, Hikaru, you believe me?”

“Yeah, sure. I mean, this is definitely Ichirou’s writing.”

“Then do you think you could bring this letter to his family for me?”

“Got it. Sure, I’ll get his mom to accept it. I promise.”

Hikaru struck a dramatic pose like something out of a manga. I handed her the letter.

...Phew. Now I’ve fulfilled my promise to Satou.

“Sa-tuu...?”

Hikaru tilted her head.

Oops. I must have said that out loud.

“You mean the dog Ichirou’s grandfather had?”

“Dog...? No, it was Ichirou Satou’s nickname.”

“Oh, right. He did always go by that in games.”

Now I’d accidentally learned the origin of why his name was pronounced “sa-

two” in the other world.

For a while after that, Hikaru and I chatted about Satou, until eventually the rain let up and we decided to go our separate ways.

And yes, I wound up taking the puppy home.

We had a big yard at my family home, and my little sister had been wanting a dog.

“Thou must build a home, Hero.”

A voice spoke behind me.

I turned around and saw Hikaru standing in a regal pose, her arms folded.

Her black hair now looked rainbow-colored, like light through a prism.

“A home...?”

“It can even be a doghouse, as long as it is big enough to fit a person inside. And thou must hang this nameplate upon it.”

I automatically accepted the nameplate, a board inscribed with the name *Satou*. The penmanship was impeccable; Hikaru must have taken some serious calligraphy classes.

“But why—?”

Before I could finish asking what the home was for, I looked up to see that Hikaru was gone.

I felt like I’d been bewitched by a fox spirit or something.

“Woof!” The puppy barked in my arms.

“Guess I’ll make a little house for you, huh?”

“Woof!”

The dog gleefully licked my face.

Behind the friendly pup, I saw the nameplate still in my hands.

“All right! Your name’s gonna be ‘Satou.’”

I held the puppy up as I declared its new name.



“Whuzzat, big bwudder?”

My little sister Aika, who was barely three years old, tottered over to me with her nigh-incomprehensible baby talk.

“I’m making a doghouse.”

“Doggy! Gedda doggy?”

Aika clambered onto my back, looking excited.

She was every bit as adorable as I remembered.

What a little angel.

“Yep, a real cute one!”

As soon as I got home with the puppy in tow, my mother whisked him away to get his vaccinations.

“Yaaaay!”

Aika hopped up and down for joy.

I quickly caught her before she could tumble off my back, placing her safely on the grass.

“Wanna ride da doggy!”

“Oh yeah? Let’s hope he grows up big real soon, then.”

The puppy was definitely a large breed, anyway.

“Uh-huh!”

I couldn’t wait to add photos of my adorable little sister riding around on her dog like a princess on horseback.

Aika watched me work on the doghouse for a while. Eventually, she started nodding off, so I paused long enough to put her on the sofa inside.

“...There, all done.”

As a finishing touch, I nailed the *Satou* nameplate to the doghouse.

It was the one I got from the rainbow-haired version of Hikaru, of course.

I was guessing that this version of her wasn't quite human—not a ghost or an apparition, but something divine in nature, like the young goddess who summoned me to the other world.

I didn't know why she wanted me to build a doghouse and put this nameplate on it, of course.

But there had to be some important reason.

"Maybe I'll even get to see Satou and the others again someday."

I stretched as I murmured to myself.

Then I clapped my hands together to get rid of the dust and wood chips.

"Hayato, you hooome?"

Just then, I heard Yumiri calling to me from the front door.

Ever since our recent reunion, she'd gone back to calling me "Hayato" like she did when we were kids, instead of "Masaki" as she'd started doing when we got older.

The kids at school teased me for a while, but I was so happy to have my lost teenage years back that I just leaned into it until it eventually died off.

"I'm hooome!"

I called Yumiri into the yard to show off the doghouse I made.

Before long, my mom's car pulled into the garage. The puppy must have finally finished all his shots.

I could already hear him yapping away excitedly.

It was going to be another lively day, that much was for sure.

"Satou, Japan's as peaceful as ever today."

With a murmur to my friend in a parallel world, I gazed up at the blue sky, past the cherry blossom trees that were just beginning to bud.

EX-2: Coach Hikaru and the Homunculi Sisters

Hearing the word coach always reminds me of a famous sports anime I used to watch reruns of on TV, I think? I always admired the idea a little bit, because my middle and high school sports teams only had advisers, not coaches. (Mitsuko Takatsuki)

“Ooh, so this is a teleport point?”

“Yes, Hikaru. You insert a core in this slot to activate it, I declare.”

“You need this authorization item in order to pass through the teleport gate, I advise.”

“Ah-ha-ha, typical Ichirou. He always loved his retro games.”

The fifth of the eight sisters, Fünf, and the sixth, Seis, showed me how to use the teleport gate.

“Master said he wishes to open their use to the public sometime this year.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that to me, too.”

I nodded at the eldest, Adin.

He asked me to handle it when the viceroy and the guildmaster found out about the gates.

“Adin, we have returned with Karina, I report.”

The youngest sister, Huit, waved at us as she approached.

She was riding a runosaur, despite this being a labyrinth. The second-eldest sister, Ithnani, was riding with her, too. The third sister Tria, the gorgeous, mega-busty Karina, and the modest but pretty Zena followed on foot. Karina’s guardian maids Erina and Newbie were with them as well.

“Is Zena joining us today, too?”

“Yes, Hikaru. We happened to see her when we went to get Karina, so we

brought her along. Master already gave his permission.”

“Miss Mito! I thought you were in the royal capital?”

“I only just got here. I’m picking up some kids from the orphanage.”

I didn’t mention that I’d flown here, of course. I used my Flying Shoes outside the royal capital, then caught a ride partway through with my new friend Verny the wyvern.

“How do you do, Lady Mito?”

“Ah-ha-ha...same to you, Karina. You’re looking lovely as always.”

I had zero doubts that Arisa was the one who taught Karina such a classic rich-girl phrase.

“Mito is Hikaru, I correct.”

“...Huh?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

I explained to the confused Zena and Karina that I also went by the name “Hikaru.”

“Well, then, which would you prefer that I call you, pray tell?”

“Either is fine.”

The two considered for a while, then decided to call me “Hikaru” like the sisters.

“Come to think of it, are you alone today, Zena? What about John’s girlfriend and your other pals?”

“Lilio and the others are in the usual place, training with our troops.”

It was another hunting ground that Ichirou made for Zena and her fellow soldiers to train on.

That’s my Ichirou for you—well, not *my* Ichirou. I guess he’s a thoughtful guy in every world.

“Are you playing hooky, Zena? I inquire.”

“No, no. I was planning on practicing a new chant today.”

“Is it more powerful than the Blade Storm you demonstrated recently? I inquire.”

“Well, Blade Storm is the strongest intermediate spell. I can’t use advanced spells just yet.”

Just being able to use a high-end intermediate spell like Blade Storm at her level was plenty impressive, although Zena seemed ashamed that she couldn’t do more.

“You use Wind Magic, right, Zena?”

“Yes, since that is what runs in my family.”

“Gotcha. I bet you’d pack an even bigger punch against monsters if you learned a little Fire Magic or Lightning Magic on the side, y’know.”

Wind could fan flames or carry lightning to be extra effective against large groups of enemies.

“Since Arisa’s got Fire Magic on lock, I guess I’d recommend Lightning Magic if you wanna work alongside Satou and his party, maybe?”

“Lightning Magic, you say...?” Zena looked a little worried. “Do you think I’d be able to learn such a thing when I can only use Wind Magic up to the intermediate level?”

“Oh, for sure. Once you know one kind of magic, it’s a lot easier to learn the rest.”

It costs less skill points that way, too.

With that in mind, I gave Zena an introductory guide to Lightning Magic.

“If it’ll help me support Satou, then I’ll do my best to learn.”

She clutched her hands to her chest, the very picture of a lovestruck young maiden.

Since she was clearly in earnest, without a shred of calculation, I couldn’t help wanting to root for her.

“Yeah, you got this! Hit me up if you get stuck on something. I’ll help you out anytime.”

I have to admit, I did feel a little bit jealous, even though I know this Satou isn't really my beloved Ichirou.

But I encouraged her anyway, 'cause you've gotta root for a girl in love.



"We have arrived, I declare," Huit reported.

We passed through the teleport mirror and arrived somewhere inside the labyrinth. The area looked faintly familiar.

"Ooh, this place, huh?"

"Have you been here before? I inquire."

"Yeah, a long time ago. I think it took about three days to get here."

The terrain here was a perfect fit for magic soldiers or mages to level up.

Again, typical Ichirou. He's got a sharp eye for detail.

"Three days? It's amazing we were able to travel here instantly."

"Indeed. Very impressive."

Zena and Karina were both in awe.

"The world is truly in a Great Labyrinth era."

""Great Labyrinth era...?""

Huit and the others all tilted their heads.

Okay, I knew they weren't going to understand the reference, but having all these identical sisters stare at me blankly was still a bit embarrassing.

Ah, if only Arisa or Ichirou were here, they would've gotten the joke.

Feeling just a little lonely, I explained myself nonetheless. "I meant, now everyone will be able to go deeper into the labyrinth."

"Still, it's quite an amazing invention."

"Yes, this is a huge breakthrough."

Karina and Zena admired the teleport mirror.

"Wonder if we could get some prize money for it, huh?"

“Erina, I think it’s up to the viscount to decide how and when to make this information public.”

Newbie scolded Erina, whose eyes were starting to turn into dollar signs.

Apparently, everyone called her “Newbie” or “Miss Newbie” because her real name, Riena, sounded too similar to Erina. I felt bad for her when I first heard about this, and worried that it was workplace harassment; however, she assured me that she “actually rather likes it,” so I refrained from sticking my nose into it.

“Enemy spotted!”

“I’m on it.”

While we were chatting, a war mantis appeared from the shadows.

Since the others didn’t seem to be ready for battle yet, I took it down with a chantless Remote Arrow.

While I was at it, I used “Body Strengthening” to drop-kick a goblin assassin that was trying to sneak up on us.

“...G-goodness, that was incredible.”

“Using a spell like that without a chant...you’re like the legendary Ancestral King Yamato!”

“Ah-ha-ha, thanks.”

It really makes you blush when someone calls you “legendary.”

“How did you become so strong? I inquire.”

“I suppose you were trained like Nana and the others?”

Huit and Adin looked at me hopefully.

“Hmm, it wasn’t just training. I didn’t have any natural abilities to start with, either. A lot of amazing people taught me their secrets before I was finally able to fight on my own.”

When I was first summoned to the Saga Empire, I was considered a failed hero who couldn’t even fight.

“I wonder if we could ever be anywhere near as powerful if you teach us, dear Hikaru?”

“Yeah, ’course you can!”

Especially since this world has a level system that rewards effort in a calculable way.

“Now, let’s get this HBC started—Hikaru Boot Camp, that is!”

Since everyone asked me to give them a lecture, I cleared out the monsters near the teleport mirror with the Practical Magic spell Remote Arrow, then started an impromptu crash course. (I picked the name on pure impulse.) “First, fill your body with magic power.”

Everyone was with me so far.

“Next, try circulating the magic through you. If you’ve got the ‘Magic Manipulation’ skill, it should be a piece of cake!”

“This is difficult in a different way from using one magic spell while maintaining another.”

“Ah-ha-ha, if you can manage that, you should get the hang of this in no time.”

Evidently, Arisa and Mia had previously trained Zena in maintaining a continuous effect spell while using another at the same time.

“I dunno if I even get it enough to know if it’s hard or not.”

“It’s like charging a magic item, just with your body instead.”

“That’s still rather difficult.”

Huit and Seis were having a bit of a difficult time. Erina and Newbie were worse off; they would probably need their own individual lessons later, since they didn’t have the “Magic Manipulation” skill.

“Like this, perhaps?”

“Exactly, Lady Karina. If you focus on that discomfort, you should be able to use it yourself soon enough.”

“I shall do my best!”

Although Karina didn't have the "Magic Manipulation" skill either, apparently, her Intelligent Artifact Raka was helping her enough to manage.

"I did it! Huit did it, too, I declare."

"Danger to dignity as an elder sister detected. Shifting into serious mode, I declare."

Once she saw that Huit had beaten her to it, Seis got all fired up and soon mastered it as well.

The sisters all have very different personalities, even though they look identical, except for their hairstyles.

"That just leaves you, Erina. Don't give up."

"Don't mock me, Newbie... Ah, did I get it? Is it working?"

"Ooh, very nice. Yeah, that's the stuff! The magic is flowing!"

Erina and Newbie managed to get the hang of it, too, once I held their hands and gave them a demonstration.

Now that they all had the hang of it, the next step was maintaining it.

"Huit, it's not getting all the way through your feet. Make sure you send the flow all the way to the tips of your toes!"

When you're first starting out, your magic won't flow to your extremities if you lose focus even a little bit.

"Got it? Yeah, looking good! Okay, next step!"

Young kids sure learn fast.

"This time, make the magic flow through your weapons and armor, too."

This step is harder than it sounds.

The armor part is especially tough. Most people can't do it as easily as with a weapon or shield that's held in their hands, although it's certainly easier if you have mithril alloy armor.

"Not easy, right? But I know you guys can do this! Keep at it!"

Everyone looked intently focused on their efforts.

They were clearly struggling, like when you can't get the last detail of something just right.

"Oh-ho! Now there's a talented eldest sister! Adin's got it. The rest of you, follow her example!"

Once one of them figured it out, the rest redoubled their efforts and began mastering it one by one.

The second to manage it was Karina, with help from Raka. Just as I suspected, Raka totally had to be custom-made from the magic AI parts that controlled the moving armor machines back in the Flue Empire era.

The rest of the girls eventually figured it out, albeit not as fast as the first two.

"Very nice. That was a little tough, but you all got it."

I praised their efforts and had them take a short break.

Since it was easy to lose a lot of magic during circulation for a beginner, they might have run out of magic if I didn't give them MP recovery potions.

"This is just the baseline!"

"Baseline? I inquire."

The ever-curious Tria shot her hand up in the air before asking her question.

"Yep, the goal is to be able to maintain this all day long!"

""*All day?*"" the sisters exclaimed in chorus.

"If you can manage that, you'll be able to sharpen the magic around your sword to create 'Spellblade,' harden the magic around your armor and body to make 'Magic Power Armor,' and all kinds of fun stuff!"

""*Spellblade!*""

""*Magic Armor!*""

That got a big reaction.

Plenty of people could do it back in the day, but these days I guess it's like a secret technique that only experts can use.

Maybe it's because there were a lot of magic metal weapons back then, what

with the wars all over the continent and all.

Putting that ancient history aside, I went on teaching the girls as their eyes sparkled eagerly.

“Fill your weapon with magic all the way to the tip. Mages, circulate it to the very end of your staves, too.”

“Hikaru, that is impossible, I protest.”

“Magic that has left the body cannot be returned, I insist.”

“Just think of your weapon as an extension of your body, and it’ll be fine. Like this, see?”

I produced a staff from my Inventory and demonstrated.

“Okay, now it’s your turn. Just give it one last push, and then we can take a break for lunch!”

As much as I tried to encourage and challenge the increasingly unhappy class, it turned out to be too much to ask for them to be able to circulate magic through their weapons and armor in just one day. I guess I should’ve seen that coming.



“I brought sandwiches for everyone!”

The head chef of my Mitsukuni Manor in the royal capital made a lavish sandwich set in advance for our lunch.

That crafty chef even included cutlery and drinks. I brought out extra supplies from my Inventory as well.

““““Thanks for the food!””””

The sisters and even Zena and Karina pressed their hands together before the meal. They even washed their hands first. Arisa taught them well.

“Tria selects an egg salad sandwich!”

“Huit will eat a *katsu* sandwich, I declare.”

I smacked the sisters’ hands as they happily reached for the sandwiches.

“Hikaru, please do not bully us, I request.”

“Tria too! Tria thinks bullying is bad, too!”

The girls protested, as I knew they would.

“It’s not bullying. You can’t stop circulating your magic during lunch, either, that’s all.”

“Even during a meal? I inquire.”

Huit looked shocked.

“Yep, you got it. I said ‘all day,’ didn’t I?”

“Tria objects! Tria wishes to focus purely on food while eating, I protest.”

“I mean, that’s fine, if you don’t mind falling behind your sisters. Is that cool with you?”

“Ngh, Tria... Tria will do her best.”

I patted Tria’s head as she feigned dramatic tears. “You can do it.”

“This is delicious, I declare!”

“The eggs are so fluffy-soft! Tria is curious about the cooking methods!”

“The pork cutlet is meaty and perfectly paired with the sauce, I praise.”

“What sophisticated depth of flavor! The hint of mustard makes it especially delicious.”

“Yes, it’s quite delectable. This cheese and ham sandwich is divine.”

“Sjust as good as the sandwiches Lulu and the viscount make.”

“Erina, I know they’re really good, but you probably shouldn’t be eating one in each hand...”

Everyone seemed to love the sandwiches.

“Did you really make these, Hikaru? I inquire.”

“Nah, I brought it from home. The chef makes them so delicious that I requested a big set so that all of you could try them, too.”

“That explains it, I report. It has the taste of a true chef’s cooking, I praise.”

“Oof...that one hurt, Huit.”

I guess I brought that on myself, though. They did see me burn my cooking plenty of times when we worked at a restaurant together for a while.

“Now, time for the second half!”

During the afternoon, I figured they could practice what they learned in actual combat.

“Homunculi sisters, your goal is to gain five levels! Zena and Karina, you can shoot for three!”

Since there were lots of monsters here, we should have been able to hunt them at a pretty good pace with help from my overpowered “Superhero Strength” skill.

It’d still be less intense than Ichirou’s crazy level grinding that Pochi and the other kids told me about.

“Miss Hikaru, isn’t that taking it a bit too far?”

“It is dangerous to push past one’s limits.”

The only way forward was to keep moving, despite the cautious Zena and Adin pleading for me to reconsider.

“Don’t worry, just do your best! I’ll bail you out if things get dicey.”

Worst-case scenario, I could always just handle things with Remote Arrow and Claidheamh Soluis.

“Very well, Miss Hikaru. I shall give it my all!”

Man, I love how proactive Karina is, even though she seems like a sheltered princess at first.

“All right, let’s do this thing!”

“No, Hikaru.” “Request to reconsider.”

“Ah-ha-ha, come on. It’s party time!”



As the sisters cried out in protest, I used my Practical Magic to attract some monsters.

“Hikaru! Enemies! There are too many enemies, I report!”

“Adin, use ‘Taunt’! We must form a wall, I declare.”

“Miss Karina! You mustn’t charge in blindly! Coordinate with your allies!”

“Good luck, you guys!”

I cheered for the panicked-looking group of girls.

Let the record show that they all hit their level-up goals by that evening.

Yeah, they all flopped down on the floor looking dead inside once it was over, but I’d say it worked out just fine.

I’m sure they’ll all be delighted when I make plans for boot camp part two.

I bet it’d be fun to train them all in secret and give Ichirou a big surprise!

Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you very much for picking up *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*, Volume 20!

As of March 2020, the web version of *Death March* is finished. I started serializing the web novel in March 2013, so it was exactly seven years later that I was finally able to mark it as complete.

Of course, it's only the web version that's reached the end.

The *Death March* light novels in print will continue for a long time yet, so don't worry! I'm planning on completely changing the flow of the final arc and the plot points and gimmicks throughout, so readers of the web novel will still have plenty to look forward to as well.

Since there's not much room left, I'll sum up this volume's highlights very briefly: I used the web novel's Parion Province arc and the Weaselman Empire/Dejima Island arc as a base for a whole new story. I hope you'll enjoy seeing both Satou's party and the hero's party in action.

I'm really running out of lines now, so here's the usual thank-yous! Big thanks to my editors Mr. I, Mr. S, and A; illustrator shri; and everyone else involved in the production, advertisement, sale, distribution, and tie-ins for this volume!

And to all of you readers as well. Thank you so much for reading this book all the way to the very end!

Let's meet again in the next volume for the Parion Province sightseeing arc!

Hiro Ainana

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