



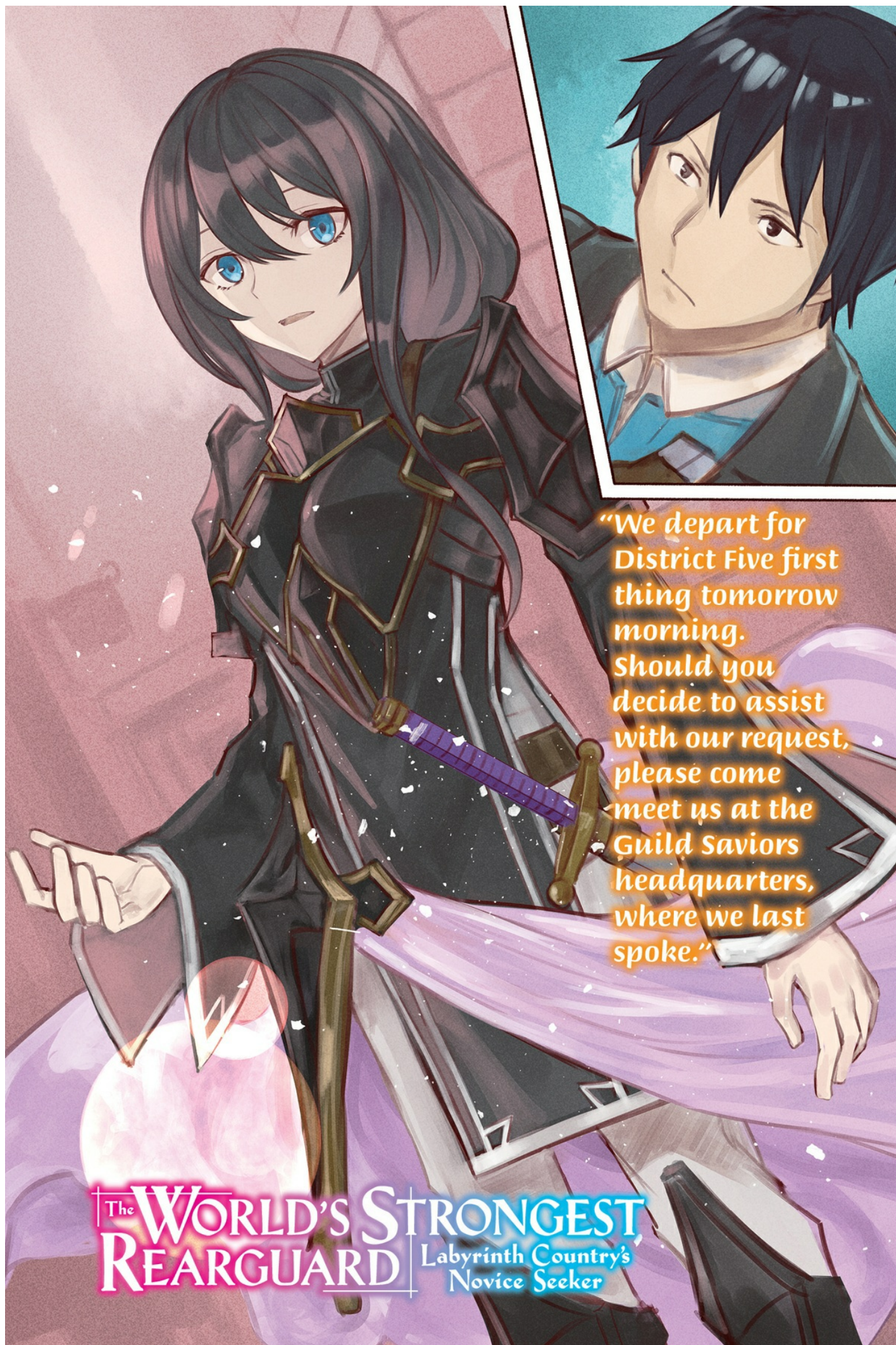
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Tôwa

Illustration by

Huuka Kazabana

The WORLD'S STRONGEST
REARGUARD | Labyrinth Country's
Novice Seeker



"We depart for District Five first thing tomorrow morning. Should you decide to assist with our request, please come meet us at the Guild Savors headquarters, where we last spoke."

The **WORLD'S STRONGEST**
REARGUARD | Labyrinth Country's
Novice Seeker



"Misaki,
Melissa
said she
wants you
to handle
the pizza
toppings..."

"Oh, I'm on it! You won't find
anyone better in the cheese-
spreading game than me!"

"Just don't go
overboard.
We've got a lot
of other food
coming, too."



*"We're gonna
make him pay."
Theresia gently
laid her hand
over the fist I'd
unknowingly
clenched.*



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Illustration by
Huuka Kazabana


New York

The **WORLD'S STRONGEST**
REARGUARD | Labyrinth Country's
Novice Seeker

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Illustration by
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Kazabana

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Illustration by **Huuka Kazabana**

Translation by Alexandra McCullough-Garcia Cover art by Huuka Kazabana

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SEKAI SAIKYO NO KOEI -MEIKYUKOKU NO SHINJIN
TANSAKUSHA-Volume 6

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PROLOGUE

The Twilight Room

District Five, the White Night Brigade's lodgings, Trillheim.

The first taste of success—along with the subsequent monetary reward that improves one's lot in life—brings hope to Seekers new to the Labyrinth Country. Before long, the share of these Seekers who embark on seeking expeditions for the sake of those monetary rewards grows. They eventually fail to advance any further through the districts and resign themselves to the daily grind simply to sustain themselves.

Yet not a single person in Johan Centrale's White Night Brigade fit this description, nor should they, in his opinion. The Brigade's thirty-two members lived in a spacious mansion among the most luxurious accommodations in District Five. Johan sat still as a statue in one of the rooms of that great house as Agnes, leader of the Brigade's second party, came before him to give her report.

"...All members of the second party have safely returned. Captain, would you kindly explain the meaning of this?" she asked.

Agnes was wearing what at first glance would appear to be Shinto priest garb. However, her job was Shinto Warrior Priest, an advanced version of the Warrior Monk job that excels in hand-to-hand combat. Her style was second to none, not even Johan's. She kept her long flaxen hair in a French braid and carried herself with perfect poise, though her eyes could not conceal the intense emotion burning within them.

Her words were full of rebuke for the younger Johan, though he gave no hint that they affected him in the least as he sat in his throne-like chair. The relic had once belonged to the royal family who had ruled the Labyrinth Country, but it now served him, a Seeker. He rested his chin on his hand and gazed off into space. The evening sun filtered in through the stained glass windows, drenching

his blue-streaked hair in various colors.

“How could you let Shirone leave? Did you really have to pressure her like that...?”

“I do feel bad for what I did to her. She’s given everything she had to the Brigade.”

“Then, why...?” Agnes began, but her breath caught in her throat when Johan turned his gaze toward her.

He was smiling as always, but that grin wasn’t appropriate for this conversation.

“Charm Master is indeed a valuable occupation,” said Johan. “However, it is also one a Seeker can choose to switch to, so long as the proper conditions are met. In other words, our Charm Master does not need to be Shirone.”

“...Shirone has contributed more than most to the Brigade, even back when she was a Dual Fencer. I’ve heard she’s been with the Brigade since shortly after you established it.”

“Which is precisely why I tried my best at uncovering whatever potential she had. Still, it’s not like I’ve expelled her. She will have a place here if she comes back,” said Johan. He placed a red pawn upon the chess board on the table in front of him. It seemed to imply that the piece represented Shirone.

“... Is ascending through the districts truly that important to you? So important, you’ll allow only those members who manage to retain the smallest shred of their sanity in the grip of a cursed weapon to stay at your side?” Agnes asked him.

“Time waits for no one, cruel as that may be. If I don’t make it to District One while I’m in my prime, the only path I’ll have left is down. And none of our seeking to this point has uncovered a means to preserve youth, if such a thing even exists.”

“That may be...but I’m sure we could find a way to climb up the ladder without relying on those weapons...”

“The ladder, huh? We will never be able to avoid the least likely misfortunes

with any certainty, no matter how much time we devote to climbing that ladder,” he replied with that ever-present smile. He continued, as if relishing every word that left his mouth, “We’ve been fortunate to avoid attacks that guarantee sudden death. We’ve outwitted the traps hidden in the labyrinths and established a cooperative, if passive, relationship with a Hidden God. But the smallest slipup could have meant death for any one of us, including me.”

“But you... You possess the most powerful equipment in District Five. And at your level...”

“Level-fifteen Seekers have lost their lives to Named Monsters as low as level ten. You can be the strongest Seeker there is, have the most powerful equipment around, and death will still come for you unless you get your hands on something with Sudden Death Resistance. All armor is imperfect at best.”

The Brigade had achieved the number one rank in District Five and had District Four within arm’s reach, yet pessimism lined every word their captain spoke. Nonetheless, Agnes didn’t feel that he was complaining.

“...Will you still not tell me why you’re searching for color-inscribed equipment?”

At Agnes’s question, Johan reached out for the sword resting against his throne, wrapped his fingers around the hilt protruding from the black sheath that housed it, and raised it in front of his face.

“The curses *choose* us. We must be prepared to fend off what death lurks in the labyrinths when we come face-to-face with it. Death scares me more than anything. I’m just like everyone else,” he replied, a boyish, carefree grin playing on his lips. Sometimes Agnes had to wonder if the White Night Brigade’s stoic commander and the boyish figure before her were, in fact, the same person.

“The Scarlet Emperor is diametrically opposed to your sword. Knowing that, why did you give it to Elitia...?”

“Colored weapons only reveal their true powers before the chosen few. From day one, nothing about life as a Seeker is fair... You should know that best, Agnes. You, a reincarnate, acquired a job that by all rights should only be available to this country’s natives.”

“...Do you care nothing for the safety of your family? You can’t tell me you’ve forgotten about Rury...,” Agnes pressed, referring to Elitia’s close friend, the young girl captured by the Simian Lord. No one in the White Night Brigade spoke of her any longer. Agnes, however, was one of the few who hadn’t completely given up on rescuing Rury, even here where Johan’s word was law.

“It’s true that Elitia had shown some fencing talent before we raided that labyrinth, but only enough to give her an edge among other swordfighters her age. She didn’t have what it takes to get to District Five. She got all the strength she gained by leeching contribution points off the party.”

Agnes had wondered what Johan thought of Elitia as her older brother. Not once since coming to the Labyrinth Country had he put his family first; he treated his sister as any other Seeker in the Brigade. Even so, Agnes held on to a slim ray of hope that Johan still cared for Elitia, that he would reach out to help her if she ever truly needed it. But Johan dashed those hopes without ever losing that faint grin as dusk began to plunge the room into darkness.

“Elitia’s new name, the Death Sword, is proof that she’s still alive. She’s using the powers of the Scarlet Emperor to survive. She gained that cursed blade at the cost of her friend and is making it her own.”

“How can you be so cold...?! Ellie has done nothing to deserve—”

“She’ll abandon her little ‘goals’ before long. The kingdom that the Simian Lord built from the ground up is a finely tuned machine... It’s a wonder the Guild has managed to contain him and his underlings at all. Just imagining the kind of stampede they would cause gives me the worst headache.”

Anyone who had ever set foot inside that labyrinth knew all too well why the Guild Savors could not lay a hand on the monster living there. Seekers were free to make their way to the upper districts by raiding easier labyrinths, a choice that inevitably led some labyrinths to fall into complete neglect. It was in one of these abandoned lands that Rury, a member of the White Night Brigade and Elitia’s close friend, had gone missing.

“I warn all new members as soon as they join us that if they fall behind in a labyrinth, we won’t attempt a rescue if the risk is too great. Many parties in this country run on a similar rule for the sake of protecting their group.”

“...Even assuming you agreed to such a rule at the outset, not everyone could actually follow through with it.”

“I admit, it was a tough decision. I hated the thought of losing a valuable Healer... But she made a grave error when she chose her skills. And I’d bet we’ll find another Healer whose skills complement our Brigade even better than hers.”

“...Then it’s only a matter of time before I, too...,” Agnes started, but she dared not finish the thought. She knew that the moment it reached Johan’s ears, she’d no longer be qualified to remain in the Brigade.

“Elitia will eventually return; I have no doubt of that. She’ll be stronger and an even greater asset to us,” predicted Johan, still smiling, completely unaware of the last thing Elitia had said as she left the Brigade. Agnes made no mention of it and kept the memory to herself.

“...I will await your next orders in my room. I only ask that you allow me to do all I can to trace Shirone’s whereabouts.”

“I can’t have you leaving District Five, too. Use whatever means you like, so long as they’re within this district.”

Agnes left the room and turned into a hallway lit with magical lamps. Her thoughts spilled out almost unconsciously as she treaded along the crimson carpet:

“Elitia...Shirone...please, please be safe.”

CHAPTER 1

Deep Within the Plateau of Primary Colors

Part I: Still Waters

We soon realized all the mud golems we’d come across had been defeated in order to force the Clay Giant to appear. Gathering the cursed soul stones on their foreheads evidently created a special condition that allowed you to summon the Named Monster. Shirone exploited that tactic and used what’s called a magic-manipulation talisman to control the Clay Giant and sic it on the Four Seasons.

Elitia said that, back when she left the Brigade, Shirone had been at level 12. I took that to mean once you achieved that high a level, you could even bend Named Monsters to your will and use them for nefarious purposes. Of course, we still didn’t know if she’d managed to control it because she was a much higher level than the monster, or if that species in general was easier to manipulate.

“Arihito, don’t you think our levels went up after fighting that Clay Giant?” asked Elitia.

“Right, let me check... Me, Theresia, and Igarashi have all leveled up.”

We’d done our best under the circumstances, but it was a shame we hadn’t gotten to take the Clay Giant down with the rest of our party; we could have all gotten more experience points that way. The Four Seasons members might have also leveled up—theirs was certainly a desperate battle, but they’d come out of it in one piece.

◆Current Party◆

1: Arihito	◆ × □ #	Level 7
2: Theresia	Rogue	Level 7
3: Kyouka	Valkyrie	Level 6
4: Elitia	Cursed Blade	Level 10
5: Cion	Silver Hound	Level 6

As I'd expected, the members who hadn't grown in level had also accumulated a large amount of experience points from the battle. My license showed five of the bubbles measuring Elitia's EXP had been filled, and she was much more advanced than the rest of us. I gathered you needed to fill all ten EXP bubbles to level up. Melissa had also filled quite a few of her own bubbles in one go and was probably on the verge of leveling up soon.

"This is a first. We normally check in with our levels back at the Guild after reporting back on our latest expedition," I noted.

"I think that's usually for the best. Our levels actually rise while we're still in the labyrinth, but I prefer to take my time when I choose new available skills," said Elitia.

"Let's just keep in mind we have more skill points now if we need them. Thanks for pointing that out, Elitia."

"...I know we're in a tight spot, but it's still exciting to see you level up," added Melissa. It seemed she'd started to expand her interests beyond rare monsters and into people—okay, maybe that was a little harsh. She had such a wide range of skills available to her, so I was honestly excited to see her advance as well. The same applied for the others, too, of course.

"Wow, this place really does go on forever...", I said.

"Atobe, should we just keep going straight in?" asked Igarashi.

"Yes. I can't really explain it, but I can kind of sense the direction Shirone went... Maybe it's from that move she used on me earlier."

Shirone's Magic Marking skill had allowed her to make her Return Scroll apply only to me. Maybe that skill was why I could sort of tell which way she'd headed, although I wasn't sure how long the effect would last.

I really hope it wears off when she leaves the labyrinth or after some kind of time limit... I suppose I could also ask her to remove the mark when I catch up to her. Of course, she might not be in any condition to talk at that point. Just one more reason we can't abandon her now.

I decided to focus only on our search for Shirone. Each floor in the Plateau of Primary Colors stretched on for what felt like ages; the landscape seemed to repeat itself, making it difficult to tell how much ground we'd covered and cementing in our minds just how vast it was. We found the pond-size puddles that dotted the Clay Giant battlefield all over the rest of the second floor, as well as a few kinds of monsters, some of which looked like salamanders.

◆Monsters Encountered◆

SLOW SALAMANDER A

Level 6

Friendly

Resistance Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

SLOW SALAMANDER B

Level 7

Sleeping

Resistance Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

They measured about six-and-a-half feet from their noses to the tips of their long tails, and horns thick as branches sprouted from their heads. I wondered if they might use those to attack us somehow—but the one waking monster just sat poking its head out of the puddle and watched us with a curiously charming expression.

“This might not be the time to say this, but that monster is so laid-back...,” said Melissa. “Its face looks like a stuffed animal...”

“They may look cute, but they go crazy and will attack if something agitates them or if it starts raining.”

“Wow, Ellie, you know so much,” said Igarashi. “I—I guess we can’t let our guard down then, can we?”

“That ‘slow’ in its name might mean it’s got attacks to decrease its enemies’ speed. Or maybe it can send us flying to slow us down that way,” I said.

“...!”

Theresia, seated atop my knees, bristled. She’d seen angry-looking Slow Salamanders coming up ahead of us, waiting right in the middle of a path we had no way of avoiding that was surrounded by ponds.

“There’s...something in its mouth...,” said Melissa.

“...I think it’s Shirone’s short swords,” replied Elitia. She was exactly right: As cute as these monsters were, we couldn’t let our guard down around them.

The damage Elitia had inflicted on the Clay Giant when we defeated it had also hit Shirone in what my license called backfiring. Shirone had managed to manipulate the monster, but doing so had also evidently put her at risk; any damage sustained by the monsters she controlled could come back to bite her, as well.

“Shirone was pretty badly injured... I don’t care how strong she is, there’s no way she could’ve taken these monsters down in that state,” I said.

“She lost all her weapons but still headed deeper in the labyrinth...” A troubled expression came over Elitia’s face. Anyone could see Shirone was basically throwing her life away.

“...Shirone attacked and made these monsters hostile,” Igarashi deduced. “She must’ve escaped their detection range, because they’ve got their sights locked on us...!”

The monsters were still some distance away, but at the speed Alphecca was racing along, we’d close that gap any moment. I considered asking if she could ram into them with Aura Spike or something, but then I looked over and thought I saw hesitation cloud her ghostly, half-translucent visage.

“Alphecca, what’s wrong? Is that type of monster hard to handle?”

“We all have our limitations. We are resistant to most types of magic, but we are not entirely immune to all its variations,” Murakumo explained in Alphecca’s place. In other words, that must mean Alphecca was particularly vulnerable to

the Slow Salamanders' attacks.

"I am ill-equipped to face attacks that would reduce my speed...and I cannot overutilize my skills that might dispel status inflictions as they require blood of the purest maidens to activate."

She still should have been able to use long-range attacks such as Rose Javelin, but I figured she probably chose not to try them on opponents she was ill-matched to face. I had no intention of forcing our armaments to follow my commands; their feelings were no different than a person's, and to me, they were equally important members of our party. We all had our weaknesses and needed to back one another up.

"Igarashi, let's hit them with a long-range attack!"

"You got it!"

"Awooo!"

Mounted atop Cion, Igarashi looked like the bravest of knights. Her silver armor accentuated the effect; it was absolutely stunning.

◆Monsters Encountered◆

SLOW SALAMANDER D

Level 7

Hostile

Resistance Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

Equipped Item: Heaven's Stiletto +4

SLOW SALAMANDER E

Level 7

Resistance Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

Equipped Item: ★Bloodsucker +3

The Salamanders wrapped their tails around each of Shirone's short swords—it looked like they might be able to swipe at us with them.

"Attacks of this ilk...are an insufferable pestilence!" bemoaned Alphecca.

The Salamanders turned their horns toward us and from a distance did something before we could even get our attack together.

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated HAWK EYES → Increased ability to monitor the situation
- > SLOW SALAMANDER D activated BREATH OF STAGNANT WATER → Target: Mid-range vicinity
- > SLOW SALAMANDER E activated BREATH OF STAGNANT WATER → Target: Mid-range vicinity

Their attack was invisible—well, *almost* invisible. I could just barely make it out with Hawk Eyes, but it was incredibly difficult to see at all, much less determine how far it extended. With no idea what was coming, I had only one move: aim my slingshot at the Salamander that Igarashi didn't already have in her sights.

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT (FREEZE)
- > KYOUKA activated THUNDERBOLT
- > BREATH OF STAGNANT WATER hit targets → Reduced ALPHECCA, MELISSA, and ELITIA's speed
- THERESIA was unaffected
- > BREATH OF STAGNANT WATER hit targets → Reduced CION and KYOUKA's speed
- > BREATH OF STAGNANT WATER reverberated → Speed reduction strengthened to Level 2
- > KYOUKA's THUNDERBOLT activation was delayed

“Whoaaa!”

“.....?!”

What’s with this skill...? I can hardly see anything, and it’s so overwhelmingly powerful...!

Both Alphecca and Cion slowed down at exactly the same moment. The attack hadn’t worked on Theresia or me, but the sudden jolt sent us flying forward. I activated Yoshitsune’s Leap, caught Theresia in midair, and somehow managed to land safely. I hadn’t expected that letting Theresia ride on my lap would pay off like this, but fortunately either her armor or something intrinsic about her had deflected the attack and nullified its effects.

It had gotten to Igarashi’s Thunderbolt, however, which crackled and fizzled out before it got to race through the air. Their attack clearly affected skills as well, but it hadn’t canceled mine. The frost stone–powered magic bullet hit one of the Salamanders squarely in the head.

“...GYEEE...EEE ...”

◆Current Status◆

> FORCE SHOT (FREEZE) hit SLOW SALAMANDER D

Weak spot attack

Inflicted FROZEN status

The Salamander’s horns completely froze over. I was sure the shot had inflicted quite a bit of damage, but it was hard to deal a decisive blow without adding any support damage to the attack after all.

These guys are bad news... That move can’t immobilize us, but if it hits me, it’ll take a huge bite out of my speed...!

“What’s...going on...? I’m...so slow...,” Igarashi struggled to say.

“Im...possible...,” Elitia added. “Not...on this...floor...”

The two Slow Salamanders’ attacks reverberated against each other and amplified their combined effect. They probably wouldn’t have slowed us down this much if we’d fought just one at a time. Shirone must have had no other

choice but to cast aside her weapons in order to escape the scope of this attack. I couldn't help but thank our lucky stars these Salamanders hadn't intervened in our battle against the Clay Giant.

"...GYEEE..."

"...KRAAAH..."

The Salamander I hit stood frozen in place, but the other opened its mouth wide to let out a menacing call and took off scurrying across the ground toward me. It would lose a footrace against a Komodo dragon, but its speed still took me by surprise.

"We must...escape the enemy's range or else...", Alphecca warned.

I would've done more to try and avoid them if I'd known they had the power to inflict such devastating status ailments, but since Alphecca had expended all her magic in the fight against the Clay Giant, she didn't have enough power to activate Float and carry us this far through the air. Even if we'd run here on our own two feet, we would've almost certainly collided with these two Salamanders either way.

But since it had come to this, all we could do was fight for our lives. If it worked out, we might also recover Shirone's weapons.

"Theresa, I need a favor... Try to stay as close as you can in front of me, okay? Or else that speed reduction might hit me, too."

"....."

Theresa nodded and readied her Razor Sword and buckler. The two of us prepared to crush the enemy ourselves, hoping the status ailment afflicting our friends would eventually wear off. I loaded up my slingshot, aimed it at the Salamander chasing after us, and got ready to land the first blow.

Part II: Water Spirit

The Salamander slithered along the ground as it scurried over to us and opened its mouth to unleash another attack—not the speed-eating strike, but one that summoned spheres of water out of the pools around us and left them bobbing in the air.

“Don’t even think about it!” I yelled.

“...KAAAH!”

◆Current Status◆

> SLOW SALAMANDER E activated ELEMENTAL AQUA → ELEMENTAL AQUA initiated autonomous attack

> ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT (FREEZE) → Hit SLOW SALAMANDER E
Weak spot attack

Inflicted FROZEN status

“.....!”

“KWAAAH!!”

The Salamander completed its attack before my bullet got to it and conjured up floating spheres of water that seemed to pulsate like a steady heartbeat. Who could’ve guessed a regular, run-of-the-mill monster would have so many different attacks in its arsenal? It wasn’t even a Named Monster! But this was no time to be griping about that. Theresia and I were the only ones with any real mobility left.

Theresia raised her shield and turned to look back at me. That one glance was enough to tell me exactly what she was planning to do.

“Go for it, Theresia!”

“—!!”

Theresia charged at the Elemental Aqua. The water bubbles pulsed violently and spewed jets of water toward her at a furious clip, when:

◆Current Status◆

- > ELEMENTAL AQUA activated GUSHING GAG
- > THERESIA activated MIRAGE and SHADOW STEP
- > THERESIA evaded 6 stages of GUSHING GAG

She dashed and darted through the air so quickly that for a second it looked like she'd produced several clones of herself. Elemental Aqua shot jet stream after jet stream at her; they all seemed to meet their mark but managed only to pierce through the fleeting images she left in her wake.

She's not just evading their attacks... She's making sure none of them get by her and hit me...!

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO and THERESIA earned a Trust Level Bonus → Activated COUPLED EVASION

Theresia adjusted her position to steer the enemy's attacks, ensuring all the jet streams missed me right behind her. I stood in the midst of a ferocious onslaught but didn't feel the slightest hint of danger. This was one chance I couldn't let slip by. I set up a combined attack with Theresia, determined to end this battle once and for all.

"Freeze!"

".....!"

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT (FREEZE) → Hit ELEMENTAL AQUA
Weak spot attack
Inflicted FROZEN status
- > THERESIA activated AZURE SLASH → Hit ELEMENTAL AQUA

Super effective against FROZEN enemy

Fatal blow

Blue flames licked the edges of Theresia's Elluminate Razor Sword as she brought it down in one fell swoop over the Elemental Aqua I'd frozen with the frost stone. Her sword slashed the spheres of water in half; in an instant they all evaporated and completely disappeared.

"KWAAAAH!"

One of the Slow Salamanders broke free from its frozen status and charged at us. Theresia wouldn't be able to cover me from her position if it activated that Breath of Stagnant Water at me now; it'd kill my speed and take me out of the battle.

Maybe this'll work... It does live in the water... Here goes nothing...!

"Theresia, hit it with the back of your sword!"

".....!!"

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: VINE SHOT
- > THERESIA attacked SLOW SALAMANDER D
- > VINES captured SLOW SALAMANDER D
- > SLOW SALAMANDER E's FROZEN status was removed

Vines shot out of Theresia's sword the instant it touched the Salamander and trapped the monster in a tangled web. She rushed behind the remaining monster before it could start attacking once more—and cinched the win.

".....!!"

◆Current Status◆

- > THERESIA activated SNEAK ATTACK → Damage to SLOW SALAMANDER E doubled
- > THERESIA lightly attacked SLOW SALAMANDER E

> VINES captured SLOW SALAMANDER E

““...KWAAAH...!””

Theresia attacked the enemy from its blind spot, giving her strike twice the power. She must have known her next blow might be fatal, so she intentionally held back and only lightly tapped the hilt of her sword against the enemy, activating the vines to sprout once more and successfully capture the Salamander without killing it.

The six-foot-long salamander-type monsters flailed about in the thorny binds that held them suspended above the ground. These vines rendered even monsters with the most vicious attacks completely powerless.

◆Current Status◆

> ALPHECCA, MELISSA, ELITIA, CION, AND KYOUKA's speed reduction was removed

“...Phew, finally back to normal... Atobe, Theresia, thank you.”

“...Now that I can move all of a sudden, it feels like I'm going super fast,” said Melissa.

“You've got that right...,” agreed Elitia. “That's the last type of monster I want to fight. My job is all about speed!”

Melissa and Elitia came riding over on Alphecca, and Igarashi caught up to us on Cion.

“I recommend disposing of these monsters,” Alphecca suggested. “However, the final choice is yours to make, Master.”

“I was planning to do just that, but I think their skills might come in handy at some point. Plus, we don't have to finish them off to find whatever loot they have on them.”

“Y-yeah. I don't know if I could dissect something that looks so much like a stuffed animal...”

“Their tails are delicious. You can sometimes find them for sale in District Seven,” Elitia mentioned. “Any equipment you make out of their skin will have

waterproof properties, and you can use the things on their heads as hand-to-hand combat weapons.”

Humans could be truly frightening—although that’s more than a little hypocritical of me to say after reaping the benefits from so many items made of monster parts.

“...Hm? Atobe, look at the monsters... They seem really wary of Theresia.”

“What...?”

Upon closer inspection, the captured Slow Salamanders appeared to be trembling slightly in their vines. Both sets of beady eyes were glued to Theresia.

“Theresia is a Lizardman...and these are Salamanders. Maybe they don’t trust lizards...?”

““...KWAH!”” the two monsters cried in unison, as if to confirm Elitia’s guess. But Theresia was just silently watching them—or actually, she was licking her lips. Maybe they looked tasty to her. I wasn’t sure if it would work, but I thought that might be enough leverage to try and negotiate with them.

“Don’t worry, we’re not going to eat you. I promise we’ll find you somewhere safe to live. Would you come with us later?” I asked the Salamanders.

““ ””

◆Current Status◆

- > SLOW SALAMANDER D and SLOW SALAMANDER E are no longer hostile
- > Successfully entered into service

Though they said nothing in response, they did apparently agree to my terms. I lifted the Vine Bullets’ bind on them, but they didn’t run away and simply watched me silently.

Hm? What’s this...?

A small, light blue crystal had fallen to the ground when Theresia destroyed the Elemental Aqua. I picked it up; it was smaller than a magic stone but probably useful for something.

“Oh... Atobe, there’s something stuck to their tails. Do you think they’re magic stones?”

“They’ve also got Shirone’s swords,” said Elitia. “They’re covered in something sticky, but they don’t look damaged.”

“Yeah, looks like the Salamanders’ skin is coated with some kind of phlegmy substance... Melissa, do you think it’s poisonous?”

“No. You can add salt to thin it out when you cook with it.”

Theresa’s stomach let out a low growl at the word *cook*. Melissa fished some meat jerky out of a pocket in her overalls and handed it to Theresa, who crammed it in her mouth.

“Let’s treat ourselves to something tasty after we find Shirone and make it home,” I told her.

“.....”

Theresa nodded. I wasn’t sure if it was because we’d managed to get these two on our team, but the other hostile Salamander that had poked its head out of the water was nowhere to be found. It looked like choosing not to defeat these monsters was already paying off.

◆Current Status◆

- > Acquired 1 STAGNATION STONE
- > Acquired 1 WATER SPIRIT CRYSTAL
- > Acquired 1 sticky HEAVEN’S STILETTO +4
- > Acquired 1 sticky ★BLOODSUCKER +3

Part III: The Blue Butterflies

We hopped on Alphecca and started off once more down the path cutting through the pools of water. Suddenly, our surroundings began changing.

“This feeling... We must be teleporting.”

“That threw me off a bit; there wasn’t even a marker...just this fog coming out of nowhere,” Igarashi said a little nervously as she rode along next to us astride Cion. I worried for a second we might be under attack. This was the only way Shirone’s tracks led us, though, so we had to keep pressing on down this road.

The fog began to thin after a little while to reveal that, though the sun had been high on the second floor, night’s dark curtain had already fallen here on the third floor. This took us all by surprise; we’d never before experienced such a drastic time change moving from one floor to another within the same labyrinth.

Huge, curiously shaped stone formations and sparse vegetation dotted the vast wilderness that stretched out across this floor of the Plateau of Primary Colors. It reminded me of a similar landscape: the Guiana Shield of South America. I’d only seen photos of it taken in daylight, but maybe it would look something like this at night.

The stone columns almost seemed to form a path, and farther past them on either side, tall, stony cliffs demarcated the boundaries of what appeared to be a canyon.

“I wonder what kind of monsters live in a place like this...,” Elitia said as she leaned forward from behind me on the chariot, perhaps in an effort to see better in the dark. Her hair tickled me as it grazed my cheeks; she didn’t seem to notice, so I kept quiet.

“I don’t have any trouble seeing at night. The dark doesn’t bother me,” said Melissa.

“.....”

Evidently, Melissa had inherited werecat qualities such as excellent vision, even in the dark. Theresia also appeared to see without much trouble. I wondered what the world must look like through her lizard mask—was it something like night vision goggles? Or could she see clear as day?

“Looks like Cion can see pretty well, too,” said Igarashi. “I think she might be tracking a scent... Mind hanging back a bit, everyone?”

“Woof!”

Cion kept her nose pressed to the ground and seemed to be sniffing out a trail invisible to everyone but her, just as Igarashi said. Maybe she knew how to trace footprints?

We proceeded cautiously down the path, keeping an eye on our surroundings. Just as I wondered if there was any way I could see a bit better...

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated HAWK EYES → Increased ability to monitor the situation

...Huh, I guess hawks have pretty good night vision, too.

I’d always thought most birds, apart from owls and other nocturnal species, were pretty much blind in the dark, but I guess I was wrong. My field of vision expanded all at once, though I still couldn’t see as far as I might during the day. From what I could tell, only a few small creatures scampered through the rough terrain. I didn’t sense any monsters, or any trace of Shirone, either.

“...Wait. Cion’s acting a bit different...,” Elitia noted. As soon as the words left her mouth, Cion stopped in her tracks, sniffed around in a circle, a bit distressed, and crouched down on the ground. Igarashi hopped off Cion’s back and coaxed her to continue, but it was no use.

“What’s wrong, Cion? Are you trying to say Shirone’s trail ends here?” Igarashi asked.

“Hnnn,” whimpered Cion, looking troubled. She licked Igarashi’s outstretched hand and lay down on the spot. The rest of us soon caught up with them, hopped off Alphecca, and began trying to piece together what had happened,

wary of any potential danger around us. Melissa got down on all fours and started crawling around looking for clues. After a few minutes, she got to her feet and lightly shook her head.

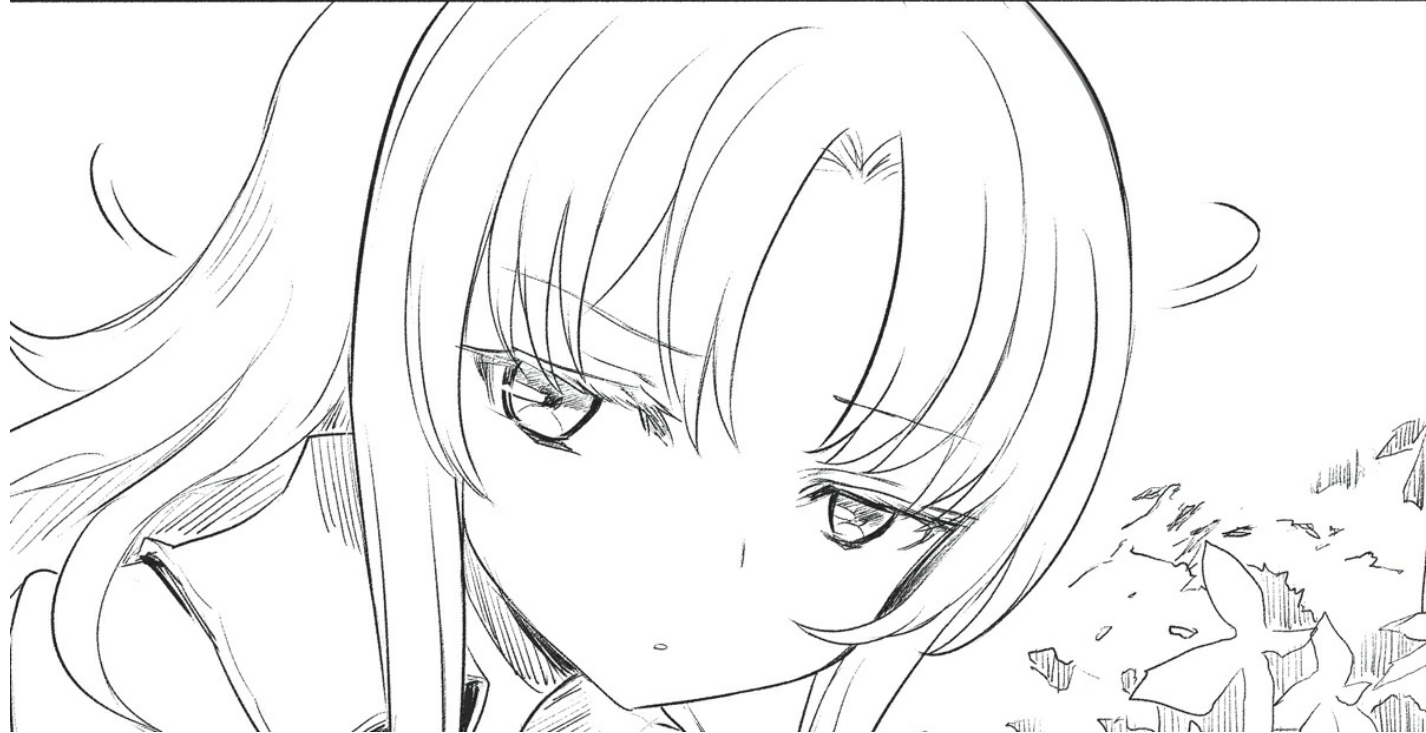
“Her trail’s faint; it stops right here. She must’ve jumped or something, but I can’t find any trace of that, either.”

We couldn’t find any signs of Shirone among the oddly shaped rocks shooting out almost perfectly perpendicular to the ground, nor amid the trees scattered in the area. But we knew for a fact Cion had tracked Shirone’s movements to this point.

What happened here...? Did a monster attack her? Seems like she vanished a bit too suddenly for that. Maybe...

“...It’s almost like she was spirited away. Do you think some kind of flying monster got her...?” Igarashi wondered aloud. She looked up at the black-and-white skies, where a thin fog draped over the hazy moon. The monochromatic heavens felt out of place for the Plateau of Primary Colors; it made everything feel much more surreal than even your average labyrinth, like something straight out of a fairy tale.

“I find it hard to believe a Seeker at Shirone’s level would get caught totally off-guard...but the evidence does seem to point to that possibility,” I replied.



“True... If that’s really what happened, we need to hurry and find her. But there’s still so much ground to cover.”

We could very easily lose a lot of time on a wild-goose chase on such a vast floor, even if we had a general sense of the direction she’d gone. There was one more possibility we had to consider: Shirone had purposely obscured her tracks to hide from her pursuers. I could also imagine her using the Return Scroll to teleport back to the entrance of the labyrinth and wait for a moment to slip through unnoticed. In that case, would we be better off making our own escape while we still could instead of stumbling blindly through the dark? Just as the thought crossed my mind, something small fluttered into my line of sight.

That something was a solitary blue butterfly that appeared before us under the black-and-white sky.

◆Monster Encountered◆

?BLUE BUTTERFLY H

Level 3

Neutral

Resistance Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

“Is this tiny butterfly a monster...?”

“It says ‘Neutral’...which must mean it’s a monster that won’t attack us,” I said.

As far as I could tell from my license, there were quite a few of these butterflies in the vicinity. However, they showed no signs of attacking and seemed content to flutter about. Melissa watched them for a moment and then said:

“...Should we take them out, just to be safe? If they’re the monsters Shirone ran into, they might have some clue about where she is.”

“No, we can’t attack them. Our karma will go up if we strike a neutral monster,” Elitia explained.

“Really? I’d thought your karma only went up if you broke the Guild laws...,” said Igarashi.

The butterflies kept their distance from us. Elitia’s warning made sense; there was something obviously wrong about going after a monster that showed no signs of aggression. Soon enough, however, the butterflies started growing in number one by one and then gathered around the very person who had told us to hold our fire: Elitia.

“Ellie, we should probably get away from them. They’re monsters, after all. Even if they look harmless, they might still be dangerous,” advised Igarashi. Almost as soon as the words had left her lips, Elitia began acting oddly.

“...Elitia?” I asked.

“...I...”

“Heed my warning, dear devotee. The monsters that appear before you are—”

Elitia began mumbling something in the same instant Ariadne reached out to warn me. But before I could hear her whole message...

“...No... I’m...I’m not a murderer!”

“Elitia!”

◆Current Status◆

- > ?BLUE BUTTERFLY H activated GUILT TRIP → Target: ELITIA
- > ELITIA activated SLASH RIPPER → ?BLUE BUTTERFLY H evaded
- > ELITIA attacked a Neutral monster → ELITIA’s karma rose

The supposedly neutral monster had done something to Elitia; there was no other plausible explanation for what she did next. Though Elitia herself had warned us against engaging them in battle, she unsheathed her Scarlet Emperor and slashed through the air at the butterflies. It looked like she’d landed a hit, but her blade sliced through nothing but air.

“Elitia, snap out of it! These guys mean trouble. We need to get out of here!” I called.

“...I can’t... It’s too late...for me...”

What was happening to her? She cradled her head painfully in her hands while the butterflies gathered and flew around her in larger numbers, as if bombarding her with some unseen attack.

“Atobe, there’s some kind of fog rolling in that way!”

“.....!”

“Devotee, I advise you to retreat for the time being. You might still manage to escape that fog should you run with all your strength—”

Alphecca tried to warn us, but the blue butterflies had already swarmed around Elitia, who seemed not to hear a word we said; she simply stood there, falling further and further into a self-destructive state.

“Elitia! We’ve gotta run for it! Elitia!”

“Atobe... We can’t just leave her behind. Right...?!”

Igarashi went to attack the blue butterflies but stopped herself halfway. Maybe she’d also realized Elitia’s karma had gone up. We’d also incur karma if we fought the butterflies, yet this theoretically neutral enemy was free to attack us—and I was still naive enough to think something so unfair would never happen that easily. The labyrinth could reveal its true colors and devour Seekers whole the instant they let their guard down. Elitia’s friend had probably fallen victim to that cruel reality as well. In that case...

That monster must’ve tricked Elitia into attacking it, even though it’s supposed to be neutral... But there has to be a way to make up for that one misguided strike. We’re all going to find a way out of here, no matter what...!

“That fog must’ve taken Shirone!” I shouted. “If we want to get her back, we’re gonna have to go in after her!”

“Yeah... You’re right. We should prepare ourselves for that...but first... Ellie!” Igarashi shouted as she ran over to Elitia, swatting away the butterflies in her path. Her voice pulled Elitia out of the depths of her confusion; Elitia lowered her brandished sword and loosened her grip on its hilt. The thick fog shrouding everything in sight was almost upon us. I threw away all thoughts of relying on

the Return Scroll to get us out of here and turned to face the fog head on.

“Everyone, take cover in my shadow. What you seek almost certainly lies within the folds of this blasted fog, exactly as you suspect.”

“Yeah... I really hope so. Doesn’t change the fact we’re still stuck playing defense... We’re gonna have to shake things up.”

“As you wish,” we heard Alphecca say.

We took shelter beneath her chariot. Igarashi scooped Elitia up in her arms and dove for cover in the last possible second before the fog rolled directly over us. This thicker layer brought huge swarms of butterflies with it—many times more than the number we’d just seen—but they got no closer to Elitia. After the fog blanketed everything in sight, the butterflies flew up and away toward the heavens.

From within Alphecca’s shelter I saw the monsters blocking out the skies cast a great shadow on the earth. The innumerable sets of wings began to coalesce into one enormous monster, almost as if they had been a single living organism the entire time.

◆Monster Encountered◆

☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

Level 8

On Guard

Special Resistance

Dropped Loot: ???

Part IV: All Alone

“Hfff, Hfff...”

I ran and ran until I finally made it to the third floor of the labyrinth. Day immediately turned to night, and all signs of the salamander-type monsters coming after me disappeared. I found myself in a sort of valley surrounded by tall, rocky cliffs to either side. Stone pillars in all kinds of weird shapes stuck out of the ground; I walked over to one and leaned my back against it.

“...How the hell did a monster from this stupid labyrinth get me so bad...? There’s nothing I can do here all by myself...”

Seeking as a party had become second nature to me ever since I joined the Brigade. But now I was only going back to the life I’d known before. I’d already seen one of my previous parties get wiped out; I’d been kicked out of another and got thrown under the bus after yet another party tricked me. That’s just what you had to do to survive in the Labyrinth Country. You used your friends to get ahead, even if it meant cutting them out of your life once you were done with them. Otherwise, you’d be forced to compromise your dreams and have to settle for a safety district, where you could keep seeking without any real adventure. There had been a point where I’d thought about finding companions I could spend my days seeking with in peace and not have to worry about going on to the higher districts or climbing up the ranks—but I’d abandoned those pipe dreams long ago.

I’d always had a spot in the Brigade as long as I could contribute in some way. The captain had accepted me. But he didn’t need me anymore to get to where he was trying to take the Brigade. Even back when I was a Dual Fencer, I never did manage to use a colored weapon. I had nothing left to offer. That much even I knew. Just like I knew how pathetic it was for me to be clinging to this place where I used to belong, knowing nothing I did would amount to anything and hoping beyond hope I’d get some leniency. But the captain never compromised on his standards once he’d made up his mind. He’d even ignored

his own younger sister Ellie's pleas. I couldn't claim any blood relation and had proved totally useless to him; there was no way he'd see any more value in me.

"I have no use for you here."

That was his final warning. The last opportunity he entrusted to me was to leave the Brigade and retrieve Elitia's sword. That sword would answer to no one but Elitia. And yet, our leader commanded me to recover it, sans Elitia if I had to. He'd decided he didn't need Elitia as long as someone else could learn how to use it.

Elitia had refused to abandon her goal of rescuing Rury from the Simian Lord's clutches, but the captain forbade all the other members in the Brigade from helping with her quest. Now that she was all on her own, I'd thought maybe Elitia was out in the cold, just like me. When I first heard rumors that she'd picked up the nickname *Death Sword* and that other Seekers steered clear of her, I assumed she'd be all alone—until I found her in District Seven. The wave of emotions that washed over me after I heard she'd found a party to join was too much to handle.

"...Why am I the one who's all alone...? I'm the one who's working my butt off to keep my place in the Brigade..."

The vice captain of the Brigade had always been especially kind to me. But even she could not defy explicit orders from our leader. The rest of the Brigade members saw the writing on the wall and spoke with me only as much as they absolutely had to. They knew I'd soon be forced out unless by some miracle we found another colored weapon fit for a Dual Fencer.

The Brigade's plan to try to gain an advantage over other parties, resorting to cursed weapons if we had to, had repulsed Elitia. But she still hadn't been able to turn away the sword the captain assigned her—she had been chosen. And just like that, she got a new job I'd never heard of before and powers far beyond her level.

It was just so unfair. Elitia had stolen from right under my nose the one thing I wanted so badly but could never have, and not only was she trying to get rid of it, but she walked around with the saddest look plastered on her face as if she were the sole victim in this tragic circus.

“...It’s not fair... You’re so cruel, Ellie... And here I... I...!”

My head swirled. I’d seen those girls Ellie and her friends knew walking into this labyrinth, and I followed after them; by the time I ran into those golem-type monsters, I’d already hatched a plan to break her party up. I thought I had it all figured out. My mark on Arihito had gone off without a hitch; once I took him out of the picture, I’d make sure Four Seasons hung up their Seeker hats for good. Then Arihito, plagued by guilt for letting Elitia into his party out of pity, would break under the sense of responsibility for the girls’ fate and Elitia would be left alone again, still unable to give up on rescuing Rury. Once that happened, I was sure I could convince Elitia to come home with me. I’d accomplish my mission to retrieve the Scarlet Emperor and buy myself a little more time in the Brigade.

It was perfect. And yet.

And yet, Arihito had come back. He came flying in at an unbelievable speed as if it were the most natural thing in the world and saved these parties just as they were on the brink of destruction. Not a single person got hurt—and I could wrap my head around less than half of what he’d done in that battle. I did know some things for sure: He was the backbone of his party, did some kind of support job, and had nerves of steel to analyze any situation with terrifying clarity, along with the courage to rally his party members.

“We will under no circumstances let Elitia die.”

That’s what he’d told me without missing a beat. Any leader—I don’t care how great—should know better than to promise something like that once they’ve seen how merciless the labyrinths can be. And yet.

“Plus, we all share the same goals.”

How could he say that? To Arihito, Elitia’s goal should be an impossibly high hurdle even he couldn’t possibly hope to overcome. And yet...

Every time we enter a labyrinth, we put our lives on the line. Nobody should be that ready to risk their life to help *someone else* reach their goals unless there was something in it for them. Even the Guild Savors have their own motivations for joining the ranks of the Guild. As a general rule, it would be unheard of for them to assist an ordinary party outside of an official capacity—

but several Guild Savors had lent their support to Arihito and his group.

I didn't get it. These rookies had been in this country for only a few days! Elitia had put all her trust in Arihito, and he had made the impossible possible. I knew without a doubt nothing could stop their inevitable progress.

I felt the strength wane from my body and lost any sense of where I was standing.

I couldn't take the jealousy I felt toward Elitia.

"...What makes her any different from me? Why can't that be me...?"

I knew what was coming to me. I'd chosen to deceive those girls and would now have to face punishment under the law. There was no way I could sneak out of this unnoticed. Setting the monster on that party had spiked my karma so high, I was a wanted criminal in basically every district. The Guild was going to imprison me until it fell back down to zero. I'd lose a few levels and forfeit so many contribution points—and I could forget about going back to District Five if this meant I got kicked out of the Brigade.

"...Well, there goes everything. This sucks... After I promised myself I'd never let this happen again..."

I couldn't stop myself from whining, though I could tell my words rang empty and hollow. My mind flashed back to when I'd first provoked Arihito, and a rush of self-hatred washed over me. Even if I had managed to take him back with me, I would've still been worthless to the captain. I'd known it all along, yet here I was clinging to this future that would never be mine. I'd dug my own grave, but I couldn't muster the guts to turn myself in to the Guild Savors.

That's when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something blue flutter into view.

"...A butterfly... Is this tiny thing a monster...?"

◆Monster Encountered◆

?BLUE BUTTERFLY A

Level 3

Neutral

Resistance Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

Not all monsters found in the labyrinths necessarily turned hostile against Seekers. Some were neutral; others could actually communicate with us. The Guild hadn't yet identified this kind of butterfly. *Blue Butterfly* had to be a working name, which meant nobody had either figured out exactly what it was or taken one down and brought resources back with them yet. I might've been more curious back when I was a lower level. But this level-3 monster was practically useless to me or the Brigade now—unless it was a Named Monster.

“...I'm such an idiot.”

There I was, still thinking about what the Brigade might need. Some part of me believed I had a place there until the captain gave the final word. I hated being that naive. I'd never get to go back, even if by some miracle I survived deep in this labyrinth. I'd failed to get Elitia back, lost my weapons, and racked up so much karma, I'd hurt the Brigade if I didn't pull out.

“The weapons passed her up. I hate to say it, but that means I've got no choice but to leave her here in this district.”

“...Captain...?!”

I could hear his voice coming from somewhere. There was no way he was actually near me, but it was definitely his voice—soft, but cold as ice, and so captivating, a single sentence drew you in completely. The captain couldn't be here. This had to be some kind of illusion, but that familiar voice pulled at my heartstrings.

“No, I wouldn't call her loyal. She's just an abandoned puppy who's grown dependent on me. I'm nobody special to her. I'm sure she feels the same.”

“That's not true! I did it all for the Brigade...!”

Staying calm was out of the question. I knew the voice was either an illusion or a monster attack, but I couldn't just ignore it. It spelled out exactly what I'd feared for the longest time the captain actually felt about me.

“She’s given her all for the Brigade and, not for nothing, went so far as to change jobs. Are you really going to abandon her?” asked a different voice. This one belonged to a woman who’d joined the Brigade after me but had since become indispensable to both the Brigade and the captain: Vice Captain Agnes.

“I know she can’t use a cursed weapon, but she’s still got a lot to contribute as a seeke—”

“Assuming she managed to contribute anything, it’d be average at best. Given the monsters we’re up against, I need someone so strong, I’d be an idiot to take them out of our starting eight-member lineup. The chances Shirone will ever get her hands on that kind of power are now infinitesimally low.”

“...Stop.”

There were more butterflies now. Where there had been just one, now there were two; I realized what that meant, but my mind had gotten too muddled to think.

◆Current Status◆

> ?BLUE BUTTERFLY A activated GUILT TRIP → Target: SHIRONE

“Everyone knows they could be subbed out at any time. I’m sure Shirone didn’t expect she’d be here forever—”

“.....!!”

◆Current Status◆

> SHIRONE activated SPECTRAL SLASHING TALISMAN → Hit 2 ?BLUE BUTTERFLIES

> Defeated 2 ?BLUE BUTTERFLIES

> SHIRONE attacked a Neutral monster → SHIRONE’s karma rose

I ripped out a talisman from my coat and activated it—the magical blades it unleashed sliced through the fluttering butterflies before they could escape. I didn’t want to listen to these voices anymore, even if they were saying what the captain actually thought. That was the last thing I wanted to hear. And I knew

without a doubt the butterflies were behind those voices. This Guilt Trip skill must tell you the things you dreaded most in the voice of the person you hoped would never utter them.

It was like they were asking me to attack them.

“...You really want to get under my skin, don’t you? You don’t know anything. How can you say this is all my fault?!”

I lost my cool. The butterflies I could’ve sworn I’d already taken down flew at me again and again until, a second later, great swarms of them completely covered everything else in sight. The voices in my head started to blend and bleed together. I heard the captain, then our vice captain—she’d always watched out for me, but the version I heard now didn’t even try to speak up against the captain’s wishes. She must’ve thought there was no point fighting to keep a grunt like me around.

I knew in my heart it wasn’t true. Agnes really did care about me. I wanted to believe that, and yet.

“...If that’s your final decision, I’ll endeavor to get the other party members on board.”

I could just see her saying that and forgetting about me soon after. After all, she hadn’t once suggested taking the second party out on a rescue mission back when we lost Rury, either.

“...I’m the biggest dummy here.”

I’d thought I could stay with the captain if I turned against Elitia in her attempt to save Rury. She was desperately trying her best, and I’d laughed in her face. I could just guess what she thought of me now that she had Arihito:

Poor Shirone. She’s trying so hard to pretend she doesn’t realize how pitiful she is.

◆Current Status◆

> SHIRONE activated ANNIHILIGHT TALISMAN → Hit 16 ?BLUE BUTTERFLIES

> SHIRONE attacked Neutral monsters → SHIRONE’s karma rose

> ?BLUE BUTTERFLIES activated SWARM STATE

> One ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO appeared

The next thing I knew, a thick fog had rolled over my surroundings. I had been so overwhelmed by the butterflies before my eyes that I hadn't noticed it silently creeping in. I looked up—and saw an enormous butterfly beating its wings as it hovered in the air.

◆Current Status◆

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated PAINFUL PENANCE →

Target: SHIRONE

> SHIRONE sustained damage corresponding to karma levels

SHIRONE's karma fell slightly

“Aaaaah!! ...Agh... Aaaurghh—!!”

Pain coursed through my entire body. The agony almost knocked me out cold; I collapsed onto the ground and gasped for air. And just like that, it was gone—all the karma I'd racked up for taking down those Blue Butterflies had powered a huge backlash of equal measure. I understood what had happened but couldn't do anything about it.

◆Current Status◆

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated IMMACULATE TRANQUILITY

→ Area effect: Karma will gradually decrease

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated CARCERAL COCOON →

Target: SHIRONE

I'd once heard a rumor about this. There was supposed to be some kind of monster that would appear before Seekers who'd committed a crime. None of the Seekers it attacked ever made it out of the labyrinth. They said the monster would judge the guilty in its homemade court—but everyone in the Brigade had dismissed it right off the bat as something that could never happen.

Yet this skill had robbed from me as much vitality as the karma I'd gained. I

couldn't lift a finger as the monster spewed white thread from its mouth and wound it around my body, binding me tightly. If that was what I had coming to me, I had no choice but to face the music. I'd failed to trust the captain or the vice captain. I knew the Blue Butterflies were showing me nothing but lies, and still I lost my cool and turned my talismans against them in anger. I could've avoided all this pain if only I hadn't done that.

This is it. I'm done for...

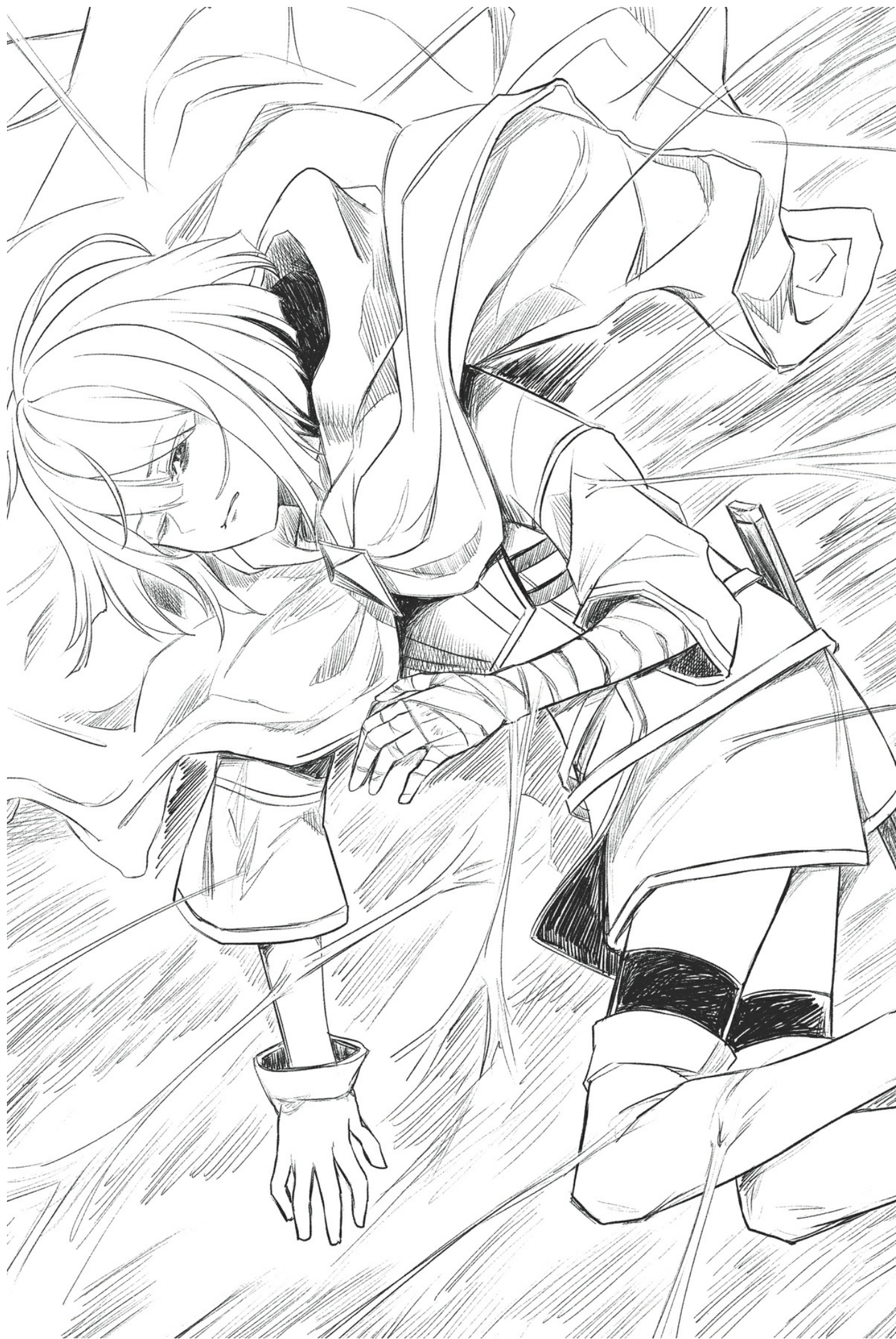
Hopelessly tangled in the string, my vision went dark. The fog around me began to thin; I was being taken off somewhere.

The last image to flash before my eyes was Arihito. He must have looked absolutely brilliant to his party members as he rode in to save them on that chariot. To me, however, he looked so very far away. I'd longed to meet someone like him forever.

◆Current Status◆

> Elaps ime activa specia effe of CARCERAL → SHIRO was trans to diff dimension

> ☆MERCY WINGED IMAGE MOR lifted SWA STATE



CHAPTER 2

Moonlit Butterflies

Part I: Crimes

“Ellie, calm down! Ellie!”

Elitia gripped her sword tightly and tried to jump out from the cover of Alphecca’s shadow, no longer able to lie in wait. Igarashi grabbed her from behind and with Melissa’s help somehow managed to restrain her, but Elitia never took her eyes off the butterflies fluttering all around.

“Elitia, what in the world...?” I started to say but swallowed the rest of the sentence when I saw the look on her face. It shone not with hostility or anger, but with a fear so intense, it made Elitia’s lips tremble.

“...It’s not true... Arihito and Suzuna would never be afraid of me...,” she pleaded.

My license displayed the Blue Butterflies had used a skill called Guilt Trip. It said nothing about what that actually did to Elitia; I could tell just by looking at her it was awful, but I’d have to ask her to find out more.

“I’ve never been afraid of you, Elitia, not even once,” I assured her. “And nothing is ever going to change that.”

“...I know... But the truth is...,” she said without looking in my direction. She had her back to me and Igarashi’s arms still wrapped tightly around her.

“Maybe taking my word for it isn’t so easy, but I hope you believe me when I say I’d never be afraid of you. And if I’m lying, then—”

“Say nothing further. Master, I urge you to carefully consider the sequence of events which led you to this moment,” warned Alphecca’s ghostly apparition after she materialized once more upon the seat of her chariot.

The sequence of events... Those butterflies did something to Elitia, and she attacked them. That made her karma go up because they’re theoretically neutral opponents...

“Those butterflies provoke Seekers into attacking...,” I said. “I’ll bet they have

some kind of skill that deals with karma.”

“But then why are they only going after Ellie...?” asked Igarashi.

The butterflies hadn’t messed with anyone else. Why would they use Guilt Trip on Elitia and not us? Was it just a coincidence, or did they have some kind of reason?

“...It’s because I’ve committed a crime. And I haven’t atoned for it... I offset the karma but that’s all. I still haven’t—”

“Elitia, you need to calm down. Otherwise you’re gonna end up dead,” said Melissa. Her voice was as detached as always, yet her words spelled out the very real danger before Elitia in no uncertain terms. But that still wasn’t enough to break the spell that kept Elitia fixated on the butterflies.

“...We need to figure out exactly what they’re doing before they come at us again. Elitia...it looks like those Blue Butterflies used a skill called Guilt Trip on you. What did that do?” I asked.

“You don’t have to tell us if it’s too painful...,” Igarashi added gently. “But if you do, we’ll be that much more ready to help with all we’ve got. Although I realize that might not be the most reassuring coming from me.”

At that, Elitia finally loosened her grip on her sword. Then, her back still turned to me, she began speaking very quietly.

“...I heard everyone... I heard Arihito, and Suzuna, too... Everyone said I scared them and that’s why you can’t get rid of me... It sounded just like you...”

Who wouldn’t lose their cool after being forced to hear something so horrible?

The Blue Butterflies didn’t see their karma go up from using such a terrible skill on Elitia. This was different from Gray, who could hide his Trickster skills from detection.

“...So basically, they provoke you with a feeling of unbearable guilt. And this messed-up system just lets them get away with that scot-free?”

“Atobe...”

We all struggle with this sort of thing. We only ever get to see one side of the

people in our lives, but we push ourselves to put our trust in them in spite of that. It's how we find the strength to keep going. The monster knew Elitia's deepest fear, that we were all secretly scared of her. It leveraged this fear against her and forced her to push back—if that meant more karma, then so be it.

“Bring it on... We'll play by these twisted rules and win.”

Karma served to represent the laws Seekers in the Labyrinth Country were supposed to follow. Amass karma and the Guild would arrest and punish you in some way. Shirone's karma had already been elevated by the time she met those butterflies, and then she disappeared. In other words, we'd be running a huge risk if Elitia fought them now that her karma had risen, too. The first thing we needed to do was find a way to retreat for the time being—however.

“Escape will be futile until you somehow lift this fog. Until then, I will be unable to move... I might hit those butterflies should I attempt it.”

“Yeah, we'll figure it out. That huge butterfly isn't listed as neutral, so we should be okay to go after it...”

“Ellie?!”

Elitia jumped out from under Alphecca and raised her sword up high to slice through the Blue Butterflies—but we couldn't let her incur any more karma.

“Elitia! Don't fall for it!” I yelled.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated MORALE SUPPORT 1 → ELITIA's morale increased by 13

> ELITIA consumed morale

Recovered from CONFUSION

“...Arihito...”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated RECOVERY SUPPORT 1 → ELITIA recovered full vitality

I activated Recovery Support with the hope it might help Elitia clear her head a bit and comfort her in some small way. Luckily, she burned through some morale and snapped out of her confusion.

“We will never hurt you; not me, not anyone else here. You’ve got to believe us...!” I pleaded.

“...I...I’ll never doubt you again...! But...”

“Atobe, we’ve got to do something about that butterfly... Or else forget about getting Shirone back; we may not make it out of here alive...!”

Merciful Winged Mirage Morpho was not listed as neutral. Still, given all that had happened, I couldn’t shake the feeling it might find a way around that and make our karma go up regardless.

What happens when our karma rises...? We can’t take any chances if it could mean something fatal. But if we don’t make sure it’s safe to attack it, then... Or is there another option? There’s got to be some way we can go after it without messing up our karma...!

“Atobe, the giant butterfly’s up to something...!”

◆Current Status◆

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated TRANSLUCENT TENTACLES
→ Target: ELITIA

Mirage Morpho’s wings shimmered faintly as it hovered in the air, bathed in moonlight. In that moment, a chill so intense I couldn’t begin to describe it ran through me, and I shouted with all my might.

“Elitia! Run!”

“.....?!”

Elitia jumped back as soon as she heard me, but it was too late. The swarm of Blue Butterflies left Elitia’s side as a vicious, invisible attack headed straight for her.

“Awoooooo!!”

“...Cion...!”

◆Current Status◆

> CION activated COVERING → Target: ELITIA

> ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: CION

> TRANSLUCENT TENTACLES hit CION

Damaged HOUND LEATHER VEST +3

“Bow...!!” Cion yelped.

“Cion...!” cried Igarashi.

My Defense Support wasn’t enough to dampen the blow that sent Cion flying, taking a full third of her vitality with it. It even broke a piece of the armor we’d put around her torso. The enemy had the high ground from its vantage point in the sky and was almost entirely concealed by the fog; my Hawk Eyes could just barely make out the faint outline of a pair of enormous, translucent armlike limbs.

“Grrrr...!”

“Cion, fall back! Listen up, everyone, I need you to stay on your toes!” I called out. “That butterfly can come at you from a distance, and it’s almost completely invisible...!”

“You’re telling me it’s allowed to attack us, but we can’t do *anything*...? That’s cheating...!” Igarashi yelled, furious. I couldn’t agree more. If Mirage Morpho really was free to attack without incurring any karma and we got hit with a penalty anytime we went after it, we’d all end up with overwhelming karma to answer for, assuming we managed to take it down at all.

But then I ran my eyes over my license, and everything clicked into place.

◆Current Status◆

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO’s karma rose

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated IMMACULATE TRANQUILITY
→ Area effect: Karma will gradually decrease

The blow meant for Elitia that Cion intercepted with Covering had caused

Mirage Morpho's karma to spike. Immediately afterward, Mirage Morpho's behavior changed; it began emitting a high-frequency sound, which slowly faded until I could no longer hear it.

"...What's going on?" asked Melissa.

"The monster's karma rose when it attacked Cion. It's trying to bring that back down," I explained.

"Does that mean karma is somehow bad for it, too...?" If Melissa was right, maybe that meant we could contain it by forcing its karma to rise even further.

Maybe the area effect will bring Elitia's karma down, too, so the Blue Butterflies can't use Guilt Trip anymore—or not.

"...No! Arihito's not afraid of me... You're wrong...!"

◆Current Status◆

> ?BLUE BUTTERFLY D activated GUILT TRIP → Target: ELITIA

Either Elitia's karma hadn't decreased enough, or Guilt Trip had nothing to do with karma.

...Forget about that now. I've got other things I need to do...!

I had only one trick up my sleeve that would reach Mirage Morpho floating high above us. It came with a huge risk, but we needed to help Elitia as soon as possible.

"Sorry, everybody... I'm gonna do something a little crazy. Make sure you aim right at that butterfly once it falls!"

"Atobe!"

".....!!"

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated REAR STANCE → Target: ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

I lost consciousness for the briefest second, then suddenly my surroundings

changed. Gravity abandoned its grip on me, and I found myself behind Mirage Morpho.

Should I use Murakumo...? No, I can't get her out...!

"Master, heed my warning. Inflict a heavy attack on this monster, and you shall put yourself in great peril."

I could unsheathe Murakumo only if the conditions were right—and they were clearly not, if she herself advised me against calling on her powers. That left me with just one option: Go in and try inflicting the most damage possible. I needed to drag Mirage Morpho down, if only by a few feet.

"Down with you!"

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT (FREEZE)

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated FLARE DIVISION →
Altered target of ARIHITO's attack

> FORCE SHOT (FREEZE) hit 3 ?BLUE BUTTERFLIES

Weak spot attack

Inflicted FROZEN status

> Defeated 3 ?BLUE BUTTERFLIES → ARIHITO's karma rose

"Urgh...!"

Mirage Morpho flickered, disappeared, and instantly teleported, causing the magical ice bullet I'd released to pierce straight through three Blue Butterflies, almost as if they'd swapped places with the monster.

That skill diverted my attack... Will it stop at nothing to mess with our karma...?!

I'd made it up this high, but it wasn't going to be easy getting down; Rear Stance burned more magic than most of my skills. I couldn't overuse it.

I know I just got it, but should I try loading my gun with one of the stagnation stones...? No, the monster will just divert my target again... Crap, I'm out of

moves...!

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated YOSHITSUNE'S LEAP

I leaped through the air to put some distance between myself and my foe. I figured I could make it down safely this way if I jumped every time I started to fall. But then, just as I abandoned my body to the gravitational pull and felt the blood rush to my head, I saw Mirage Morpho cloak itself in a shimmering blue light.

◆Current Status◆

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated PAINFUL PENANCE →

Targets: ARIHITO, ELITIA

> ARIHITO and ELITIA sustained damage corresponding to karma levels

Karma fell slightly

“Ughaaah...!”

“Aaaaah...!!”

Pain so intense I felt it would tear me to pieces ripped through my body. It wasn't just me—I heard Elitia scream out in anguish from the ground.

Damn, I'm gonna black out... And the landing's gonna crush me...!

“Woof!!”

I'd lost track of how many times Cion had saved me like this. She jumped up to catch me and just barely managed to break my fall before I hit the ground.

◆Current Status◆

> ★SCHOLAR'S ANKH → activated Evaded fatal blow

Gained extra experience points due to MORIBUND status

I felt a slight warmth coming from the Scholar's Ankh hanging around my

neck. Cion had evidently saved me right before what could've been my final fall. I took a sip of a potion as soon as I could, but it didn't heal me fully right away. I felt disoriented, dizzy.

I can't afford to take another hit... This Ankh only works some of the time, so there's almost no way it'll work twice in a row.

"Atobe, say something! Atobe...!"

"...I-I'm okay...! I'm alive, Igarashi...!"

"...Nothing about that looked okay. I almost had a heart attack..."

"Arihito, you should take a breather," said Elitia. "Don't get any closer to the monster...!"

Elitia had sustained less damage; that probably had something to do with her maximum vitality being higher than mine. Regardless, while she looked more or less fine, I was basically on death's door. More than likely, that was because I'd inadvertently taken down three of those Blue Butterflies; Elitia, meanwhile, had only swung at them. Plus, the area effects might have started working on her a bit already, too.

So your karma goes down when you're hit with that Painful Penance... But if my hunch is right, that means...

"Arihito, the butterflies... Get away from the butterflies! Hurry!"

The Blue Butterflies swarmed around me, ready to torture me for hurting their brethren.

"Grrrr...!"

"Cion, wait! Don't attack them!" I commanded.

Cion did as she was told and deactivated the Fire Garnet on her anklet. We'd be in an even bigger mess if her karma rose on top of everything else. The Blue Butterflies were clearly off-limits, and now that my karma had spiked, I was their next target.

◆Current Status◆

> ?BLUE BUTTERFLY J activated GUILT TRIP → Target: ARIHITO

The flapping of the thousands of butterfly wings—something that should be too quiet to hear no matter how hard I strained my ears—began to sound like a voice I'd heard somewhere before. It felt nostalgic...or maybe that wasn't the right word for it. That voice, so much like one hiding somewhere deep within my oldest memories, rang out from the spring of my consciousness in ripples that grew larger and stronger.

Part II: Bewitched

"I wonder why none of his relatives took him in."

"It's no real surprise. Apparently, his mother came from a wealthy family and ran off with his father."

"And now this little thing has no one... What a terrible pity."

I'd lost my parents as an infant and had been left all alone in the world. At least that's how I thought of myself, but I knew it wasn't true. I had relatives, but none of them had agreed to take care of me. I like to think I'd probably avoided a life of being shuffled around from house to house, so maybe I'd dodged a bullet there. Still, sometimes I'd picked up on things the caretakers at the orphanage couldn't completely conceal, in spite of all the kindness they'd showed me. Their true feelings would come to the surface and catch my eye. At times, I'd imagine the things they really wanted to say but would never dare to voice, such as:

"I heard they were rushing to get him to the hospital when they got in that accident."

"The driver in the other car had only a few scratches, and little Arihito came out basically unscathed. They say he'll probably have some psychological trauma, though. I wonder how he'll feel when he realizes what happened, poor thing."

I didn't want to hear it; I pretended not to whenever such talk did happen to reach my ears. Eventually I grew up, took my place as a cog in the great social machine, and got so absorbed in my work that I managed to forget all about those feelings. I'd finally stopped replaying those haunting memories, but the Blue Butterflies gouged my old wounds open without a shred of mercy.

"What a pitiful little creature."

"If only he'd never been born, his parents would surely still be alive..."

The truth is, I knew. I knew the teachers at the orphanage had never once said anything like that to me. But in my own personal weakness, I let the butterflies' illusions get under my skin. I was the reason my parents had died. I might never have lost them if only I hadn't gotten sick and forced them to rush out of the house that day.

But I'll never forget the last thing I saw from the back seat of that crumpled car.

◆Current Status◆

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated CARCERAL COCOON →

Target: ARIHITO

Something white came floating down from the sky: the thread Mirage Morpho spun out of its body. I jumped away from Cion so it wouldn't fall on her and got tangled up in the string. I could hear Igarashi screaming, heard Cion barking, too—but all I could do was yell and warn them to stay away. I couldn't bring them down with me. Plus...

Nothing about Mirage Morpho's way of doing things sat right with me. It tormented people with guilt and still got to call itself neutral? I'd never accept such twisted logic.

Is this how it got Shirone, too? ...It's gotta be.

This monster, Mirage Morpho, unquestionably had nothing but hostility in its heart as it tried to bring Seekers to their knees. It would come as no shock if its skill that dealt out damage corresponding to a Seeker's karma had claimed some of their lives. If this was the way Shirone had gone, I thought perhaps I'd be able to see something once in the clutches of the white thread—and in fact, that's exactly what I saw. A small slit into another dimension appeared the moment the cocoon opened up to capture me. There on the other side, bound and trapped by the thread enveloping her body, lay Shirone.

"If your last birth was a mistake, the answer is simple: Become born again. Allow the labyrinth to swallow you whole and bring you to life once more, as a child of the labyrinth."

The voice no longer held any malice. It whispered to me sweetly, reassuring me everything would be better once I left all I knew behind and gave in to the cocoon. It now sounded like my mother, whose voice I had long forgotten—but it was all wrong.

“Don’t you dare...use her...to tell me things she’d never say...!”

Neither the white thread endeavoring to entangle me nor the Blue Butterflies’ mania showed any signs of abating, but their words could no longer reach deep into my heart.

“Nobody gets to decide what I’m guilty of or what I want to atone for—nobody but me...!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO’s party Trust Levels Bonus activated → Nullified GUILT TRIP

“Atobe...!”

“Arihito...!”

No one should ever be able to incapacitate us with guilt. We were a party; if one of us froze, it affected us all just the same.

It tried to push me into a corner, but that’s exactly what I needed to get out of here... I’m taking Shirone back. Right now, I’ve got the power to use that...!

I’d gotten through so many close scrapes already: I’d raced over the labyrinth with Alphecca, found myself surrounded by monsters, fought off the Clay Giant, and seen my life flash before my eyes at the hands of Mirage Morpho. I didn’t have to check to know my morale was maxed out. I had only one move that would give me the strength to break through these binds—that, of course, was:

“Complete Mutual Support!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated COMPLETE MUTUAL SUPPORT

Time limit: 120 seconds

> All individual buff skills applied to entire party

- > Entire party buffed by WOLF PACK
- > Entire party buffed by SECRETS OF THE SWORD 2
- > Entire party buffed by KNIFE ARTISTRY
- > Entire party buffed by BRAZEN CORONATION

Alphecca's Brazen Coronation, the skill that allowed her to shut down enemy attacks, strained and fought against the white thread—and finally won.

"Whoaaaaa!!"

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated VINE SHOT → Hit ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

> SHIRONE was captured by VINES → Released from capture by THREAD

I shot my vines out to wrap around Shirone over the white thread binding her and pulled hard, just barely extracting her from the other dimension before the slit shut.

"...How vexingly reckless you are. And to think you'd also retrieve the captured maiden from another dimension—what a tremendous show of quick wit."

"I know... Alphecca, please watch over Shirone for me. I've gotta take that butterfly down. Everyone, lend me your strength!"

I walked over to Elitia clinging to the hilt of her sword piercing the ground. Tears flowed out of her eyes. Even if for argument's sake we accepted that butterfly did pity our sins, nothing could lead me to believe we'd find peace in reincarnation. I held my hand out to her.

*"...After—after I left the Brigade, I did something to earn the name *Death Sword*. The truth is...I don't have any right to be looking for friends to help me..."*

"Oh, yes you do!"

◆Current Status◆

> SUZUNA activated MOONREADING → Success

> Revealed ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO's hidden skill

CRIMINAL'S CAGE

Suzuna's voice rang out clear and commanding, as if cleaving straight through the fog. The moonlight once concealed under the hazy cover shone down on Mirage Morpho—and unveiled innumerable scales shedding from its wings that without a doubt held some power over the fog.

We were in the cage long before we saw the Blue Butterflies... Elitia's attack hit nothing but air, yet her karma still increased. That alone should've told us this was all a setup...!

◆Details of Revealed Skill◆

CRIMINAL'S CAGE: Creates Criminal area effect within the bounds demarcated by falling Scales. All hostile actions a Seeker takes against the monster will increase the Seeker's karma. Escape from the affected area only possible after the user can no longer participate in battle.

Our licenses are what judge our actions and adjust our karma...but monsters can tamper with that system. It seems unbelievable, but that's what actually happened... This Mirage Morpho is distorting the laws to its own ends.

"Suzu! Arihito's really in there, right...?!"

"Yeah... There's really only one thing we can do from outside... Arihito! Elitia! Don't give up! We're right here!"

It was Misaki and Suzuna—and a few others. Looked like whoever it was had brought the two here.

"My dear devotee, shall I clear your path? Do you require my assistance?" Ariadne asked.

"No...I'm fine. I can see the way out... This monster isn't working entirely outside the rules. It's just twisting them."

"Atobe, what does that mean...?"

“Igarashi, you acquired that Snow Country Skin skill, right? Do you have any other new ice-type skills available?”

“Y-yeah... There’s a level-two skill called Frosted Armor. I’d need Decoy, which I’ve already got, and another one called Ether Ice to acquire it.”

◆New Available Skills – KYOUKA◆

Level 2 Skills

Frosted Armor: Reflects attacks with an added ice attribute.
Applies to any decoys or golems the Seeker creates. (Prerequisites: Decoy, Ether Ice)

Igarashi kept picking up electric and ice-type skills. I wanted to use all the tools in our arsenal; there was no telling how many chances we’d get for obtaining skills.

“Igarashi, I know this’ll use up all your skill points in one go, but could you acquire Frosted Armor? I have a hunch we should be able to avoid any karmic penalties if we hang back and get the butterfly to strike first.”

“I’ll deal with whatever karmic penalties come my way. It wouldn’t be fair for me to avoid them when you and Ellie have already been through so much.”

“...Arihito, what should I do?” asked Melissa.

“I want you to go for the monster’s limbs if we can lift this Criminal’s Cage. Otherwise, don’t go crazy. Any counterattack after that could be fatal.”

“...Okay.”

My journey into the land of the dead had shown me one thing: This swarm of Blue Butterflies had a weakness. Attack them and we’d not only incur karma but also have a powerful counter headed our way, courtesy of Painful Penance. In that case—and I hoped this would be the first and only time we’d have to resort to that same twisted logic—there was still one way we could stop the butterflies in their tracks without increasing our karma.

“Igarashi, please make a Decoy and use Force Target on it, then activate your new skill. Theresia, I’d like you to back her up.”

“All right, I’m on it.”

“.....!”

Igarashi and Theresia took their places on the vanguard; before they made any moves, I grabbed the pendant hanging around my neck next to the Ankh.

“Snow, Penta, Rupee! Come!”

“““CHEEEEEEP!!””””

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO summoned SNOW, PENTA, and RUPEE
- > SNOW activated SILVER WONDERLAND → The terrain was changed to FROZEN SOIL
- > PENTA and RUPEE activated ICE DANCE → Strengthened effects of SILVER WONDERLAND

“I see... Butterflies suffer in the cold. However, an area effect won’t register as an attack, so if they lose the ability to move, it won’t reflect badly on you.”

“““Cheep! Cheep!”””

Penta and Rupee jumped around Snow’s outstretched white wings. Ice sprouted beneath their feet and immediately spread over the battlefield; the temperature plummeted and made our breaths come out in white puffs.

◆Current Status◆

- > ?BLUE BUTTERFLIES entered HIBERNATION due to FROZEN status
- > ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO’s stats fell due to FROZEN SOIL

The Cage still hasn’t lifted... But those butterflies are shedding much less than before. Now if only we can get Mirage Morpho’s scales to stop falling...!

◆Current Status◆

- > KYOUKA activated SNOW COUNTRY SKIN → Nullified all status impairments caused by low temperatures

Igarashi's Snow Country Skin buffed Theresia with its supplementary effects in the last few seconds before the Complete Mutual Support time limit ran out—and just like that, the two were free to move in the freezing cold without it slowing them down.

“Let's go...!”

“.....!!”

◆Current Status◆

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated FORBIDDEN TENTACLES →
Began indiscriminately attacking all nearby targets

> THERESIA activated MIRAGE and SHADOW STEP

> KYOUKA activated EVASION STEP

Igarashi and Theresia darted back and forth to dodge the tentacles' vicious attacks. They'd have to first evade anything coming at them before they could provoke the monster to attack their decoys.

Looks like Forbidden Tentacles is a multistep attack built on Translucent Tentacles... We can't be sure it won't come after us, too...!

“Ariadne!”

“I grant thee, my devotee, my protection. May my Mechanical Arm serve as your shield!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO requested temporary support from ARIADNE → Target:
Entire party

> ARIADNE activated GUARD ARM

> FORBIDDEN TENTACLE hit GUARD ARM

> FORBIDDEN TENTACLE hit GUARD ARM

> FORBIDDEN TENTACLE hit GUARD ARM

Ariadne's Mechanical Arm materialized over and over out of thin air, blocking

each and every tentacle and the devastating blows they were about to deal. It threw itself directly between us and the tentacles coming to pulverize us without rhyme or reason, grabbed hold of them, and defended us flawlessly.

“Ariadne, I owe you one...!”

“Amazing... I never knew she could stop so many attacks...!”

“I have strength yet left to intercept attacks on your behalf so long as they are not electrified. However, I have already consumed half of my stamina.”

I could only imagine how brave Cion must have been to take one of those horrific attacks for Elitia—and realized I ought to add another defensive trump card to my deck in addition to Defense Support 1. But first, I needed to figure out how to defeat this Mirage Morpho in front of me. Ice crystals glistened in the subarctic biosphere Snow had created. Just then:

◆Current Status◆

- > KYOUKA evaded FORBIDDEN TENTACLES
- > KYOUKA’s evasion rate increased
- > THERESIA evaded FORBIDDEN TENTACLES
- > ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO’s FROZEN status intensified → ☆
MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO’s stats fell

Our two vanguards dodged every one of the tentacles’ tenacious attacks. Igarashi took advantage of a break in the onslaught to conjure up the medium she’d use to make her decoys.

“Brave spirit of the warrior, draw the enemy’s wrath... *Decoy!*”

◆Current Status◆

- > KYOUKA activated DECOY
- > KYOUKA activated FORCE TARGET → Target: DECOY

All she had left to do was apply her Frosted Armor to the Decoy. But she’d used up almost all her magic; Evasion Step kept burning it off for as long as she had it activated.

“...I have to...hold on a little longer...!”

“Igarashi, I’ve got you!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated CHARGE ASSIST 1 → KYOUKA recovered magic

> KYOUKA activated FROSTED ARMOR → Target: DECOY

Freezing air enveloped Igarashi’s Decoy, but we could not be sure our enemy would take the bait.

“Theresia...!”

“—!”

That’s when Theresia went in for the final push. Her goal: Lure the invisible tentacles out as far as possible and evade their powerful attacks. A split-second delay and they would be on her. She needed to use all the evasive skills in her arsenal and get her decoy to do the actual attacking. Faced with all this, Theresia chose to...

◆Current Status◆

> THERESIA activated MODE SHIFT: SAND CLAD

> THERESIA activated MIRAGE → Strengthened by SAND CLAD

Activated DUST STORM SHADOW

> FORBIDDEN TENTACLES activated combined unit attack → DEATH GRASP

“Theresia!”

“Amazing... How did she do that at the last second?!”

The translucent tentacles appeared out of nowhere, wrapped around Theresia, and started crushing her—except that it wasn’t Theresia, but a sandy illusion she’d crafted.

The wild terrain on this floor does have a pretty thin layer of sand covering it... Theresia saw that as her chance to use her Desert Rose...!

The real Theresia reappeared far away from the attack; she'd snuck around the sandy areas that hadn't yet frozen over, just as I'd suspected. Her camouflage blending in perfectly with the sand, she was as stealthy in all her covert movements as a bona fide ninja. We looked at the sky and saw Mirage Morpho had begun to succumb to the extreme elements and lose some of its height; the ice creeping over its wings had hardened them so much, we could now hear them struggling to beat all the way from where we stood.

◆Current Status◆

> DEATH GRASP hit DECOY → FROSTED ARMOR reflected attack onto ☆
MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO was FROZEN

AREA EFFECT: CAGE was lifted

The enemy had put all its might into the last attack. Frosted Armor reflected it right back, this time with an added ice attribute that hit Mirage Morpho in its weak spot. We'd finally done some real damage and avoided upping Igarashi's karma. Slowly but surely, Mirage Morpho fell lower and lower until we could reach it with a single jump.

"Melissa, Elitia! I'll support you!"

We couldn't let this chance slip through our fingers. Melissa leaped onto Cion's back and charged into the fray; Elitia followed right after, powered by her own speedy skills.

"...We're a bit late to the party...!!"

".....!!"

At that same moment, Igarashi and Theresia reached full morale—meaning we now had one more combo move we could use.

"Let's take it down!"

""""Yeaaaaah!!""""

◆Current Status◆

> KYOUKA activated SOUL MIRAGE → All party members gained a MIRAGE WARRIOR

> THERESIA activated TRIPLE STEAL → All party members received TRIPLE STEAL effects

> ARIHITO activated COOPERATION SUPPORT 1 and ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> KYOUKA and MIRAGE WARRIOR activated LIGHTNING RAGE → Hit ☆
MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

Combined attack stage 1

26 support damage

> LIGHTNING RAGE activated additional attack → 6 stages hit ☆
MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

78 support damage

> THERESIA and MIRAGE WARRIOR activated AZURE SLASH → Hit ☆
MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

Slight knockback

Consumed magic

Combined attack stage 2

26 support damage

> KYOUKA, THERESIA, and ARIHITO recovered vitality and magic

Failed to steal loot

Electricity ran down the length of Igarashi's cross spear and continued surging through the monster with an additional attack. Theresia slashed her flaming blue sword at it before darting away.

"Those feelers are mine...!"

"Awooooo!"

◆Current Status◆

> CION activated BATTLE HOWL and HOUND GALLOP → Vanguard's'

attack power increased, CION's speed increased

> MELISSA and MIRAGE WARRIOR mounted CION and MIRAGE WARRIOR
Used WOLF RIDER

> MELISSA activated KNIFE ARTISTRY → Probability of partial
destruction increased

> MELISSA and MIRAGE WARRIOR activated LOP OFF → ☆MERCIFUL
WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO dropped materials

Combined attack stage 3

26 support damage

> KOTTO'S GAUNTLETS activated special effect → DOUBLE DOWN
activated additional attack

26 support damage

> CION and MIRAGE WARRIOR activated HEAT CLAW → Hit ☆MERCIFUL
WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

Specially effective against insects

Combined attack stage 4

26 support damage

IMMACULATE TRANQUILITY was disabled

> CION and MELISSA recovered vitality and magic

Successfully stole loot

Melissa and her Mirage Warrior swung their butcher's knives down hard in one swift motion and lopped off Mirage Morpho's feelers, disabling the last remaining area effect. Just then, Elitia and her Mirage Warrior charged in, brandishing their swords high over their heads, and rained down a barrage of razor-sharp petals on the monster as it struggled to make its final stand.

"...Scatter like flower petals... *Blossom Blade!*"

◆Current Status◆

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO activated PAPILLON'S DREAM

> ELITIA and MIRAGE WARRIOR activated BLOSSOM BLADE

> 24 stages hit ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

Combined attack stage 5

312 support damage

> ELITIA activated additional attack → 16 stages hit ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

208 support damage

> Combined attack: AZURE, LIGHTNING, LOP, BLOSSOMS → 238 additional cooperation damage

> PAPILLON'S DREAM was canceled

> ELITIA recovered vitality and magic

No loot in target's possession to steal

> Defeated 1 ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

"Hfff, Hfff..."

"Ellie! You guys...!" cried Suzuna.

"Whaaaaa?! Th-that's a friggin' ginormous butterfly... Don't tell me this is another Named Monster?!" Misaki exclaimed.

Suzuna and Misaki came rushing toward us the moment the fog lifted. Suzuna threw her arms around Elitia while Misaki stared wide-eyed at the fallen Mirage Morpho. Snow and the two Coral Peigoes who'd transformed the terrain into Frozen Soil realized the fight was over and started cooling off from battle. Snow plopped down on its butt, and Penta and Rupee climbed up to perch on its head, letting just their tiny faces peek out from within Snow's plumage.

"These little ones really saved the day...", cooed Igarashi. "You're the only one who could even get close to anything flying that high up in the air, Atobe."

"Your skills always surprise me, Arihito. I didn't even see you get behind the enemy," Melissa commented with her customary flat affect.

“Not the safest move for a rearguard maybe,” I admitted, “but some things you’ve gotta get behind your enemy to really see.”

“I have never heard tell of a rearguard such as you,” said Alphecca. *“Nevertheless, I suppose ascertaining the enemy’s weakness is a rather fitting duty for such a role.”*

“Alphecca, you maintain your physical form for such extended periods. I cannot help but find this unfair should the amount of magical energy required to sustain it be a function of the different roles we Armaments fulfill,” complained Murakumo from the sheath on my back. I hadn’t gotten the chance to call her to battle this time, and she seemed a bit disappointed to have missed out on the action.

“I’m sure I’ll need your help sooner than we might expect, Murakumo. But I really needed to go with my best bet for inflicting damage this time around.”

“You chose wisely, Master,” Murakumo conceded. *“That monster possesses a skill to reduce damage inflicted by physical attacks. The ice-type attacks and blows buffed by your support contributed greatly to its downfall.”*

Evidently, some monsters had incredibly strong defensive powers that might not show up as a specific attribute on our licenses. It looked like Attack Support 1 was shaping up to be a real keeper, especially if it could continue to support my party members as they got stronger and grew in numbers.

“Um... A-Arihito, is that...?” Misaki asked, pointing to Shirone lying on the ground. She and Suzuna should’ve been waiting outside the labyrinth for us. If they’d made it here, it meant Seraphina must’ve met them along the way and brought them up to speed. But Seraphina had left the labyrinth with the ladies of Four Seasons. I did venture a guess as to the only other person who could have brought Misaki and Suzuna here—but I never expected my hunch would actually turn out to be correct.

That person, you see, should have been miles away at the Guild Saviors headquarters.

Part III: The Request

“...Kozelka, Khosrow.”

Before us stood the silver-haired woman in her black armor and her aide, the mysterious man with the eye patch. Why had they come all this way?

“...Apologies we could not assist you in battle. We found two of your party members attempting to follow you into the labyrinth and took the liberty of escorting them here,” said Kozelka.

“Looks like this monster was an even bigger pain in the ass than I’d thought. Y’all might know this by now, but these Named Monsters come in a few different flavors,” explained Khosrow. “You’ve got your normal black-starred ones, and then you’ve also got the extra-pesky ones like this guy right here...the hollow-starred.”

“‘Hollow-starred’...?”

I hadn’t had time to really study my license in the heat of the battle. I pulled it out now to take a closer look and saw a ☆ identifying Merciful Winged Mirage Morpho as a Named Monster in place of the usual black star.

“It is said an exclusive privilege will be conferred to any Seeker who vanquishes a hollow-starred Named Monster,” said Kozelka. “You may not immediately discover what practical effect this will have, but it should not prove a detriment to you.”

“Oh...really? We only defeated it so we could bring Shirone, a Seeker it had captured, back with us. She had run off this far in the labyrinth all on her own,” I told them.

“We know... It’s part of our job to stay on top of the punks who’ve jacked up their karma. We’re gonna have to take this Shirone character into custody...”

Shirone had to atone for what she’d done to Four Seasons. My party members and I were all aligned on that front.

“Would you please give her these swords when she wakes up?” I asked. “She dropped them on the way here, and we picked them up for her.”

“Ah, sorry, no can do. She’s blown past legal karma limits and signed herself up for some mandatory jail time. We can take whatever she’s got on her now, but you’re gonna have to work it out with her in person at some point if you want to return any other lost property you found. And not to be crass, but there’s no rule saying you’ve got to do that.”

So you were legally allowed to keep items belonging to a Seeker with too much karma; I could see how some might exploit this rule in bad faith, but I figured it had been put in place to check the power those who’d committed some sort of karma-related infraction could wield.

“...Khosrow, we could make an exception if Mr. Atobe insists,” Kozelka cut in.

“No, that’s fine. We’ll hold on to them,” I told her. “A couple of monsters stole them first, so they’re pretty much unusable at the moment in any case.”

“Whoa, it’s dripping with slime... Courtesy of those two on the second floor? Weird, they hardly even blinked when we passed ’em,” said Khosrow, his face scrunched up in disgust at the state of the swords. I guessed the sticky Slow Salamander slime was too much to stomach, even for a battle-hardened, tough-as-nails Seeker like I imagined he must be.

“...She’s breathing. Maybe we should give her some medicine. She’s lost a lot of vitality,” said Melissa as she examined Shirone, careful not to touch any of the white thread wrapped around her body. Suzuna looked to me for permission; I nodded in return and she drizzled a few drops of potion onto Shirone’s lips. Nothing happened at first, but eventually Shirone’s lips quivered open, and she drank the liquid that dribbled into her mouth.

“Seraphina gave us her report on what brought you here,” said Kozelka. “It appears, Mr. Atobe, that you had what one might consider an adversarial relationship to Ms. Shirone. Notwithstanding, you chose to come after her?”

“...Yes. Shirone led a party we’re very close with into a dangerous trap. None of us are eager to forgive her for that, but we couldn’t look the other way after we saw her going deeper into the labyrinth all alone. I wouldn’t blame you for calling us foolish.”

Khosrow scratched his chin a little awkwardly. I worried about what he must think of what we'd done—but only for a second.

“Most people would just turn a blind eye and walk away, y’know? Nah, that’s not—I mean... Only crazies walkin’ around with a huge screw loose would spend their time worrying about people who’d openly attacked them.”

“It’s true... I can’t argue with you there. I know, as their leader, I probably should’ve prioritized my own party members’ safety more than anything.”

“But we choose to follow you exactly because of how you make those tough decisions,” Igarashi insisted. “It’s true we’ve all got unfinished business with Shirone, but the last thing we want is for her to pay with her life for what she’s done.”

The rest of the party nodded in agreement. Their smiling faces were my saving grace; I needed to be careful not to take their kindness for granted.

“...We can use this thread. Can I take it off?” Melissa asked Khosrow. “I can get a clean cut if I strengthen my steel knife with a blade edge stone.”

“Sure, knock yourself out, kid...but take this to cover her up in case her clothing gets all torn up.”

“Yikes, I dunno if an old man’s coat is the best thing for... Uhhh, never miiind!”

“Thought it’d stink like an old man? Hate to break it to you, but I’m all about hygiene,” replied Khosrow with a pained smile. He shrugged off Misaki’s teasing; he wasn’t quite in “old man” territory yet.

“Anywho... Third-Class Dragon Captain, perhaps we should proceed to the main topic at hand.”

“Right. Mr. Atobe, I do apologize for having to mention this immediately following such an intense battle; however, I came here because there is something I wish to personally discuss with you.”

“It’s too bad we couldn’t lend you a hand with that beast of a butterfly, but you’ve given us a great look at what y’all can do. You’re first-ranked in District Seven as it stands, and we all know you won’t hang around District Six long after you move on up.”

Was this it? I had a pretty good guess of what they were trying to say based on the context. We'd officially become one of the parties the Guild could ask for assistance now that we'd received the honorary title of Advanced Seekers. Helping with those requests could get us temporary access to the next two districts—including District Five, where Elitia had once resided.

"A certain species of monster has proliferated far beyond the Guild's estimates in District Five and is currently causing the stampede threat level there to rise," explained Kozelka.

"They're not running around loose in town yet, but I reckon they'll probably break through our barricades by tomorrow," added Khosrow. "We can't get any help from the higher districts...and you guys are so crazy strong. You're in a league of your own in District Seven. We'd like to ask your help. You're free to say no, of course, but would you mind throwin' us a bone and at least sleep on it?"

We'd just about made it to District Six and were now getting a chance to go all the way to District Five, the biggest catch being that we'd have to face monsters exponentially stronger than what we'd seen so far. It was risky. But we couldn't let this golden opportunity slip through our fingers; we had no time to waste in our quest to save Elitia's friend.

"We depart for District Five first thing tomorrow morning. Should you decide to assist with our request, please come meet us at the Guild Savors headquarters, where we last spoke," Kozelka instructed.

"I understand. We'll all talk this over and decide what to do."

"You do that. Who knows? Do well enough on this mission in District Five, and you may get to skip invading the District Six labyrinths altogether... Still, having the strength to defeat higher-ranked monsters doesn't necessarily mean this is gonna be a safe endeavor. Slowly working your way up against stronger monsters is always your best bet if you wanna make sure you live to fight another day."

"Khosrow, Mr. Atobe's party has advanced through the initial districts faster than any others in Labyrinth Country history. That's a rather rude suggestion, given their accomplishments," scolded Kozelka.

The fastest in the history of the country—it didn't feel real, but looking back, I guess our days had been pretty full of nonstop action.

"...Just another reason it's worth tryin' to hold on to them. Course, no amount of training wheels will prepare you for the real fights out there. The Labyrinth Country is no picnic."

"...I do try to keep that in mind," I said. "I always strive to ensure we move forward together, above all else."

Kozelka silently nodded in response. Melissa finished removing the thread around Shirone and covered her with Khosrow's coat. Khosrow then scooped her up and hoisted her on his back.

"I'll get a Carrier to come get the Mirage Morpho," Melissa told me. "I think I can squeeze the feelers into the silo."

"Yeah, please do... Thanks, Melissa."

"I'll take over for Madoka when she's not here. She works really hard. I've gotta do my part, too." Melissa always seemed so indifferent, but we were slowly getting to see more of her warmhearted nature and the passions she kept close to her chest.

Elitia had kept her eyes glued to the ground ever since Kozelka had first presented her proposal. Suzuna called out to her; after a moment, she looked up.

"Elitia, let's think things over once we're back at the apartment," I said.

"...Sure. Sorry, I was only thinking about myself..."

"That's not true," protested Suzuna. "Ellie, if there's anyone you're thinking about, it's..."

We were so close, we could almost taste it. Still, we couldn't hide from the fact that we really should go through the labyrinths in District Six and hone our skills if we wanted to stand any chance of saving Elitia's friend from that monster—a District Five Named Monster. At the same time, the Guild had called upon us to help face the stampede in District Five, meaning they recognized we had what it took to go up against the monsters there. I needed

to see what everyone wanted to do and then make the call. We could figure out the rest after that.

The arctic temperatures Snow had conjured up thawed, and the Blue Butterflies took off in flight once more. They didn't even register as monsters anymore now that Mirage Morpho was gone. Theresia reached her hand out; one of the butterflies flew over and began flitting playfully around her.

Who was Merciful Winged Mirage Morpho trying to have mercy on? Why did it trap Seekers in white thread and shut them away in another dimension? If that was really its voice I heard, maybe it was trying to give Seekers who'd committed some sort of crime a new lease on life. What if that's how Theresia became a demi-human, too?

"....."

"Hmm...? What's this...?"

Theresia handed me a clear stone with a Blue Butterfly trapped within. It reminded me of a piece of amber with a fossilized creature inside.

"Cool find," I told her. "That's a beautiful stone."

"....."

Theresia nodded. We'd come out of this fight against Mirage Morpho with quite a bit of resources and dropped loot, but I had a feeling this stone Theresia found would prove just as valuable.

◆Current Status◆

> Acquired 1 BLUE BUTTERFLY AMBER INCLUSION

CHAPTER 3

From Solo to Partied

Part I: Reporting Back

We picked up the two Slow Salamanders we'd tamed on our way back through the second floor then used the Return Scroll to exit the labyrinth. Shirone was taken away to the Guild Saviors headquarters. Kozelka raised a salute in our direction and left with Khosrow at her side.

"Arihito! You guys... I'm so glad you're all okay...!" cried Madoka as she ran toward us. She must have been waiting for us to arrive. Igarashi smiled warmly as she approached our friend, who looked just about ready to burst into tears.

"Well, good thing that's settled... No rest for the wicked, though. In any case, we should take a little break for the time being," said Igarashi.

"Of course. What would you like to do for dinner?" asked Madoka. "I'll call for it right away!"

Dusk had begun to fall, and the enticing smells of dinners being prepared wafted over from the neighboring houses. It felt like we'd been in the Plateau of Primary Colors for just a few hours, but I suddenly realized how famished I was—and it looked like the others were in exactly the same boat.

"How about we get some takeout and eat in tonight?" I suggested. "There are some other restaurants I'd like to check out, but we might end up moving tomorrow."

"*Takeout*—I haven't heard that word in a long time," said Igarashi. "Madoka, do you think you could get food delivered to our apartment?"

"Sure, I can arrange for a Carrier to bring it to us. I think I'll try ordering from three different restaurants to get a little variety."

"Ooh, then let's get something from that Refreshing Heaven place that was so good last time! And something from A Taste of Leuven and some kind of pasta or pizza!" said Misaki, pulling out a notebook she must've picked up at some point. She started reading off a list she'd kept of all the restaurants we'd visited. There appeared to be no objections, but then Melissa raised her hand.

“...We shouldn’t eat only takeout. I’ll make the pasta and pizza. My dad taught me how.”

“I bet even I could help you out with a dish like that,” Igarashi said. “I’ll be your sous-chef again if you don’t mind. Everything goes so smoothly with you at the helm in the kitchen, Melissa.”

“Please let me help as well. I did nothing but wait outside the labyrinth today.”

“Suzu, you’re making me look extra bad! I didn’t do a single thing... Wait, how did your morale get so full, Suzu?”



I was curious about that myself, but I figured maybe it had something to do with the close bond Elitia and Suzuna shared—that is, until I realized Suzuna had her eyes fixed on me for some reason.

“What’s up, Suzuna?”

“...N-nothing. I’m sorry, I know we only did it because you needed me to...”

“Oh-ho-hoh? Suzu, are you thinking maybe you’re all fired up now ‘cause you’ve gotten closer to Arihi—”

“M-Misaki, let’s talk about this over there... Sorry, Arihito!”

Suzuna hastily slapped her hand over Misaki’s mouth and led her away from the group. Was there something special about the Trust Levels between Suzuna and me that affected her morale? I didn’t think anyone really stood out from the rest of the group in that respect.

“I get the feeling me and Theresia’s morale went up, too...,” said Igarashi.

“.....”

“...It’s hard for mine to go up. Maybe I need to get more into it,” said Melissa.

“Y-you think it works like that...? Arihito, how about my morale? Does it increase pretty easily?” asked Madoka.

We’d seen Madoka use her Item Effects Morale Discharge before, but Melissa hadn’t yet activated hers even though she was maxed out. Morale gradually decreased once you left the labyrinth, and I was looking forward to seeing what her Morale Discharge did next time she had the chance to use it.

“Oh... U-umm, it looks like Theresia’s getting a little flustered, so maybe we should talk about this some other time,” Igarashi cut in.

“Fiiine. I think my morale adds up slower than yours, Kyouka. The key to a man’s Trust Levels is through his stomach, though, so I guess I should help out with dinner, too!”

If that’s true, Labyrinth Country restaurateurs must be the most trusted people around.

In my case, Trust Levels between my party members rose every time I

supported them; I felt lucky I'd gone with *Rearguard*, even though the job still held quite a bit of mystery. We had those bonds to thank for getting us out of some pretty close scrapes.

"...*Ahem*. Atobe, don't read too much into those Trust Levels. You'll put us all in an awkward position if you start thinking about it too deeply."

"Hm...? Obviously I think they're very important, but what do you mean about reading too much into them?" I asked casually in response, but Igarashi just gave me a vague smile and started heading home with the others. Theresia's complexion had taken on a lobster red tint for the past few minutes, which made it kind of awkward to walk alongside her. I wound up falling behind everyone on our walk home, a hardcore rearguard till the end.

I went up to speak with Louisa at her post in Green Hall, but she was just about to clock out for the day, so we decided to handle the post-seeking report back at our place. Once we returned to the terrace house, I assuaged my guilt for leaving dinner to the rest of the gang by promising I'd help out next time and sat down across the living room table from Louisa to talk.

"Let me begin by saying how glad I am to see you all come out of this most recent expedition safely and soundly. Word has it you came to the rescue of several Seekers in the Plateau of Primary Colors."

"It's kind of a long story... Did you by any chance hear what happened?"

"I understand a member of Elitia's former party, a Ms. Shirone Kuzunoha, interfered in your affairs. Her actions represent very serious infractions against the laws of our country. I imagine she will be required to undergo reeducation after she serves her sentence."

Gray had also apparently been signed up for the reeducation program; I wondered if the rehabilitation course would have the desired effects. From what Khosrow had said about expecting Gray to become a "brand-spanking-new man," I felt pretty certain Shirone had some rather demanding discipline waiting for her.

"Before we get to this latest expedition, I'd like to go over your results from the Islet of Illusion... It's quite rare for anyone to accumulate contribution points in this labyrinth as it is an officially designated health resort. Nonetheless, your

party proved as exceptional as always, so I would like to begin by tallying the points you earned there.”

◆Previous Expedition Results◆

- > Raided previously undiscovered area ISLET OF ILLUSION: 100 points
 - > CION grew to level 6: 60 points
 - > Captured 1 ★JEWELLED WINGS DANCING OVER FROZEN WASTELAND: 240 points
 - > Party members’ Trust Levels increased: 35 points
 - > RYOUKO’s Trust Level increased: 10 points
 - > IBUKI’s Trust Level increased: 10 points
 - > ANNA’s Trust Level increased: 10 points
 - > Fought alongside FOUR SEASONS: 10 points
 - > Conducted a combined seeking expedition with a total of 12 people: 60 points
- Seeker Contribution: 545 points

It seemed like we wouldn’t get any contribution points for defeating the ice figures Jeweled Wings had summoned into the battle. But I hadn’t expected to get any points at all, so I was happy with anything we did take away. Louisa looked troubled for some reason as she studied my license; I thought I saw some sadness in her eyes as they perused the lines of text.

“...Your Trust Levels with the members of Four Seasons have increased, yet mine haven’t budged at all...”

“Uh... Y-you know, I think that’s probably because we all teleported to the other island together. I used my support skills to help them recover magic, too.”

“You restored their magic... I didn’t know you had such a wonderful skill at your disposal. I suppose there’s no use sighing about it. I doubt I’ll ever have an opportunity to experience that skill for myself as a Guild employee.”

Louisa smiled as she spoke, but I felt a prick of guilt and the urge to apologize.

I wondered if I should come up with an excuse to use Recovery Support 1 on her and try reducing the toll her office work took on her eyes, shoulders, or back.

“You must get the woorst knots in your shoulders, Louisa. Just say the word and I’d be more than happy to give you my special massage. Think of it as my own personal way of thanking you for all you’ve done for us!” Misaki offered.

“M-Misaki... Thank you, but that’s really not necessary...”

Misaki came out of the kitchen with her apron still on, walked around behind Louisa, and began massaging her shoulders. She had some confidence in her massage skills and showed surprising finesse—at the cost, perhaps, of a short attention span, judging by how quickly she’d abandoned her post in the kitchen.

“Misaki, Melissa said she wants you to handle the pizza toppings...,” said Igarashi.

“Oh, I’m on it! You won’t find anyone better in the cheese-spreading game than me!”

“Just don’t go overboard. We’ve got a lot of other food coming, too.”

“Stop worrying so much, Kyoukaaa! We get plenty of exercise from first thing in the morning all the way through the night.”

“D-don’t talk about that here... Take it down a few notches, Misaki; you’re walking a fine line,” Elitia chided as she brought her hand down on Misaki’s head in a gentle karate chop. Misaki took it in stride and stuck her tongue out. Their exchange left me wondering what kind of exercise they did at night. Were they having secret pillow fights or something?

“...M-Misaki’s always so cheerful. She really knows how to liven up the mood, doesn’t she?” commented Louisa.

“She takes it a bit too far sometimes, but I can’t imagine what we’d do without this little ray of sunshine,” I agreed.

“Whoa, did Arihito just compliment me?! Do my ears deceive me?!”

“Misaki, I’m gonna take over the toppings if you can’t pay attention.”

“Wait, don’t put that mystery meat salami there...!”

“...It’s not a mystery. It’s angry boar meat.”

I’d had a sandwich with wild boar bacon not too long ago, so I gathered boar monster meat was the Labyrinth Country’s pork equivalent.

“Umm... Sorry it’s so noisy,” I told Louisa. “Would you mind helping me go over the results from the Plateau of Primary Colors expedition as well?”

“Hee-hee... It certainly is a bit more laid back doing this here rather than at the Guild.”

◆Expedition Results◆

- > Raided 1F through 3F of P_{lateau of P}_{rimary Colors}: 30 points
- > A_{rihito} grew to level 7: 70 points
- > T_{heresia} grew to level 7: 70 points
- > K_{youka} grew to level 6: 60 points
- > M_{elissa} grew to level 7: 70 points
- > Captured 2 S_{low Salamanders}: 240 points
- > Defeated 1 bounty ★C_{ursed Tri-Masked Clay Giant}: 3,600 points
- > Defeated 1 ☆M_{erciful Winged Mirage Morpho}: 3,200 points
- > Party members’ Trust Levels increased: 25 points
- > Rescued R_{youko}: 100 points
- > Rescued K_{aeede}: 100 points
- > Rescued I_{bu}ki: 100 points
- > Rescued A_{nna}: 100 points
- > Fought alongside F_{our Seasons}: 10 points
- > Rescued S_{hirone}: 100 points
- > Delivered S_{hirone} to Guild Savors: 500 points

Seeker Contribution: 8,375 points

District Seven All Time Contribution Ranking: 1

District Six Contribution Ranking: 1,180

It looked like none of the Blue Butterflies counted toward our contribution points, but we still came out of the expedition with more than 8,000, thanks in no small part to fighting two Named Monsters one right after the other.

“D-does this mean...? Mr. Atobe, do you mean to tell me you defeated two Named Monsters when you rescued the Four Seasons ladies and this woman called Shirone?”

“Yes, one each on the second and third floors... One of them had captured Four Seasons, and we couldn’t free Shirone without taking the other down, either.”

“Oh my... You know, I always steel myself as much as I possibly can before your reports, but it’s never enough. I almost fainted again when I saw these results. You really know how make a girl worry... Although I suppose I should know better than to worry about you by now.” Louisa removed her monocle. She pressed her hands to her lightly blushing cheeks a little sheepishly and smiled, tears glistening in her eyes.

“Congratulations, Mr. Atobe. The District Six ranking you see here is merely for reference as the contribution points you earn only officially count toward your status here in District Seven... All the same, given that you’ll be 1,180 out of 8,000 Seekers, you should expect to use the Upper Guild as soon as you proceed to District Six.”

We wouldn’t be starting at the bottom in the next district. Still, the competition would intensify the more Seekers were actively trying to advance to District Five—a fact that brought home just how enviable our shortcut to jump directly there really was.

“...Louisa, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you later.”

“Of course. The Guild headquarters have informed me of the particulars. I understand you’ve received a request to assist with a situation in District Five?”

A stampede threatened to break out in town two districts above us; we’d only be tasked with helping to secure the area, but even that surely meant fighting monsters exponentially more dangerous than those in District Seven. And yet,

Louisa stayed perfectly calm as I recounted what Kozelka had said. I suppose she must've expected the possibility we'd travel to a higher district might come about ever since we were designated Advanced Seekers.

"I agree it may be more prudent to advance one step at a time toward your goal. However, you've always very clearly expressed your determination to reach District Five from your first days in District Eight."

"Louisa..."

"I will accompany you to District Five. I cannot assist you in the actual battles, but I would like the opportunity to continue following your work as your personal caseworker."

Could we really hold our ground against the monsters up there? If so, the chance to rescue Elitia's friend might actually be within reach—and come far sooner than any of us could have imagined.

"I plan to discuss this over with everyone and then decide whether we'll go."

"Wouldn't you say you're all already in agreement on the matter? Mr. Atobe, you and your party successfully defeated two Named Monsters in quick succession. I have no doubt you possess the skills necessary to fight any average monster that may appear in District Five."

Louisa's encouragement reached everyone in the kitchen and made it clear there was no further need to confirm anything; we were all completely on the same page.

"We've come this far. We can't just let this chance slip through our fingers... Ellie's friend is waiting for us. There's not a day to waste," said Igarashi.

"...It seems like it was just yesterday. When I first met Ellie, I felt like it would take us ages before we would ever made it to District Five," added Suzuna.

"I know I'm not thaaat much help in battle, but nothing's gonna scare me as long as I get to be with Arihito and you guys," said Misaki. "Oh, don't worry, Arihito, I don't mean that in a weird way!"

No leap in the dark could scare us as long as we had one another—or so I wished we could say. The truth was we all struggled to keep our nerves at bay

every time we fought a monster.

“...Thanks, guys.”

Still, nobody understood the dangers a party on the verge of advancing to District Six would face fighting monsters in District Five better than Elitia.

“Kozelka said we’d meet tomorrow morning, right?” asked Igarashi. “We’d better eat up and get a good night’s sleep.”

The doorbell to the terrace house rang as soon as Igarashi had finished speaking. Madoka went to answer it and ushered the Carriers delivering our orders from Refreshing Heaven and A Taste of Leuven into the living room. Just then, Ceres and Steiner dropped by on their way home from the rental studio; meanwhile, the ladies of Four Seasons, fresh out of the hospital, and Seraphina and Adeline reached our door.

“I say, you always have a party brewing every time we pop in,” said Ceres.

“Don’t pretend you weren’t worried, Master. We were passing by and saw everyone gathered at the front door...,” Steiner chided playfully. Ceres, perched on their shoulder, pouted to hide her embarrassment.

“...The ladies insisted on coming to see you all off, Mr. Atobe,” explained Seraphina.

“Fortunately, they sustained hardly any injuries during the battle with the Clay Giant,” said Adeline. “They were adamant about wanting to see you today instead of waiting for the morning, so we tagged along. Lieutenant Seraphina warned us not to get too rowdy, though.”

The members of Four Seasons stood silently for a while after they came inside. I got up from the sofa and went over to greet them, racking my brain over what to say. *I’m glad we all made it out okay. We’ll be heading up to other districts, but please take good care of yourselves*—not bad, though not exactly the words I was looking for. But before I could land on anything better—

“...Mr. Atobe...”

“Teacher...!”

“Arihito...!”

“Arihito...!”

The four ladies rushed at me all at once—I could’ve sworn they were coming in for a hug, but they stopped at the last second and laughed shyly as they turned to face one another.

“Ha-ha-ha... We’re hopeless. It’s like we’re always on the same wavelength,” Kaede said with a laugh.

“I—I was only trying to say thank you. Unlike *you*, Kaede,” protested Ibuki.

“...I do believe the urge to hug Arihito is only natural, given how he came to our rescue,” said Anna.

“True, but we can’t hog Mr. Atobe all to ourselves,” added Ryouko. “Kyouka, Louisa—wouldn’t you agree?”

“Oh no, don’t let us stop you. I’m sure Atobe appreciates the attention.”

“If Kyouka says so, I’ll defer to her wishes. It’s lovely to see you all again.”

Louisa got up and shook hands with the four women. Everyone in the kitchen finished preparing dinner and came out to join us, instantly brightening up the room. Seraphina walked over to me and nodded in greeting. Adeline stood close behind, her hands balled into fists for some reason. Maybe she was trying to offer Seraphina some encouragement?

“Mr. Atobe, I shall accompany you and your party should you decide to assist in District Five. Third-Class Dragon Captain Kozelka entrusted you with this special mission...so I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to join you in battle if I might prove at all useful to you.”

“Thank you very much, Seraphina. That would be a great help. I’d been trying to figure out how we would survive any initial attacks thrown at us.”

Seraphina placed her hand over her heart; she was wearing her Guild Savior uniform, which I gathered was her go-to attire on the days she didn’t need to don her armor. From the looks of Adeline’s much more casual outfit, it seemed they were free to wear whatever they wanted off-duty.

“I, Lieutenant Seraphina Edelbert, pledge to devote all my strength to thwarting any first blow the enemy may strike against us.”

“Thank you, we’re all counting on you. I know we’re much lower in level, but we’ll do whatever we can not to get in your way.”

“We’ve worked together so many times, but your humility never ceases to impress me... Wait, did that sound patronizing?”

“...Adeline, poke fun at important moments such as these and it will reflect badly on your character,” warned Seraphina sternly.

“Ha-ha-ha, you’re blushing. You only started showing me these sides of yourself after we met Mr. Atobe, even though I’ve known you for so much longer,” Adeline teased lightheartedly. Her face grew suddenly serious, and she put her hand on my shoulder. The whole room tensed in anticipation, wondering what she might say.

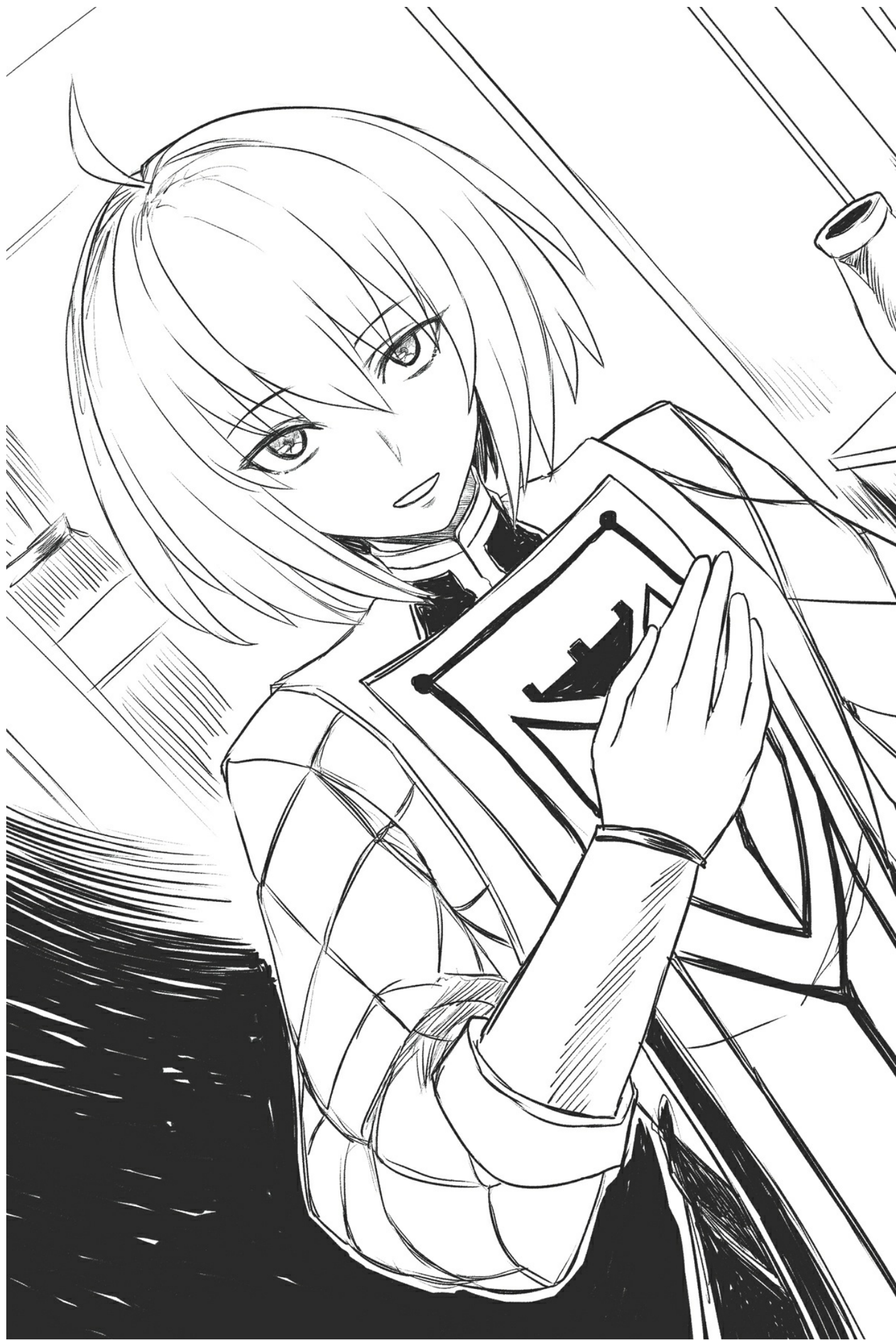
“Please take good care of the lieutenant. I trust she’ll be in good hands with you.”

“Wh-what are you...? You’ll trouble Mr. Atobe with such nonsense.”

“Juuust kidding. Sometimes you get an instant payoff if you switch it up and try the serious look for a change. Don’t you think, Misaki?”

“Huuuh? Ummm, I guess you could say that. Or maybe that’s just with Arihito...”

“I tagged along today so I could say hello as our commander’s going to be in your care, and to get to know you all a little better,” said Adeline. “A little late to be asking, but you don’t mind, do you, Commander?”



She wouldn't take no for an answer, but we all realized what this was actually about. Adeline knew she would have to part with Seraphina for a while and was reluctant to see her go—or so we thought.

“Mr. Atobe, the rest of my platoon will also head to District Five as backup... Please feel no need to indulge Adeline's dramatics.”

“You should've let that play out a little longer! I was hoping he'd open up and share his true feelings in the heat of the moment, but now it's gone.”

“...Arihito, I just realized I might really vibe with Adeline,” Misaki declared with utmost seriousness. No one blinked an eye at the total disconnect between the tone and the content of what she said. Adeline actually seemed somewhat pleased; I dropped the subject after reminding myself that friendship can bloom in the unlikeliest of places.

Refreshing Heaven's signature limited dish, the medicinal soup, had a reputation for being so good, even monks would jump over the proverbial temple walls to get a taste. They made it with meat and bones harvested from the rarest and most curious monsters one could find in the District Seven labyrinths, ingredients so uncommon that the dish appeared on the menu only once a month at best.

“I say, a bowl of something that scrumptious would drag even the most enlightened of monks out of nirvana,” said Ceres.

“It was certainly good enough to make you forget your manners and complain about getting only one serving, Master.”

The three of us were the only ones left in the living room. The others had figured we'd be better off using the public baths, seeing how large our group was, and had already started out. I told them I'd meet up with them later; I was curious to try this spa that was supposed to be specifically designed to help revitalize Seekers.

“I couldn't help it. It was just too delectable,” protested Ceres. “I'll simply have to pine away patiently for my next chance to enjoy it... Anyway, Arihito, what are you thinking in terms of modifications? We'll be limited in the number of items we can process if you want them done before morning.”

“Switching out magic stones or runes should take no time at all, and I think we could make two or three pieces of equipment out of any raw resources you’ve got.”

“I see... Then, what could we add to Suzuna’s Pan’s Flute?”

“It’s got space for one magic stone and a rune. You might consider fitting it with the phonia rune if the flute proves useful in battle,” suggested Ceres.

I decided to also add the stagnation stone to Suzuna’s flute since it could accommodate more than just the one rune. It seemed likely adding stagnation-inducing capabilities to a wide-ranged sonic attack would render it that much more powerful. I still had one extra frost stone, but decided to hold on to that as I could also use it in my magic gun. That left the alter rune, which could apparently use half your remaining magic to restore up to full vitality, and the vellum rune we’d recovered from the Merciless Mourner. I considered having Seraphina use the alter rune, given its particular effects, but we might find other options to consider if we acquired other equipment with a rune slot.

I appraised the vellum rune and found more details about its effects.

◆Vellum Rune◆

- > Increases user’s close combat capabilities depending on how many party members have been incapacitated and rendered unfit for battle

- > Allows user to activate Solitary Struggle

“This vellum rune... It’s a bit tricky figuring out where to put it, given the risks involved. Incapacitated would mean your life is in incredibly great danger,” Ceres explained.

I guess this would be best for someone with a higher level like Elitia, or higher vitality like Cion or Seraphina, but neither Elitia nor Cion has any slots for runes on their equipment. I’ll have to check with Seraphina if she’s got one later.

“Now let’s see, what other resources could we process...? Oh my! You’ve picked up quite a few varieties of skill-enhancing fruits.”

“It’s hard deciding what to do with resources this valuable. Does it look like

you could find a use for any of these?” I asked Ceres.

“It’s generally recommended to process these so as to maximize their effects, even for high-level Seekers. It might be best to let a powerful Healer carry them for you, if you ever run into one. They should be able to make some very potent medicine with them.”

“I see... Then I think we’ll just hold on to them for the time being.”

“The other resources you picked up look like they’d be good for making accessories,” added Steiner.

◆Materials Available for Processing◆

Snow Drop x1

Snow Quartz x1

Water Spirit Crystal x1

Blue Butterfly Amber Inclusion x1

“In that case, it might be a good idea to ask everyone what they’d like to use them for,” I said.

“Hmph. I’d wager they’d all want one of these... You don’t have enough for everyone now, so maybe you’d best give them out as presents as you find more.”

“Ohhh, right... Women do love pretty jewelry, don’t they? I should’ve thought more about what they might like instead of focusing only on equipment.”

“Just the kind of keenly insightful advice we’d expect from you, Master, what with your many, many years of studying the human experience and— Ow!”

“Age is no matter to either of our races. Isn’t that right, Arihito?”

“Y-yes, ma’am...”

I hadn’t gotten a very good look at Ceres when I ran into her in the bath, thanks to all the steam, but from what I had made out, she appeared to have been much more mature than the young girl standing before me now. I couldn’t bring myself to ask what that was about, though.

“Then what say we meet up with the other ladies at the public bath and ask them what they fancy?”

◆Changes to Magic Stones and Runes on Equipment◆

> Fitted ★PAN'S FLUTE with PHONIA RUNE and STAGNATION STONE →
Upgraded to ★PAN'S FLUTE +1

◆Processed Equipment◆

- > KYOUKA acquired SNOW DROP EARRINGS
- > SUZUNA acquired SNOW QUARTZ PENDANT
- > ELITIA acquired WATER SPIRIT CRYSTAL PENDANT
- > THERESIA acquired BUTTERFLY RING

Part II: Doubt

I caught up with the others at the spa. After our baths, we all gathered at the lounge that also served as a bar, so I took the opportunity to go over our newly available skills.

◆New Available Skills – ARIHITO◆

Level 2 Skills

Doll Assist: Strengthens golems and similar pawns created by allies in front of user.

Backdoor: Provides a constant stream of intel on enemies whenever user is in retreat. (Prerequisite: Rear Stance)

Escape Anchor: Significantly increases swiftness when activating Rearguard General. (Prerequisite: Rearguard General)

Level 1 Skills

Front Line Support 1: Inflicts knockback on enemy whenever party members in front of user sustain an attack.

Remaining Skill Points: 3

◆New Acquired Skills – KYOUKA◆

Level 2 Skills

☆Frosted Armor: Reflects attacks with an added ice attribute. Applies to any decoys or golems the user creates. (Prerequisites: Decoy, Ether Ice)

Level 1 Skills

Ether Ice: Installs ether with ice attribute.

Remaining Skill Points: 3 → 0

◆New Available Skills – T_{HERESIA}◆

Level 2 Skills

Trap Detection 2: Gives user a special trap-detecting vision.
(Prerequisite: Trap Detection 1)

Antibody: Nullifies systemic status ailments due to poison or similar substances with a fixed probability of success. Temporarily augments user's attack power and speed.

Weapon Bite: Blocks enemy weapon attacks and steals weapon upon success.

Level 1 Skills

☆Dodge: Evasion skills increase when user equips specific types of shields.

Remaining Skill Points: 3 → 2

◆New Available Skills – M_{ELISSA}◆

Level 2 Skills

Plattered Alive: Increases chances the user will deal a single fatal blow to fish-type monsters whose vitality has fallen a certain degree.

☆Cat Step: Increases evasion rate. Can Charm opponent on successful evasion. (Prerequisite: Cat Walk)

Level 1 Skills

Toxin Test: Allows user to detect poison in food consumed.
Reduces effects of poison.

Remaining Skill Points: 3 → 0

Leveling up had given us access to new skills, but there were also many others we lacked the points to afford. We could always acquire them as the need arose, so it was better to hold off on everything except for the ones we knew for certain would prove useful. Theresia's Trap Detection 2 sounded great, but Antibody also required two skill points, so I decided not to get either for the

moment. Weapon Bite would likewise come in handy only if we ran into a monster that fought with some kind of weapon. Dodge, on the other hand, I did have Theresia acquire since it complemented her skill set, worked with her buckler, and cost only one skill point. Melissa told me she wanted an evasion skill, so she wound up taking both Cat Walk and Cat Step.

The members of Four Seasons begged to stay the night; for a second it looked like we'd run short on beds until the ladies whipped out sleeping bags they'd apparently used before and turned the second-floor bedrooms into a regular campsite. I dozed off on the sofa to the raucous voices coming from above and before long fell into a deep sleep.

It was the dead of night the next time I opened my eyes. They took a second to adjust to the darkness of the room but eventually landed on Theresia, who'd fallen asleep seated on the sofa without anything to keep her warm. I laid her down so she could stretch out and covered her with a blanket. I worried I might wake her up, but she was fast asleep.

“...Zzz...”

I could hear her softly snoring and saw her chest rising and falling very, very slowly, almost imperceptibly. It looked at first glance as if she wasn't actually breathing, so I kept an eye on her for a bit to make sure.

...I guess it's kinda creepy to stand here in a dark room watching her sleep.

I tiptoed out of the room and decided to get some fresh air—and ran into Igarashi standing just outside the front door in her pajamas.

“Igarashi, what's up? Why are you out here so late?”

“Atobe, I'm so glad you're up... You were sleeping so peacefully, I didn't want to wake you. I think Elitia and Suzuna went out somewhere.”

“Elitia and Suzuna...? Okay, I'll take a look around the neighborhood.”

“Oh, do you mind? I wish I could join you, but I'm a bit underdressed.” She had a point; I imagined she'd be a little chilly in her pajamas with only a cardigan draped over her shoulders. The weather in District Seven the past few days had reached summertime highs during the day but got quite cool once the sun had set.

“...It’ll be chilly if you go out like that,” she said. “Here, why don’t you put this on?”

“Oh... But if I take it, you’ll be cold, too, Igarashi. I’m okay, really...”

I tried to refuse politely but lost in the end and found myself with that same cardigan now draped over me. It smelled really nice—not that I could tell that to her, though.

“You have such broad shoulders... Good thing I went for the larger size.”

“Th-thank you very much. All right, I’ll be back.”

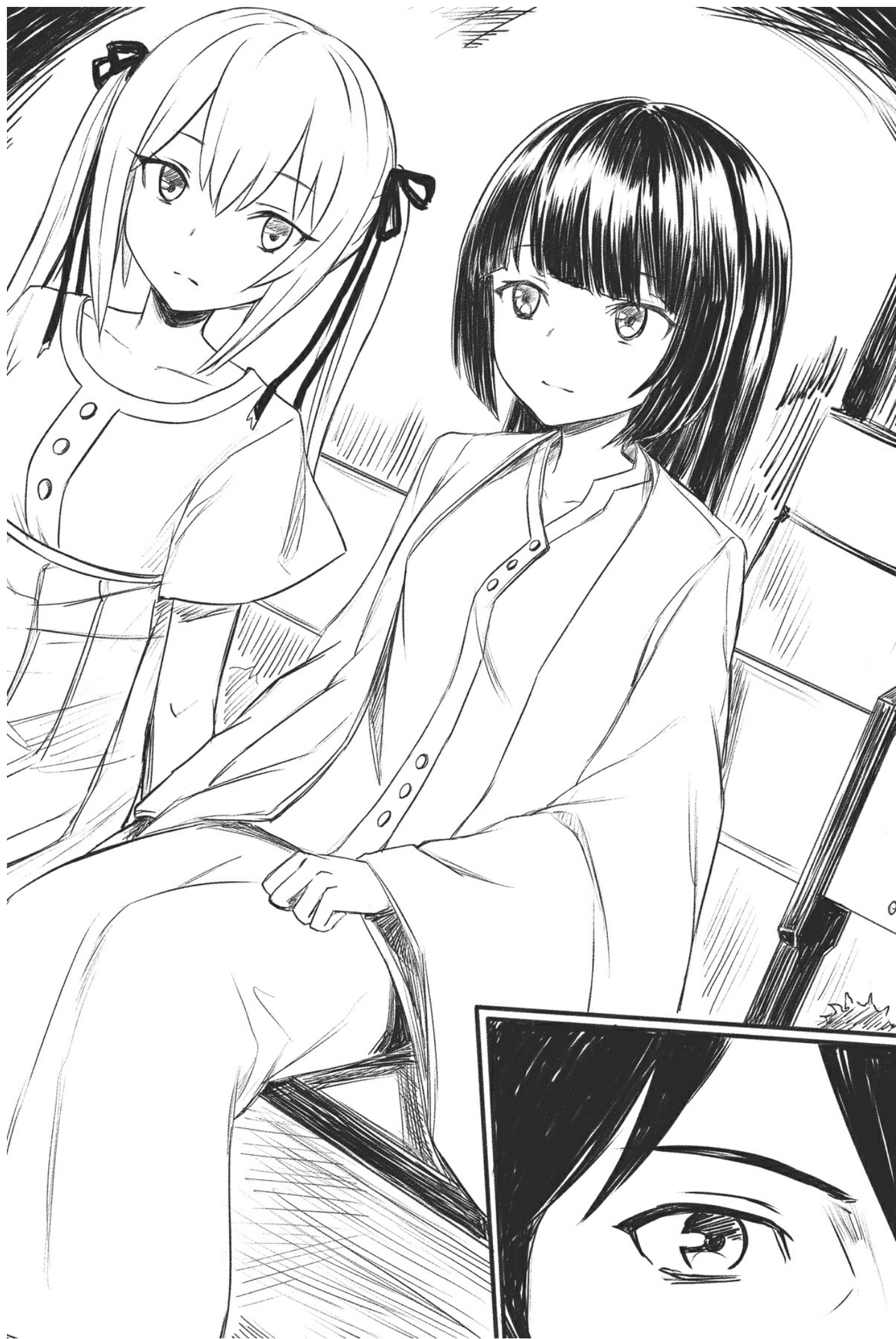
“Okay, be careful.”

Igarashi saw me off as I left the house. My license told me right away where to find Elitia and Suzuna: at a park in a residential district about a five-minute walk away. Trees were a rare sight in the cities of the Labyrinth Country. This park must have been installed as a green respite from the city’s stony architecture; the trees there appeared to have been planted after it was created. The soft glow emanating from the magical lampposts gave me just enough light by which to see the two girls sitting in front of a monument erected in the park.

“...Ellie, do you think we’re not strong enough yet?” I heard Suzuna say, and I stopped in my tracks. I debated whether to call out to them; depending on the topic, I figured they may not feel comfortable including me in their conversation, but standing here and eavesdropping wasn’t much better. Still, I couldn’t just leave them.

“You’re worried it’s going to be too dangerous...especially if we don’t work our way through the labyrinths in District Six first, right?”

“...I can go back to District Five alone if I have to. But I couldn’t do anything on my own... That’s why I needed to find friends to help me.”



“And we can all go together now. There’s nothing holding us back...”

“...I know. And I know you’ve all agreed to go to District Five... It’s all thanks to Arihito and everyone else that we’ve even gotten the chance. That makes me really happy...but at the same time...”

Elitia was confused. She’d thought the day we would get to advance as a party to District Five would still be a long time coming, and now it was suddenly before us. We’d face greater risks this way by skipping the normal order of things. But the Guild had called on us because they needed all the reinforcements they could get to quell the impending stampede.

“I’ve never actually fought a District Five monster head-on. We had a few different groups in the Brigade, and I was in the third party... I shouldn’t have even been able to get into District Five back then. I was only level eight when the Shining Simian Lord attacked us. The only reason I got into the Brigade in the first place is because my older brother’s the captain and my father’s the founder.”

“...Ellie...why were you on the expedition when this Shining Simian Lord monster attacked...?”

“The third party’s mission was to go into the labyrinth and create a diversion to make sure the enemy’s forces wouldn’t all concentrate in one place... We were supposed to lure out one of its underlings: a general in its forces but not its strongest fighter. But that day...we went to the area where we’d been told we’d find the general, but the Simian Lord caught us off-guard in a sneak attack...”

These monsters had created an entire organization with the Simian Lord—a creature cunning enough to deceive Seekers—sitting at the helm. That same Simian Lord had stolen Elitia’s friend from her in an ambush. It was no wonder all these feelings had come rushing back to her now that we actually had the chance to go to District Five. I myself had gotten a taste of true, if only momentary, despair when Shirone separated me from my friends. What if I hadn’t gotten back in time? What if they hadn’t been able to defeat the Clay Giant without me?

“The Brigade didn’t mean to pick a fight with the Simian Lord. We were trying

to get our hands on a cursed weapon from one of the Seekers he had captured. The second party completed that mission, and our captain gave the order to retreat. But no one ever came to help us fight off the monster.”

Beyond Liberty had also employed some questionable methods and excluded other Seekers from accessing the best hunting grounds. I didn’t entirely agree with it, but I did understand the logic behind it. The White Night Brigade’s way of doing things, on the other hand, I fundamentally opposed in every respect.

“...Was it the Brigade’s policy not to go in and conduct rescue missions?”

Suzuna seemed afraid of the answer she’d get. Her voice quivered, but she looked Elitia straight in the eye as she spoke.

“...My brother used to be all about helping each other out whenever we raided labyrinths. But then something happened before we left District Six...and he did a total one-eighty. He made it his top priority to get ahead at all costs and gain the strength to do so. He only recruited people who agreed with this no-holds-barred approach; that’s how the Brigade got to be what it is today.”

“So...he didn’t care if his friend fell behind, as long as he got what he wanted...?” asked Suzuna with what I first thought sounded like shock at how callously the Brigade treated its members. But it turned out there was much more to it than that.

“I certainly believe every party has the right to determine how they conduct themselves. I know I’m in no position to criticize, but...”

“...The first party was supposed to take on the Simian Lord. But we all understood that, as members of the Brigade, we had to accept the same risks as everyone else, so nobody really stood up to the captain or left the Brigade in protest. A few people did speak up in favor of rescuing Rury from the Simian Lord, but it wasn’t enough to sway the entire group.”

But Elitia never gave up. I couldn’t imagine what she must’ve felt the moment her party decided to abandon her friend. The thought alone filled me with rage and resentment.

“You got attacked by such an overwhelmingly powerful monster... How is it that nobody but Rury got hurt...?”

I would've expected the party and their battle formation to crumble and descend into chaos after the Simian Lord's sneak attack. And yet, only one person fell captive. Elitia trembled as she began revealing the reason behind this mystery. She wrapped her arms tightly around her body to try and keep herself from shaking.

"...Rury's job isn't cut out for battle. But she's got a Morale Discharge that can save her party in an emergency." Elitia explained how Rury's Morale Discharge, Salvation, had the power to send her party back to the entrance of the current labyrinth floor and inflict damage on her enemy at the cost of her own vitality, and that she'd activated this powerful skill that fateful day.

"The next thing we knew...we'd escaped the Simian Lord, but Rury was nowhere to be found... I tried to go and look for her, but the captain..." She said the captain, her older brother, knocked her unconscious. By the time she awoke, she was back at the Brigade's lodging.

"Rury never would've had to use her Morale Discharge if I hadn't been so weak... If only I'd stopped him and done my job as vanguard...or known how to use the Scarlet Emperor better...Rury would still..." Tears streamed down Elitia's face as she voiced her deepest regrets. Suzuna held her close and for a while said nothing.

There was something I still couldn't wrap my head around, though maybe that just meant I had a different way of thinking. The Brigade's first and second parties should have had a real chance of saving Rury, but they left her behind without making any attempts. Did they count themselves lucky she'd saved them from going up against the Simian Lord and decide to call it a day? Actually, it didn't matter. Nothing would convince me what they did was right.

Elitia had traveled all the way back to District Eight to find help, met Suzuna, and teamed up with us. I still didn't know everything about her past. But ever since the moment she joined our party, her mission had become an important goal for us all. She'd helped us countless times. And so we would help her. Nothing could ever change that.

"...Arihito."

"...!"

I walked out into the light of the streetlamp. The two girls noticed and looked my way.

“I heard you guys were out and about so I came to look for you. I caught most of what you said.”

“...I’m sorry,” Elitia began. “You’ve all been so supportive about going to District Five, but when I think of the kinds of monsters that means we’ll fight, I just can’t...”

“So...you think we might not be ready for it, huh? You’ve got a point. We’d definitely be in a better position if we built ourselves up in District Six first.”

“Arihito...,” Suzuna said nervously.

I could’ve focused only on the plus sides of going to District Five and put all worries aside. That was certainly a valid option, given the formidable opponents we were sure to face—but it wouldn’t be what Elitia needed to hear.

“But you know, we’ve done pretty well fighting with high-level Seekers like Seraphina, not to mention you. We’ve confronted level-nine Named Monsters like the Merciless Mourner and the Clay Giant...and come out on top. To me, that says we’ve got what it takes to fight run-of-the-mill District Five monsters, even if they might be a little stronger than we are.”

“...But...”

“I’d like to find out what the average monster level is up there. Not that a big number would change my mind, of course.”

“It depends on the labyrinth, but...they’re usually around level eleven. The Shining Simian Lord was level twelve.”

This information brought home just how unusual it must have been for level-9 Named Monsters to appear in District Seven, but it only bolstered my point. We’d fought the unthinkable here and won; trying our luck in District Five seemed in no way like a fool’s errand.

“So maybe we’ll skip over level ten and fight a level-eleven monster right off the bat... We may only manage to take one down, but I don’t think we’ll be totally useless.”

“...But...just one hit could...”

“It’ll be okay, Ellie. As long as we all work together, I’m sure...”

“What she said! A little late to be worrying about all that now, isn’t it?” a voice called out behind us. We turned around and saw Misaki, who must have followed me at some point. She appeared from the shadows of the streetlamp I had stood under myself a moment ago.

“Sorry, Atobe... We got worried and ended up coming, too.”

“Woof!”

“...You’re way stronger than me, Elitia. I’ll try not to get in your way.”

“.....”

Igarashi, Cion, Melissa, and Theresia followed shortly after, with Madoka and Seraphina bringing up the rear.

“U-um...I know I can’t fight, but if you all go up to District Five, I’d like to accompany you...!” chirped Madoka.

“In terms of levels, I’m only barely on equal footing with the monsters in District Five...,” began Seraphina, “but I believe this party will contribute in a manner befitting the Advanced Seekers honor it was bestowed.”

Tears shimmered in Elitia’s eyes, but she covered her face before any spilled out. The next time she looked up at us, the fierce, familiar sparkle had returned to her gaze.

“...Thank you. Nothing would make me happier than going up to District Five with you all by my side.”

“Of course. Let’s do this together, Elitia,” I said, and offered her my right hand. She took it and pulled herself to her feet. Suzuna stood up after her and turned to look at me, her own eyes glistening as well.

“Thank you for coming to look for us, everyone,” she said.

“Seriously! You guys really gotta stop leaving me out of these precious moments. I’m just as big an Arihito fan as youuu!” pouted Misaki.

“I’ll bet comments like that are why they didn’t invite— Um, I mean, you must

have been sleeping so soundly, they didn't want to wake you," said Igarashi.

"I was so worked up about tomorrow...or I guess today. For a while it looked like I wouldn't catch a wink of sleep. But then I tootally passed out!"

I figured her story was probably half true, and I chalked the rest of it up to that knack she had for lightening the mood and raising our spirits.

"...It's too soon to cry. Save your friend first and then cry all you want," Melissa said to Elitia, who smiled.

"You're exactly right, Melissa... First things first; I've got to fight with everything I've got, no matter what the Guild asks of us. Otherwise, there's no point in us going to District Five."

"So...that's settled, then. Shall we head back?" I suggested. "There's still some time before morning. We should rest up as much as we can."

Everyone started heading back home. I was about to follow them when I caught two figures walking in from the other side of the park: Steiner in their usual armor, and Ceres perched on their shoulder.

"Arihito, we've finished up the work you ordered and are off to bed, too. Give us a holler if you need anything while you're in District Five and we can meet you there."

"By that she means, 'Do call for us, pretty please.' We can get our hands on some quality ore there to strengthen your equipment, too."

"Thank you both. I'll be sure to reach out once we get permission to stay in the district if we have any questions about our equipment."

"Don't forget to pick up that suit Corleone's making for you whenever it's ready. And don't do anything too rash. This is your first emergency summons; getting out alive should be your top priority."

I nodded in response. Staying alive did come first—we'd figure everything else out after that.

Part III: Monsters of the Sandy Sea

We breakfasted early at the break of dawn and were getting ready to push out when a report from the Guild headquarters came in for Seraphina. The stampede in District Five had broken out earlier than expected, and the local Guild Saviors forces, other Advanced Seekers called upon to fight, and district residents had already begun responding to the situation.

We rushed to the Guild Saviors headquarters in Green Hall and found Kozelka and Khosrow, along with a platoon of Guild Savior soldiers, on standby.

“You have my gratitude for accepting our request. The battle is already underway in District Five; we shall now explain where the situation stands.”

“This stampede’s coming out of the Dead Sea Sands... The monsters there’ve got these godforsaken habitats that make it damn near impossible to keep their numbers down, so we’re left to deal with this mess just about once a year. They’re nasty suckers; a single one can give a party with an average level of ten a run for their money. Of course, we’ll all go at ’em together if they do break out into town,” Khosrow explained.

A party with an average level of 10—that’s far stronger than us, if you’re looking at hard numbers, but even they have to put up a fierce fight against just one of these monsters. On top of that, they’re going to start crawling all over the town once it’s a full-on stampede. Those of us on defensive duty will also have to split up to cover the area. I can’t imagine we can count on purely advantageous battle conditions, either.

“That said, we can still win this thing if we get ’em one at a time. Take out their Named Monster, and we end the whole stampede, but we’ll really be in for the fight of our lives if it manages to get a little posse going ’round with it. This ain’t gonna be easy, but try to focus on isolating these sons of you-know-whats and keep an eye out for any party that might be in over their heads.”

“Understood. We’ll stay vigilant and act accordingly.”

“...You don’t have to come at me with that kinda deference. I’m not your boss or anything, you know, so...it’s kinda...”

“Khosrow, this is no time to indulge in bashfulness. Do not let your guard fall for an instant,” scolded Kozelka.

“Yes, ma’am! Noted!”

I hadn’t meant anything special by it, but I guess Khosrow liked how I’d responded. Maybe previous Seekers who’d been called to duty from other districts had been a bit more bumbling from nerves.

“...That’s one of Atobe’s charms. Kind of rich for me to say that, though.”

“What was that, Igarashi?”

“N-no, um... *Ahem*. I was just trying to say, you know, we’d better do all we can to live up to the trust they’ve put in us.”

“Ohhh? That’s not what I heard at alllll...”

“M-Misaki... You really shouldn’t push her buttons like that...,” Suzuna cautioned nervously.

“I agree, that is certainly one of Mr. Atobe’s graces... It’s hardly a wonder Sergeant Khosrow would also grow fond of him,” said Seraphina without the slightest hesitation. Her expression was entirely sincere, completely unaware of how her input made this even more embarrassing. Khosrow awkwardly scratched at his cheek.

“I understand there are noncombat-oriented members among your party, Mr. Atobe. We’ll have them wait within the District Five Guild Savors headquarters after we teleport over,” explained Kozelka.

“Thank you for the kind consideration. Should we expect to head straight into battle, per your orders?”

“Yeah... But don’t go overboard if it looks like taking them down’ll be too much for you. Seekers aren’t duty-bound to quell a stampede, but some parties choose to pitch in. We may not necessarily be going at this as the underdogs.”

That sounded exactly like what had happened back in the District Eight stampede. So many people who normally had no qualms going up against

monsters in the labyrinths chose to stay out of the fight the moment it spilled over into town. It's not like they were obligated to help with the stampede, and they knew someone would take care of it eventually if they just waited it out. At the same time, the Guild Savors needed all the help they could get to ensure Seekers could raid labyrinths as safely as possible. That's why they'd come to us.

"...Additionally, several special corridors have been constructed throughout District Five in order to corner any vicious monsters that do manage to invade the town."

"Third-Class Dragon Captain Kozelka, I'm afraid it may be premature to share such classified information with them..."

"Not at all," Kozelka retorted. "We have street corner cars and other armored vehicles, as well as specialized weapons installed in different locations around the town, at the ready to use against rampaging monsters. Should you find yourself in a situation where you must rely on one of these weapons, please ask the closest Guild Savior for instruction as well as you are able. And if a Guild Savior deems it necessary to utilize said weapons, put as much space between yourselves and the targets as you can to avoid becoming collateral damage."

"You can leave herding that Named Monster into the corridor to us Guild Savors. But if it looks like we may need your help...well, we'll be countin' on you," said Khosrow, then bowed his head. This one gesture proved beyond a shadow of a doubt they'd asked for our help out of real need, not mere decorum in regard to our title.

"We will provide every party participating in this mission with up to two level-three poison resistance amulets," explained Kozelka. "Please confer and decide among yourselves who in your party will equip them."

"Desert plus poison equals, say it with me... Scorpions. Course, these hard-assed monstrosities are easily the size of a few people put together."

"Eeek! ...S-so you're saying there's tons of scorpions on the loose?!" asked a terrified Misaki.

"They live burrowed deep beneath the sand, so it's no easy feat to cull their numbers. We face a similar predicament with airborne monsters as well,"

Kozelka told her.

Scorpion monsters with potent venom; I could see them coming at us with long-range attacks, but we needed to prioritize the safety of those who'd fight them on the front line. I handed one of the amulets to Seraphina and fixed the other to Cion's anklet.

"Now then...I shall teleport us to the District Five Guild Saviors headquarters. All present, fall in line."

""""Yes, ma'am!""""

Kozelka left the room, Khosrow and her battalion close behind. Adeline had said her platoon would follow afterward as backup, but they were all fully equipped and ready to deploy. They lined up in formation and saw us off.

We entered a hall with several doors at the end of the corridor. Kozelka raised her hand up to one of these; as she did, crystals embedded into the wall next to it illuminated a 5 in the Labyrinth Country notation and the door gave way.

Are all the Guild Saviors headquarters in every district connected? If so, does that mean Kozelka and the others sometimes travel to the top three districts as well?

We passed through the doorway and walked for a bit before we sensed a change in the air. Kozelka opened another door and led us somewhere very similar yet different from the District Seven headquarters. At that moment, Guild Saviors awaiting our arrival came rushing toward us.

"Third-Class Captain Kozelka, as previously reported, the stampede broke out prior to sunrise this morning! We've confirmed a hundred and thirty-four monsters and defeated thirteen! The battle zone begins at the entrance to the Dead Sea Sands and is currently expanding to every corner of the district!"

"Roger that. We'll assess the situation and mobilize where we are needed. I've reported with my battalion and one party of Advanced Seekers; we have one more battalion to follow that will provide backup as soon as they arrive."

"Understood! I'll inform Third-Class Dragon Major Furet at—"

"Attention, headquarters, multiple enemy units are racing toward the eastern

quadrant at high velocity! Evacuation of noncombat personnel to the designated shelter area is underway but has not yet been completed!”

I can't imagine District Five is starved for Seekers, but they've only defeated 13 out of 134 of these monsters, and it's been several hours since this stampede broke out. Must take a lot of time to bring a single one down.

“The eastern quadrant... That’s a residential area for predominantly support staff. Captain Kozelka, what’s your order?”

“We must make haste. Mr. Atobe, I’m going to send you a map of the area. I would have liked to do this sooner, but the system does not allow us to display it outside of District Five... I apologize for the delay.”

“No need to apologize. It’s still plenty helpful learning this now.”

“I gotta tell ya, I like that practical thinking. Think you could come with us, Atobe? I want to buy some time for the support staff and other residents in town who can’t fight.”

“Of course. Madoka, hang back here for me. We’ll come get you as soon as we have this under control.”

“Okay...! Please be careful, everyone...!”

The District Five Guild Savors headquarters, it turned out, was built underground just like the one in District Seven. We ran down the halls and flew up the stairs, the familiar sensation of teleportation hitting me at some point during our ascent, and finally made it to the building’s ground floor.

“Mr. Atobe, everyone, stop!”

We were still inside the Guild, a place where I had assumed we wouldn’t need to worry about fending off any monster attacks. I had assumed wrong.

◆Current Status◆

> DEATH STALKER G activated POISON BLASTER

Kozelka froze just before she stepped into the hallway at the top of the stairs—a split second later, something came barreling down that very same hallway with ferocious intensity.

“Arghhhh! They’re shooting off their toxic juice in the Guild... Stay on your toes! That liquid’s poison, but it’ll also melt whatever it touches. Don’t let anything those bastards hack up get on you, unless you want some new holes in your best armor!” Khosrow warned.

“Khosrow, I’m going in. I want you all to make your escape while I draw the enemy’s fire.”

“Hey...I can’t stand by and let you go all by yourself, Captain. Leave the dirty work to your subordina— Aaand she’s not listening!”

◆Current Status◆

> KOZELKA activated GARM'S ADVANCE → Speed and evasion rate drastically increased

> KHOSROW activated BATTLE CRY → Party members’ attack and defense rose

> KHOSROW activated SPRINT BURST

They’re so fast... Kozelka’s one thing, but even Khosrow’s got a high-speed skill, and he’s a big guy... Wait, this is no time to be staring in awe...!

“Kozelka, Khosrow, I’ll support you!”

I jumped into the corridor and saw Kozelka, followed closely by Khosrow, racing toward the monster that had broken into the building.

◆Monster Encountered◆

DEATH STALKER G

Level 11

Hostile

Immune to Poison

Resistant to Attribute Attacks

Dropped Loot: ???

Armored plates covered every inch of the scorpion so enormous, it must have

been roughly three times the height of an average person. It trained the stinger at the end of its tail at Kozelka as she sprinted toward it at breakneck speed.

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated OUTSIDE ASSIST
- > ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 1 → Targets: KOZELKA, KHOSROW
- > ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT (STUN)
- > DEATH STALKER G activated POISON BLASTER → Target: KOZELKA
- > KOZELKA activated DEFENSE SPIN → Nullified POISON BLASTER

“Hyaaaah!”

Kozelka spun her blade buffed by her magic-infused defensive skill and met the poisonous jet stream that shot out of the scorpion’s tail head-on, dispelling it on impact.



“Khosrow!”

◆Current Status◆

> KHOSROW activated POWER CHARGE → Hit DEATH STALKER G

Inflicted CONFUSION status

Moderate knockback

DEATH STALKER G was STUNNED

“Taaaaake thaaaaat!”

“KYEEEE!”

The instant Kozelka stepped aside, Khosrow came up from behind and brutally tackled the giant scorpion, blasting it backward.

“This extra power... Was that you, Atobe...?” Khosrow asked incredulously.

“Let’s boot it right out of here!” cried Elitia.

“.....!”

Elitia and Theresia lunged for the scorpion and rained Slash Ripper and Azure Slash down upon it. Azure Slash had a fire attribute so the attack itself didn’t cause much damage, but Theresia activated it for the accompanying knockback effect, which sent the scorpion flying out of the building.

“Elitia, Theresia, I’ve got you!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> ELITIA activated SLASH RIPPER

> THERESIA activated AZURE SLASH

> DEATH STALKER G assumed DEVIL SCORPION STANCE

Removed CONFUSION and STUN status ailments

Defense against enemies directly facing DEATH STALKER G rose

Defense against enemies directly behind DEATH STALKER G fell

> DEATH STALKER G activated a counterattack

What did it do...? We're done for if it comes at us now...!

"Once you get to District Five, you must never let a guaranteed chance to attack escape you!"

◆Current Status◆

> KOZELKA activated ACTIVE FEINT → Target: DEATH STALKER G

> DEATH STALKER G initiated counterattack → Target: KOZELKA

> KOZELKA activated WANDERING TARGET FLARE → Evaded DEATH STALKER G's counterattack

Next counter will inflict double damage

"What in the—?!"

"—!!"

The Death Stalker had been poised to strike Elitia and Theresia, but Kozelka forced it to direct its stinger at her instead. In a split second, she managed not only to draw the enemy's fire to herself, but also to dodge that attack.

"Don't hog all the fun, Captain. Share the wealth!"

"Follow after those two ladies, Khosrow."

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated OUTSIDE ASSIST and ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> KOZELKA activated SWORD RAIN → 12 stages hit DEATH STALKER G

Double damage inflicted

156 support damage

> SLASH RIPPER hit DEATH STALKER G

13 support damage

> ELITIA activated additional attack → Hit DEATH STALKER G

13 support damage

> AZURE SLASH hit DEATH STALKER G

Slight knockback

Consumed magic

13 support damage

> KHOSROW activated SHOULDER BURST → Hit DEATH STALKER G

Removed DEATH STALKER G from battlefield

13 support damage

Kozelka's attack flowed as fast as a raging current. Her silver sword meted out a slew of slashes on the Death Stalker, piercing through its armor and slicing it to shreds. Elitia and Theresia doubled down with their own offensive and forced the enemy to lose its balance. Khosrow's attack took a moment to activate, but his shoulder packed such an incredibly explosive punch that it sent the scorpion tumbling through the air. This was no normal knockback; the scorpion had been forcibly ejected from the battle entirely, if only for the moment.

"Atobe, he's not down just yet!" Khosrow shouted. "Leave this one to us; you guys head over to the eastern quadrant!"

"We'll regroup as soon as we're able! If for some reason you run into the Named Monster, please do not test your fate!"

"We may not have the luxury of choice, depending on how it goes... But we'll do what we can! All right, everyone, let's do this!"

""""Okay!!""""

We ran out the front doors of the Guild building and headed east past a group

of Seekers and Guild Savors in a fierce melee with several scorpions. The monsters' Poison Blasters had melted away the outer walls of several buildings in the area, and their stingers had ripped up the stone pavements everywhere we looked. Some combatants failed to realize the significance of the Devil Scorpion Stance and paid the price when the monsters' counterattacks sent them flying. Others fell in immediately after and pummeled the scorpions with concentrated gunfire from a distance until a veil of smoke rose from the ground. However, the giant creatures rendered the blasts near useless with their defense against attributed attacks and came leaping through the smoke to begin their violent onslaught once again.

“““KYEEEE...!!”””

“C-can we really...make it out of this mess alive...?” asked Misaki, gasping for air as we ran. I couldn't think of anything to say. We'd definitely seen some fierce action in the last stampede in District Eight, but this was on an entirely different level. Each and every single one of these foes boasted enough strength to bust through any defensive line, as well as iron-clad protection and the capability to attack from near or far. And they did not go down quietly, even when faced with the full might of an eight-person party.

“Keep goin' on down that street! They're gonna break through to the residential district any minute at this rate!” shouted one of the Seekers in the brawl.

“...All right! Good luck out there!”

“Thanks...! How d'ya like this?! ”

Then it hit me: These people were technically in front of me, meaning I could support them on the fly with Outside Assist.

Support those two men and that lady... Will it work...?!

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated OUTSIDE ASSIST

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT
(STUN)

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> MARCUS activated HAMMER SWING → Hit DEATH STALKER 22

Stunned DEATH STALKER 22

Inflicted concussion

Combined attack stage 1

> KENJI activated DOUBLE KATATE HIRATSUKI → 2 stages hit DEATH STALKER 22

Incapacitated state extended

Combined attack stage 2

> REESE activated STALLING SNIPE → Hit DEATH STALKER 22

Stall nullified

Incapacitated state extended

Combined attack stage 3

> Combined attack HAMMER, HIRATSUKI, STALLING → Extended DEATH STALKER 22's incapacitated state

Intensified concussion

“KYEEEE!!”

A Guild Savior with a shaved head slammed the scorpion's pincers with his war hammer, forcing them to swing up into the air. His comrade, a samurai with a straight sword katana, then hit the monster with a double attack, quickly followed by the bolt of a crossbow let loose by their third companion. The onslaught overwhelmed the scorpion and left it foaming toxic bubbles at the mouth as it teetered back and forth.

“What the—?! D-dunno what happened there, but those were some killer moves... Freakin' amazing...!”

“Did someone give us a drive-by support boost...?! Thank you, whoever you are!”

“E-either way, this is our chance... Don't let up for a second!”

My support extended the stun effects on the Death Stalker and would at least make sure the monster stayed immobile, even if it didn't add much damage. The group's remaining party members joined in with their own attacks and hit the scorpion with further status ailments, finally bringing their victory closer within reach.

"Simply incredible, Mr. Atobe. How you managed to support them in such a short time leaves me at a loss for words...", said Seraphina.

"Well, I figured out from our last encounter that stun attacks work on them."

Still, Outside Assist really drained my magic. I struggled not to spill any of the potion I drank to replenish it as I ran. I started to think I might eventually need to acquire Back Order and have my friends split a bit of their magic with me.

I glanced down at my license to check the District Five map—there was some kind of red dot up ahead, maybe a monster headed for the residential district? It moved so quickly, I couldn't believe my eyes, and it would stop every once in a while to engage in some sort of battle, or perhaps attack innocent civilians.

"We shall soon engage an enemy ourselves. How would you like us to proceed?" asked Seraphina.

"I'm going to do whatever I can to stun it with one of Suzuna's attacks before it can shoot that Poison Blaster at us. Vanguard, I want you to follow that up as usual and do what you do best. If it takes that Devil Scorpion stance, though, I'd like you to go after it with your shield, Seraphina. We should be able to avoid a counterattack that way and get around behind it. Looks like that skill strengthens its defenses against head-on attacks but leaves them pretty thin in the back."

"Understood...!"

We hadn't yet seen everything the Death Stalkers could do. That support attempt had gone off without a hitch, but I couldn't let my guard down; proving our mettle in District Five was great, but I needed us all to get out of this alive.

Theresia took the lead and picked up on something just as she was about to turn the corner at the next building. Her Scout Range Extension 1 clued her in to our enemy's presence far before the rest of us had any idea.

“.....!!”

“Theresia!”

She knew running out ahead would set the Poison Blaster’s target squarely on her back. And yet, she ran into the fray without hesitation—she’d spotted two people trapped in the rubble of a building destroyed in the stampede. A middle-aged man lay hunched over his daughter in an attempt to protect her.

My Hawk Eyes told me they had no easy escape route open to them, though I couldn’t see the monster just yet. But Theresia was looking up, not at the ground. Her eyes were focused on something farther back and to the right of the building that blocked my view. The scorpion was clinging to the top of the building’s facade.

What do I do now that I can’t pinpoint the trajectory of its attack? Do I get Theresia to draw its fire? No, she might not make it in time even with one of her evasion skills if she tries covering for the two people in the rubble. There’s gotta be something we can do... Something!

“Suzuna, play your flute! And use the magic stone!”

“Okay!” Suzuna called back loud and clear. She took out her flute and began to play. Just then:

◆Current Status◆

> SUZUNA activated SONOROUS WAVER → Target: All in mid-range

Hit DEATH STALKER L

Decreased speed

> THERESIA activated ACCEL DASH

> ELITIA activated SONIC RAID

> DEATH STALKER L activated POISON BLASTER → THERESIA evaded

> CION activated EMERGENCY WITHDRAWAL → Targets: CURT, FRAN

“Eyes on me, you overgrown scorpion!”

“.....!!”

“Bow! Bow!”

Theresia and Elitia ran ahead to distract the enemy as well as give Cion the space she needed to swoop in and take the father and daughter to safety. The stagnation stone slowed down the Poison Blaster we had all seen coming so effectively that Theresia dodged it without activating any extra skills.

But the stone’s special attack proved far too powerful. I was worried it had some equally dangerous risks we weren’t aware of, and my fears had unfortunately come true.

“...Ah...”

“Suzu!” Misaki cried out, catching Suzuna as her legs gave way.

The move devastated her magic stores; it had gotten us out of this sticky situation, but I now knew for sure Suzuna would be able to use it only once until she managed to increase her maximum magic potential.

◆Current Status◆

- > Speed reduction on DEATH STALKER L was lifted
- > DEATH STALKER L activated TRIANGULAR LEAP → Target: THERESIA

The stagnation stone’s effects wore off the moment the flute’s whistle faded. The scorpion bounded back to its original speed and without missing a beat doubled down in pursuit of the one who had evaded its attack: Theresia. There was nothing particularly strange about its movements. Just devastating, dizzying speed. Theresia wouldn’t even have the chance to lift up her shield in defense. Seraphina could never make it in time; I had to call on our secret weapon.

“Ariadne!”

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: THERESIA
- > ARIHITO requested temporary support from ARIADNE → Target:
THERESIA

> ARIADNE activated TWIN GUARD ARM

> DEATH STALKER L activated CRIMINAL PINCERS → Target: THERESIA

> Hit THERESIA → Reduced damage

Equipment withstood destruction

THERESIA was captured

“.....!!”

Ariadne’s Twin Guard Arms shot out and stopped the oncoming attack—but only from one of the scorpion’s two pincers.

“...Ngh... Guh.....!!”

This was what it meant to fight in District Five—what a level-11 monster could do.

The enemy’s overwhelming power came crashing down on me and left me staggering. It was Redface all over again; all the turmoil I’d felt at the sight of that senseless violence came rushing back with renewed strength.

“Arihito, snap out of it!”

“.....!”

Misaki’s shout pulled me back to my senses. I’d known—or should have known—all along that Guard Arm wasn’t foolproof. I needed to get Theresia out of there as soon as possible, but how?

Stun the enemy and stop it in its tracks. We could save Theresia if we could just loosen its grip on her.

“Let Theresia go...you monstrosity...!”

“Hiyaaaaah!”

“Release Ms. Theresia...at once...!”

Elitia, Igarashi, and Seraphina all charged the scorpion in unison. We couldn’t afford to combine our attacks, or else we might end up hitting Theresia if we overshot the range. Our only option: Hit the scorpion over and over to stun it into submission.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT
(STUN)

> ELITIA activated ARMOR BREAK → Hit DEATH STALKER L

LOWERED defenses

DEATH STALKER L was STUNNED

> ELITIA activated additional attack → Hit DEATH STALKER L

STUN state extended

> KYOUKA activated DOUBLE ATTACK → 2 stages hit DEATH STALKER L

STUN state extended

> SERAPHINA activated SHIELD SLAM → Hit DEATH STALKER L

STUN state extended

“KYEEEE...!”

◆Current Status◆

> DEATH STALKER L assumed DEVIL SCORPION STANCE

STUN state removed

Defense against enemies directly facing DEATH STALKER L rose

Defense against enemies directly behind DEATH STALKER L fell

> DEATH STALKER L's capture of THERESIA continued

Inflicted damage on THERESIA

“.....Ah.....!!”

My heart began beating in slow motion.

My vision turned black and white save for the blood dripping from Theresia's mouth, which retained its crimson hue as she turned her face toward me, helplessly locked in the scorpion's pincers.

There was no time to waste. If I wanted to protect Theresia, I had to do what I

alone was capable of.

“Master, I shall aid you in your quest to save this faithful maiden.”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated REAR STANCE → Target: THERESIA

> MURAKUMO activated NORTHERN CROSS STRIKE → 6 stages hit DEATH STALKER L

“KYEAAAH!!”

I didn’t unsheathe the sword from my back, nor deal the blow that followed—that Murakumo materialized to do herself. She thrust the naked sword powered by both my magic and her own at the scorpion faster than the eye could see, as if piercing new stars into the velvety night sky.

But the scorpion’s strong defenses surrendered no purchase to her head-on attacks, and it began thrashing its stinger too quickly to follow. I screamed. *She* would know what to do, even if my voice failed to reach her.

◆Current Status◆

> DEATH STALKER L initiated counterattack → Target: ARIHITO

> ARIHITO activated REAR STANCE → Target: DEATH STALKER L

> SERAPHINA activated PROVOKE → DEATH STALKER L’s hostility toward SERAPHINA increased

I grasped Murakumo by the hilt and brought her with me around behind the scorpion. But that spot offered us no guaranteed safety from this enemy’s attacks. The scorpion could react in a split second and lash out behind it with its razor-sharp needle.

Or rather, it could have, if Seraphina hadn’t been standing before it. Her Provoke had turned all its hostility—and its stinger—toward her.

“Yaaaaaah!!”

Seraphina’s cry rang out, and I once again requested Ariadne’s aid.

“I grant thee, dear devotee, my protection. May these Stellar Mechanical God armaments shield you from all harm!”

◆Current Status◆

- > SERAPHINA activated DEFENSIVE STANCE
- > SERAPHINA activated AURA SHIELD
- > ARIHITO requested temporary support from ARIADNE → Target: SERAPHINA
- > ARIADNE activated GUARD VARIANT
- > DEATH STALKER activated HEART BREAK → Hit SERAPHINA

Physical attack reflected

“KYEAAAAH!!”

The scorpion let out an ear-piercing wail. It had struck at Seraphina’s shield too quickly to see, but we all saw how the stinger on its tail snapped off on impact and went spinning through the air until it sank into the wall behind it.

“Master, this is our moment...!”

“Make it count, Murakumo!”

Murakumo stepped slightly in front of me while the scorpion attacked Seraphina. We were allowed only eight people per party, but Murakumo was no mere person; she was my trusty weapon and, therefore, eligible to receive my support.

“Let’s goooooo!”

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT (STUN)
- > MURAKUMO activated METEOR THRUST → Hit DEATH STALKER L
- DEATH STALKER L was STUNNED
- > DEATH STALKER L released THERESIA

> THERESIA lost blood

Defensive armor damaged

“.....!!”

“Awoooooo!”

The scorpion’s pincers loosened their grip, and Cion wasted no time dashing in to save Theresia from their clutches.

“Cion!” Igarashi cried.

“Master, retreat!”

◆Current Status◆

> DEATH STALKER L activated NOXIOUS FUMES OF DELUSION → Hit CION and MURAKUMO

Resistant to Poison

“.....!”

The scorpion began secreting poisonous gas from every pore in its body. It was an attempt to injure us now that we had it cornered, revealing just how deep its vindictive nature ran.

“Bow!”

“This poison cannot hurt me. I don’t want to test my protection against anything stronger, but such petty fumes won’t even touch me.”

I patted myself on the back for giving Cion the poison resistance amulet; she used Covering to protect Theresia from the attack and immediately activated Emergency Withdrawal to take her to safety. I directed my Recovery Support 1 in Theresia’s direction as she rode away. I wasn’t sure it would do more than ease her pain, but I wanted to help her recover in any way I could.

“GYEE...GYEEGYEE...!”

“You’re not going anywhere!”

“C’mon, Kyouka... We’ve gotta join them!”

“You know it!”

Melissa saw her chance and took it before Elitia could begin her charge. She rushed at the scorpion with her butcher’s knife and swung the enormous blade down hard.

◆Current Status◆

- > MELISSA activated KNIFE ARTISTRY → Probability of partial destruction increased
 - > MELISSA activated LOP OFF → DEATH STALKER L dropped materials
 - > KOTTO’S GAUNTLETS activated special effect → Unleashed additional DOUBLE DOWN attack
 - > ELITIA activated SLASH RIPPER → Hit DEATH STALKER L
 - > ELITIA activated additional attack → Hit DEATH STALKER L
 - > KYOUKA activated DOUBLE ATTACK → 2 stages hit DEATH STALKER L
 - > DEATH STALKER L activated NITRO BLOOD → MORIBUND status was removed
- Slightly recovered vitality
- > DEATH STALKER L activated MORTAL FLIGHT

Melissa’s knife sliced through a gap in the scorpion’s armor and lopped off half its tail. Elitia and Igarashi followed soon after with a set of coordinated attacks. The scorpion refused to go down, however, and started attempting to escape the battle. Melissa transferred the tail she’d harvested into her Repository and tried to go after the scorpion but stood no chance of catching up to the desperately fleeing arthropod.

This must be why so few of them have been killed... Talk about a real pain in the ass...!

“I cannot allow you to escape. We’ll work together and stop at least one of you...!”

◆Current Status◆

> SUZUNA activated AUTO-HIT → Next two shots will automatically hit

> SUZUNA activated STORM ARROW → Hit DEATH STALKER L

Suzuna's Auto-Hit had one powerful thing going for it: It never failed to find its mark, no matter how quickly that mark was fleeing.

"....."

"Suzu...!"

Storm Arrow drained another large chunk of Suzuna's magic. She once again collapsed into Misaki's arms from the strain, but her arrows had stopped the scorpion in its tracks. Even this mighty beast capable of resisting attacks of any attribution was no match for a powerful gale.

◆Current Status◆

> DEATH STALKER L activated NITRO BLOOD → Activation failed

It appeared the scorpion's luck had run out; it couldn't call on that skill to save it from the brink of death again so quickly. I cocked my sling and raised it, ready to support Elitia and Igarashi, who ran out in front of me.

"GYEEE... GYEEEGYEEE...!!"

The scorpion let out a screeching wail and lifted its pincers skyward.

At that moment, the very air around us changed. Several beacons of light rose from behind the rooftops of the buildings lining the street, and another engulfed the Death Stalker we had just been fighting.

◆Current Status◆

> 8 DEATH STALKERS activated SACRIFICE

> DEATH STALKER L became unable to fight

Summoned ★THE CALAMITY

The sky contorted.

Then, almost as if crawling out of thin air, a gigantic scorpion covered in dark gray armor fell from the sky. It landed right on top of the Death Stalker that had

its pincers raised toward the heavens in prayer, crushing it on impact and shattering the cobblestones where its legs dug in to support its staggering weight.

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY activated ALL HAIL THE QUEEN → Devoured 8 DEATH STALKER souls

> ★THE CALAMITY strengthened all capabilities

Enabled special attack activation

The seven shafts of light we'd seen rising up came falling down like shooting stars, straight into the gigantic scorpion's gaping mouth. The faithful scorpion crushed beneath it soon transformed into particles of light and joined its brethren in the belly of the beast.

"It ate their souls...and turned them into energy..."

"This must be...the District Five Named Monster...!"

The monster's dark gray armor turned bone white. This was the Death Stalker Named Monster; it had the commanding presence of an armored tank and the regal poise of the highest nobility in equal measure.

◆Monster Encountered◆

★THE CALAMITY

Level 12

Hostile

Resistant to Sudden Death

Possesses All Possible Attributes

Dropped Loot: ???

"GOHHH... OHHH...!!"

Its cry rang out loud and clear: This monster very clearly ruled as queen above all the other scorpions, as the name of its skill implied.

“Eeek! ...It’s growing more tails...!” squealed Misaki. The one menacing stinger it already had split into nine separate tails. Each one was thinner than the ones on the ordinary Death Stalkers and didn’t seem to have the same function.

“Heed my warning, dear devotee. You must distance yourself from this monster as much as possible and take shelter.”

A hint of urgency rang through Ariadne’s usually dispassionate voice. I felt my blood run cold. The white scorpion began glowing with energy that surged down its body toward its tails.

“Mr. Atobe, let’s use this mome—”

“No! Everyone, take cover immediately! Anywhere you can!”

Elitia and Igarashi stopped mid-charge as soon as I reined Seraphina in. Everyone had heard me. Even Cion would still make it to safety with Theresia on her back.

The energy gathered at the tips of the white scorpion’s nine stingers. The scorpion queen lifted both pincers in the air, poised to unleash the sinister energy converging within.

“My dear devotee, allow me to grant you at the very least my—”

I understood what she meant. Things would not end well for us if that monster released its attack.

“Everyone, run! I’ll stop this...!” Seraphina yelled.

She wasn’t moving, let alone attempting to run. She’d realized she was the only thing standing between the white scorpion and the residential district just barely visible in the distance.

I should’ve known this would happen, that the day might come when I wouldn’t be able to protect my party from a wide-range attack like this on my own.

No, I can’t give up yet... Keep searching or you’ll never forgive yourself. Do whatever you can...!

I had one chance to block The Calamity’s attack and save Seraphina’s life. And

I went all in.

CHAPTER 4

The District Five Crucible

Part I: Calamity

“Aaaaaah!!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated REAR STANCE → Target: SERAPHINA

“Mr. Atobe...?!”

“Seraphina, let me be your shield, too...!”

“...Okay!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO acquired DEFENSE SUPPORT 2

Consumed 2 skill points

> SERAPHINA activated DEFENSE FORCE

> SERAPHINA activated AURA SHIELD

> ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 2 → Support Types: DEFENSE FORCE, AURA SHIELD

Defense Support 2: a skill that manifests my defensive abilities as a protective barrier to shield my friends from harm.

My capacity to defend myself lay somewhere on the lower end of the spectrum, but by placing my hand over Seraphina's, I could guarantee her defenses would cover me, too. And that meant...

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY activated STING RAY → Target: Indiscriminate, all directions

> STING RAY hit SERAPHINA

Reduced damage

Hellish laser beams shot out of the white scorpion's tail in every possible direction. Seraphina's shield and the replicate I used my new skill to create and expand combined forces and repelled the ray that came our way; it pushed Seraphina back with its overwhelming force as it refracted and dispersed into the air, but she held strong through it all.

"Ugh...!!"

"Seraphina, are you okay?!"

"Yes, are you...? Just how...?"

The laser beams had indiscriminately hit everything in their path, blasting open holes in the stone walls of those unlucky buildings that took their wrath head-on. The very structure of the town would get an unwanted remodeling if this kept up for too much longer.

"Atobe, Seraphina! Thank goodness you're both okay...!" cried Igarashi.

"This would've gone a lot differently if you hadn't made that call, Arihito... You honestly never cease to amaze me...," added Elitia.

Borrowing Seraphina's defensive abilities had given me the key to creating a protective barrier exponentially stronger than what I could activate with Defense Support 1. The protection she provided by raising her large shield, further expanded in range with Defense Force and buffed with Aura Shield, had fended off the searing beams.

"....."

"Mr. Atobe... As I feared, you've consumed too much magic..."

Taking Back Order was no longer an option since I'd acquired Defense Support 2. I had nothing left but the mana potion to replenish my magic, and there was a limit to how many times I could use it in a row.

I can still exchange vitality for magic with the Scholar's Ankh. But we can't afford to get too close to that monster with the Sting Ray threat hanging over us... What are we gonna do...?!

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY overheated

Initiated cooldown period until STING RAY can be reactivated

> ★THE CALAMITY activated ANNIHILATION ATTIRE → ★THE CALAMITY assumed close combat configuration

Area effect: Morale Deflation

The Calamity switched gears to protect itself in the aftermath of Sting Ray. The white, almost elegant armored plates covering its body blackened, and its pincers extended into pointed spears.

Theresia's injured and Suzuna's almost out of magic... Do we even stand a chance against this thing...?

“Arihito, take everyone and run! I’ll buy us some time!”

Elitia’s voice reverberated through the streets. She’d lost almost none of her vitality or magic, but I could not in good conscience go along with her plan.

“If we retreat, we retreat together! Elitia, don’t do anything rash—”

“I can’t bear to see anyone else get hurt!”

“Ellie!” cried Suzuna.

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated SONIC RAID

> ELITIA activated AIR RAID

> ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1

> ★THE CALAMITY attacked → Hit ELITIA

It was just an ordinary attack. The Calamity activated no additional skills, but its natural speed was enough to capture Elitia at full sprint. Red droplets splattered on the ground, spelling out just how deeply Elitia had committed to her charge.

“Aaaaaaaaahh!”

Elitia's blood initiated her Berserk mode and stained her eyes deep crimson; her Red Eye had activated. The moment I heard her bloodthirsty cry, I realized there was only one thing I could do.

"Elitia...I'll support you...!"

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> ELITIA activated BLOSSOM BLADE

> SCARLET DANCE increased offense and decreased defense

> 24 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

312 support damage

> ELITIA activated additional attack → 16 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

208 support damage

> ★THE CALAMITY activated IMMORTAL SOVEREIGN

Reduced damage by half

Gradually recovered vitality and magic

"GOHHH... OHHH...!!"

"Why...? Why isn't it working...?!" exclaimed Elitia, exasperated.

The Calamity endured all of Elitia's attacks without so much as flinching, though they had, in fact, caused real damage. The monster simply chose to heal itself afterward, and the slashes on its armored plates began fading. Elitia's Berserk-fueled attacks had broken us out of every crisis thus far, but even they failed to impose the slightest damper on The Calamity's movements.

"Elitia, Run! You need to fall back and reset!" I yelled.

"I'm not...done yet...!"

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY activated JAVELIN DIGGER

The Calamity dug its spear-shaped claws into the ground and plowed through the cobblestones, charging at Elitia. And yet, in spite of the bulldozer barreling toward her, Elitia showed no signs of giving up any ground.

“—!!”

◆Current Status◆

> THERESIA activated ACCEL DASH

> THERESIA activated ACTIVE STEALTH

That’s when an unexpected figure jumped into the fray: Theresa, still heavily wounded. She rammed into Elitia and pushed her out of the path of the incoming collision then immediately sprinted out of The Calamity’s way herself and activated her suit’s camouflage powers to blend into her surroundings. The Calamity paid no heed to the fact that there was no enemy in its path and continued barreling toward a nearby building, one that was sure to crumble upon contact. We had to make sure it didn’t get to that.

“D-don’t—don’t forget about me!!” Misaki shouted nervously. She stood safely out of the destructive path and had the perfect position to strike at The Calamity from the side.

Misaki’s got the Jester’s Wildcards on her... That’s right—!

“C’mon, cards, do your worst...!”

◆Current Status◆

> MISAki activated ICE JOKER → Angered ★THE CALAMITY

Inflicted ★THE CALAMITY with ice attribute weakness

Misaki’s steel card flashed a brilliant blue as she whipped it at the monster. Affixing the hollow rune to her deck had transformed them into a named weapon—the Jester’s Wildcards. Their special skill: angering whatever enemy they hit and carving out a new weak spot in its defenses.

“Stopp!!!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT (FREEZE) → Hit ★THE CALAMITY

Weak spot attack

★THE CALAMITY was FROZEN

“GOH... OHHHH...!!”

The Calamity’s legs immediately froze over, but even that wasn’t enough to kill the momentum it had built. The scorpion queen crashed into the building with an intensity so great, it shook the earth.

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY activated MIST STEAM → Unleashed wide-range superheated vapor attack

Reduced duration of FROZEN state

Extended cooldown period until STING RAY can be reactivated

> ★THE CALAMITY activated ABSOLUTE DOMINION → Will conduct preemptive strike against any enemies within a given radius

The Calamity started unleashing steam from every crevice in its body in an attempt to melt the ice that had stuck; the move assured we wouldn’t have to worry about a shortened cooldown period, but I had no doubt the queen would start attacking once again in no time. My bullets hadn’t frozen its lance-like arms, and anyone who got close enough would be guaranteed to suffer under their preemptive blows.

The Scholar’s Ankh is replenishing a little of my magic every time Recovery Support activates...but it hasn’t started converting any of my vitality to magic yet. What should we do next...?

“I—I have to do this myself...!”

“Ellie, we got this far as a team! There’d be no point if we don’t stay together... So please...!”

Suzuna’s pleas reached Elitia just as she was about to begin another round of

attacks against The Calamity.

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA's RED EYE was lifted

Red Eye, which consumed both vitality and magic for its entire duration, finally deactivated, and the red flames in her gaze gave way to its usual lucid luster. But she was still in Berserk mode, and it was only a matter of time before she lost the strength to control her impulses.

This monster will burn through ice attacks so quickly... And if that Immortal Sovereign move can slowly take this thing all the way back up to full vitality... then we don't have any moves to defeat it on our own.

The word *retreat* flashed through my head. No one asked us to take down the Named Monster. But I knew the moment we pulled back, nothing would stand between The Calamity and the devastation its name promised to wreak upon the city. Our mission was to stall this beast as long as we could—however.

“Mr. Atobe, reinforcements are coming in from the west... They're saying we should keep proceeding due east!”

The latest orders flashed on Seraphina's license. The next moment, a massive, spear-shaped something came racing toward us from the west: a vehicle equipped with a battering ram. Two enormous, armor-plated horses pulled the ram between them with a familiar figure holding the reins: Khosrow. Seated at his side were Kozelka and one more woman dressed in a military uniform with a beret covering her violet hair; I deduced she must be another member of the Guild Savior forces.

“I hate to ask this, Atobe...but we need ya to lead this asshole into one of those corridors! We'll follow right behind and cut off its exit with this battering ram!”

“Khosrow, they're exhausted from battle. We can take over from here—”

“No can do, Third-Class Captain. A quick hop, skip, and a jump over our car and we'll lose the beast. But I'd bet anything it won't be able to resist going after Atobe and his group following that intense fight...”

“Third-Class Captain Kozelka, we can assure they will not be driven to the very end of the corridor if we utilize the equipment installed at the far back. Allow me to operate and time the firing of our weapon. It’s the very reason I have accompanied you on this mission.”

“Ms. Nayuta...,” began Kozelka. “Understood, please proceed accordingly. Mr. Atobe, you hear that?!”

“Yes, I did! But about this corridor—”

The Calamity turned its attention toward Khosrow and the two ladies. I shuddered violently at the thought of what could’ve happened if its Sting Ray had been active.

“Mr. Atobe, the buildings in this vicinity have been positioned to form a corridor between them... Lead the monster to the end of the corridor, and we can send it to the specialized weapon we have installed in the city!” explained Kozelka.

“That we can do!”

I had a few ideas. One was to leave the job with our fighters who excelled at drawing and running from enemy fire, but after seeing how dizzyingly fast The Calamity could run, I knew it would be too much to ask of Igarashi or anybody else in the vanguard.

Then we make a run for it together... That’s right, we’ve done this before...

Back in our battle against the Paradox Beetle, I used Rearguard General and brought up the rear to ensure the skill would strengthen all my other capabilities.

“This is no escape; it is a charge toward victory. Master, do you require my aid?” I heard Alphecca say. It was a promising option; with her speed on our side, we might manage to outpace The Calamity. No one could hope to outrun the Sting Ray’s beams that raced along at the speed of light, however. It looked like they could track their targets to some extent as well, meaning we’d have to do more than dodge their trajectory to truly evade them.

“Seraphina, will you lend me your shield once more? I’m afraid it’ll try to attack us again as we run. If that time comes...”

Seraphina nodded before I could finish. I knew I was asking for the moon and had a feeling I wasn't doing a great job of hiding it behind my terrible poker face, but she never wavered.

"It is yours to use for however long it can serve you. That is precisely why I am here."

I nodded back. Theresia dropped her camouflage and appeared at my side; she was ready to fight, too.

"Arihito, you're not gonna try and say I should find my own way out of this mess, are you?" Misaki asked coyly.

"Ellie will be fine, Arihito. I'll be with her at all times," added Suzuna.

Elitia was in no state to say anything, but I knew she would never defy us.

"All right... Listen up, we're going to be riding over capacity, but I want you guys to jump on Alphecca. Seraphina and I will catch a ride on Cion and run right behind you."

"...Atobe..."

"It'll be okay, Igarashi. There's no time... Let's defeat that Named Monster and end this stampede once and for all."

"In the name of mine Hidden God Ariadne, we shall lead her beloved devotee. We are Alphecca...the incarnation of Arianrhod."

Alphecca materialized, let the others board her chariot, and was off, racing full speed toward the corridor. Seraphina and I also took our spots on Cion's back. We had to sit awkwardly facing her rear in order to protect the group should The Calamity strike out again, but the discomfort lasted only a second. Soon enough, I felt right at home and completely balanced.

◆Current Status◆

> SERAPHINA used WOLF RIDER

"This is Wolf Rider, a skill to use when riding a guard dog into battle."

"I see... Thanks, Cion. Can you show me how fast you can go?"

“Bow!”

“Arihitooo! Kozelka’s team’s gaining on us!” shouted Misaki.

“Okay... Let’s go, guys!”

Alphecca shot off, Cion hot on her wheels. The moment Seraphina, who sat in front of me, saw the ice burst off The Calamity’s legs, she let out a cry so sharp, it pierced through my soul:

“The Calamity... Eyes on me!”

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY’s FROZEN status was lifted

> SERAPHINA activated PROVOKE → ★THE CALAMITY’s hostility toward SERAPHINA increased

“GOHHH... OHHH...!”

The Calamity raised its pincers and furiously set off after us. It caught up to Cion in a flash and got so close, we could almost touch it.

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY attacked → CION dodged

> ★THE CALAMITY attacked → CION dodged

Every time the monster brought those spears down to attack, Cion leaped with everything she had and dodged their reach by a hair. The lances smashed into the cobblestone street and sent the stones flying in their wake. In no time at all, The Calamity managed to close the gap between it and Cion once more and unleash yet another relentless attack.

“Cion!” Igarashi screamed.

I whipped my head around and realized why she was yelling the second I saw what awaited Cion up ahead. The corridor was about to send us down a right-angled turn. We’d have to lose speed to clear that corner. The Calamity must’ve figured it would be the perfect moment to strike and lowered its pincers in anticipation.

I couldn't use my Morale Discharge since I hadn't taken any damage yet. I started to think we had no choice but to combine Defense Support 2 and Seraphina's shield to deflect, when—

“O valiant wolf, take mine hand as we fly over this battlefield!”

◆Current Status◆

> ALPHECCA activated BANISH BURST → Speed increased and broke through limit

Added FLOATING SPECTER

> CION activated WOLF RUSH → Accelerated to match ALPHECCA's speed

> KYOUKA's WOLF PACK activated reciprocal effect → CION's speed increased

“Awooooo!” Cion howled loudly.

I felt a sudden jolt as she picked up just enough speed to narrowly evade The Calamity's arms. Cion turned the corner and sprinted even faster down the street. The others chasing the monster in the battering ram vehicle made it safely past the corner, too. We had the enemy sandwiched in on both sides, but we needed to keep pressing on.

“I—I see another super-sharp corner coming up...!” yelled Misaki. “You sure this thing's not gonna send us down a dead end...?!”

“Do not fear! We have a specialist riding in the vehicle behind us who can activate the special interceptor!”

If only we can keep this up, then maybe...

But as soon the thought crossed my mind, I knew it was too good to be true.

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY can now activate STING RAY

Luminescent energy once again began surging down The Calamity's body and into its nine stingers.

“Mr. Atobe!”

“Seraphina, we *will* stop that beam. Please, lend me your shield once more.”

Seraphina turned around and looked me straight in the eye. Without a word, she took my hand and placed it over her own that gripped her shield.

“Your wish to protect all you hold dear is now mine as well. This is the feeling you inspire in me...!”

“GOHHH... OHHHH!”

The scorpion queen belted out a deafening roar—but it was no longer the only queen in town. Alphecca had appeared, adorned with her crown of thorns.

Part II: The Interceptor

We turned another sharp corner, only to find a brick wall marking a very dead end, just as Misaki had suspected. That meant the secret weapon must be hidden somewhere around here.

"I entrust my safety to you, Master," said Alphecca.

"And now, once more...together with our Hidden God, we shall fortify your almighty shield...!" added Murakumo.

Blinding beams exploded out from the nine tips of The Calamity's stingers. In that split second, I could have sworn I caught a glimpse of a young woman, her head bowed in prayer deep within the Sanctuary of that fateful labyrinth.

"Just try and get past me...!"

The Calamity had its sights set not on Alphecca or Seraphina. It had recognized a single person as its true threat then focused every modicum of malice gathering at the ends of its nine stingers on that one target: me.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated REARGUARD GENERAL → Stats improved based on current number of party members

> ★THE CALAMITY activated STING RAY → Target: All lasers on ARIHITO

The laser beams barreled straight toward me and cut in from the sides. I was surrounded, robbed of all possible avenues of escape.

"My dear devotee. While I admonish your recklessness...I take pride in your valiant courage."

I knew all my friends were praying we'd make it through this in one piece. Their hopes ran through me and bolstered the shield Seraphina and I had joined forces to create.

"Haaaaaaaaaah!"

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO requested temporary aid from ARIADNE → Target: ARIHITO
- > ARIADNE activated GUARD VARIANT
- > SERAPHINA activated DEFENSE FORCE
- > SERAPHINA activated AURA SHIELD
- > ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 2 → Support Types: DEFENSE FORCE, AURA SHIELD
- > REARGUARD GENERAL strengthened AURA SHIELD → Converted to AURA SCUTUM

I activated Rearguard General and supported the weight of Seraphina's shield with her. Then, drawing once more from her skills, I used Defense Support 2 to forge an invisible protective barrier. All nine laser beams The Calamity sent surging toward us bore straight down into the barrier—but then.

◆Current Status ◆

- > ARIHITO and SERAPHINA deflected 9 laser beams
- > AURA SCUTUM strengthened reflected attack

Every single one of the beams ricocheted off my Defense Support 2 protective barrier without leaving so much as a dent—and headed straight back toward The Calamity as it rushed madly toward us.

“GYOHHHH! ...OHHH!!”

The deflected beams hit their maker with even greater force than they'd had to start and pierced through the monster's near-impenetrable armor, forcing The Calamity to give up real speed for the first time yet.

“Both of you, brace yourselves for impact!”

Kozelka called out to the two huge horses pulling the battering ram vehicle as it barreled into The Calamity; the monster initially held its ground as the horses hurled themselves at it, but it stumbled forward after additional rounds of attack. Just then:

“Captain Kozelka...do it now!”

“Khosrow!”

“You got it, Cap!”

Khosrow hurled Kozelka through the air, literally—she shot forward like a speeding bullet, briefly landed on the wall to the right of The Calamity, and with lightning-fast swiftness, propelled herself all the way up to reach a lever positioned around three stories above the ground.

“Fall to your doom!”

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY fell into trap door

The instant The Calamity set foot on a strip of the street we’d passed just a moment before without issue, the cobblestones beneath its feet caved under its weight and went crumbling down with the monster into the gaping hole. Then:

“Fire!”

◆Current Status◆

> NAYUTA used ACTIVATE TRAP → Fired MAGICAL BEAST BINDING CANNON

> 6 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

Chains failed to capture ★THE CALAMITY

“GOHHH... OHHHH!!”

“Shit, it’s not enough! Nayuta, fire the other cannon!”

“...Activate Trap isn’t meant for one person to use in such quick succession...”

“You sayin’ you can’t do it...? Well, we better do somethin’, or that cockroach’s gonna bolt!”

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY activated HOMING NEEDLE → Target: KOZELKA

> KOZELKA activated SHADOW STEP

> KOZELKA dodged HOMING NEEDLE

★THE CALAMITY resisted Charm

“Urgh!”

There was another lever on the opposite side of the street. Kozelka tried to jump over to release it, but The Calamity refused to let her go that easily and struck out from the bottom of the pit.

Elitia and Cion are the only ones in my party who can get that high in a single bound... Wait, no. Maybe that's not what matters here...

I'd seen the skills Nayuta and Kozelka had used in action before.

That's right—Theresia had both those skills. These may be incredibly high-ranking Guild Savors, but at the end of the day, they were just putting skills they already knew to good use. Before I could even say anything, Theresia hopped off Alphecca's chariot, walked over to the wall to the left of The Calamity, and gazed upward. She was in no condition to fight, but she stood tall on her own two feet.

She's always been like that. Theresia has never once backed down from an enemy, no matter how strong or terrifying... None of us has. That's exactly what's brought us this far...!

Theresia knew Nayuta had used Activate Trap. She didn't need me or my license to tell her that. I felt a wave of pride come over me for choosing her as my first-ever party member in the Labyrinth Country.

“Theresia.”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated REAR STANCE → Target: THERESIA

“I'll support you!”

“.....!”

◆Current Status◆

> THERESIA activated ACTIVATE TRAP → Fired MAGICAL BEAST BINDING CANNON

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: BLADE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

Insufficient magic

> ★SCHOLAR'S ANKH activated → Converted vitality into magic

“Stoppppppp!”

Theresia’s skill fired the weapon built into the corridor. Huge spears trailed by strings of steel chains fired out one after the other and drove down onto The Calamity.

“I may not have the power to expend my master’s life force...but woe unto those who discount the Stellar Sword!”

◆Current Status◆

> 6 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

Chains captured ★THE CALAMITY

Partially destroyed armor

BLADE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH activated 6 times

I heard Murakumo’s war cry just before the six spears pierced through The Calamity’s armor. Murakumo added to the onslaught and struck the monster furiously with her Blade of Heaven and Earth.

“GYOHHHH! ...OHHH!!”

The tenor of the monster’s cry took a marked turn—we were finally doing some real damage. Cracks began to creep over the once impenetrable armor from wherever the spears and the Blade of Heaven and Earth had met their marks.

“Mr. Atobe!” yelled Kozelka. I had to hand it to her; even amid all the chaos, she never lost her dutiful concern for others.

“.....!”

“I’ll be okay... I’ve still got one more trick up my sleeve... Ariadne!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIADNE converted ARIHITO’s Devotion into magic

““Hiiiiyaaaaah!!””

Elitia and Igarashi leaped into the fray with Melissa following close behind. We had The Calamity completely bound, but it still tried putting up a final fight. This time, however, we knew its nine tails wouldn’t be able to summon magical energy again so soon after activating Sting Ray.

“Cooperation Support...Double Fire!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated OUTSIDE ASSIST

> ARIHITO activated COOPERATION SUPPORT 1 and ATTACK SUPPORT 2 →
Support Type: FORCE SHOT (FREEZE)

> KYOUKA activated DOUBLE ATTACK 2 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

Combined attack stage 1

> KOZELKA activated SWORD RAIN → 12 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

Combined attack stage 2

> NAYUTA activated DANCING WHIP → 8 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

Combined attack stage 3

> MELISSA activated KNIFE ARTISTRY → Probability of partial destruction increased

> MELISSA activated LOP OFF → ★THE CALAMITY dropped materials

Combined attack stage 4

> KOTTO’S GAUNTLETS activated special effect → Unleashed additional
DOUBLE DOWN attack

“GYOH...OHHH!!”

The fierce blitz lasted only a matter of seconds and ended decisively with one final charge by none other than the strongest attacker on our team: Elitia. Her eyes burned red as she raised her scarlet sword overhead and chanted:

“Icy flowers, freeze over and scatter. *Blossom Blade!*”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated RED EYE → Increased attack and mobility

Initiated magic consumption

> ELITIA activated BLOSSOM BLADE

> SCARLET DANCE increased offense and decreased defense

> 24 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

Combined attack stage 5

> ELITIA activated additional attack → 6 stages hit ★THE CALAMITY

> Combined attack LOP, BLOSSOM, FIERCE DANCE, EARLY SUMMER RAIN →
Partially destroyed additional areas of ★THE CALAMITY's armor

> Broke through ATTACK SUPPORT 2 limit

FORCE SHOT (FREEZE) activated 54 times

Weak spot attack

Elitia unleashed a deluge of strikes that rained down upon the behemoth scorpion like petals in a storm. Their ice attribute snaked in through the cracks in The Calamity's damaged armor, growing in strength and plunging the surrounding air into arctic temperatures as they expanded.

“...GYOH...OH...”

The Calamity flailed as the ice ravaged its body. Slowly but surely, the scorpion queen was trapped in a frozen prison and could no longer move.

◆Current Status◆

> ★THE CALAMITY progressed to third-degree Freeze

Fell into FROZEN PRISON state

> FROZEN PRISON state rendered ★THE CALAMITY incapable of fighting
→ Defeated 1 ★THE CALAMITY

> All DEATH STALKERS under ★THE CALAMITY's command lost the will to fight

The far-off clamor of battle and destruction instantaneously died out.

“.....”

Theresia looked over at me. Recovery Support had activated the entire time she stood in front of me, and her wounds were already looking a little less severe.

“Yeah... It's over. We won...”

“Arihito!! ...Ahhh, I thought this time we were goners for suuuure!” Misaki exclaimed as she dove straight in for a hug before anyone else could even get close. There wasn't a shadow of a doubt in my mind that Misaki had cracked the door with her Jester's Wildcards and given us the opening we needed to defeat The Calamity. I decided that, just this once, I'd let her cling to me as long as she liked.

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA's BERSERK and RED EYE have terminated with the end of combat

> Elitia's stats were temporarily reduced

“.....!”

“Ellie!”

“...Great job. You really are crazy strong.”

Igarashi and Melissa raced over to Elitia and caught her just as she was about to lose her balance.

“...You're all...so...hurt...”

“Ellie...?” Suzuna went over to check on Elitia, but Theresia cut in before she

could get there.

“...Theresia...”

“.....”

Theresia reached out and patted Elitia’s shoulder a few times. Elitia placed her trembling hand over Theresia’s and held it tightly, then said:

“I...I’m nowhere near as strong as you. You’re always right there by Arihito’s side, protecting him, and us...”

Theresia said nothing. The little we could see of her face beneath the mask betrayed no expression. But I knew she cared for Elitia. As if to prove it, she took Elitia’s hand between both of hers and squeezed it back in return.

“...Snff...hic...”

Elitia buried her face in those hands and wept. We’d won, and all lived to tell the tale. Only this time, we had the battle scars to prove it. We had skipped over District Six and come directly to District Five. The Guild Savors and the weapon they’d set up in the foundations of the city helped us bring the monster to its knees, but The Calamity had destroyed the walls and streets of the corridor as it fell into the pit, ensuring it could never be used again.

“Arihito, it dropped a box!”

I took that to mean we really had defeated the scorpion, even if it was just suspended in ice. A small Black Box lay on the ground close to the lip of the pit. Misaki picked it up and brought it over.

“That’s an amazing find, but we didn’t bring this one down on our own. Let’s talk it over with Kozelka and her team and decide what to do.”

“You betcha! Oh, looks like they’re comin’ over right now.”

Khosrow hopped off the battering ram as Kozelka and their third companion—a woman called Nayuta, according to my license—walked over to meet us.

“Mr. Atobe, we must proceed to exterminate the remaining Death Stalkers. You and your team did us a great service. That said, I imagine you must all be exhausted.”

“My name is Nayuta Houjou. I’m a Third-Class Dragon Captain assigned to the District Five Guild Saviors regimen. Allow me to escort you through the city to a safer location in order to avoid any active battle sites.”

“Thank you, that would be a tremendous help,” I said. “I’d like to keep assisting with the mission, but I can’t deny that we’re all quite spent...”

Her introduction complete, Nayuta cast a scrutinizing eye at Theresia. She must have realized Theresia had used a skill they shared.

“I alone could not have operated both of those weapons at once... We would never have subdued The Calamity without this young woman’s assistance. You have my most sincere thanks.”

“I’m sure Theresia is thrilled to hear you say so. She’s a valiant Seeker; I’m very proud to call her my friend.”

Nayuta nodded and held out her right hand. I shook it, and a warm smile spread across her face. She looked surprisingly mature for someone I felt had to be younger than me.

“...Ms. Elitia, that sword of yours should only be used once all the proper conditions have been met. It’s a wonder you so much as contend with its power at your level... To wield it to such devastating effect requires an exceptionally rare level of mastery.”

“...But...it’s all I have...”

“Ellie knows what she’s doing. She’s saved us time and again with this sword... It may be a dreadful weapon, but she has it under control...!”

I didn’t believe Elitia was only “contending” with the power of her sword. Suzuna felt exactly the same and told Kozelka so in no uncertain terms. Kozelka drew her hand up to the hilt of her own sword and appeared to consider something for a moment, then she bowed her head toward Elitia and said:

“I apologize; I should not have admonished you based on my own assumptions. You’ve all made it thus far by vanquishing your foes as we witnessed mere moments ago. And once again, your contributions here today secured victory against The Calamity.”

“This here Named Monster’s frozen to the bone... What’s it gonna be?” asked Khosrow. “Doubt it’d manage to get too far even if the ice did melt, but you won’t have to worry about that with it in this Frozen Prison status.”

“We didn’t defeat it on our own; we had your help and used the interceptor, too. I wanted to ask your thoughts about how to share the loot, this box here included,” I replied. We’d harvest a real bounty from The Calamity, frozen as it was, not to mention the Black Box. At least that’s what I’d thought, but Kozelka simply shook her head.

And then, she did something I almost never saw her do: She smiled. I hadn’t expected her to have such a gentle side. It lasted only for a second, though, and the piercing gaze I’d grown accustomed to soon returned to her eyes.

“You have accomplished a great feat mere hours after stepping foot in District Five. Not only that, you exceeded all the precedents set by any Advanced Seekers before you. I hope you take due pride in that. That’s what I intend to do myself, with your permission.”

“I haven’t seen one of those Black Boxes in ages, and I gotta tell ya, it’s givin’ me quite the rush. But it’s all yours. And don’t be shy; take all the materials you want.”

“...Sure, we’ll take them,” said Melissa. “I get the feeling this one monster’s gonna fill up my entire Repository.”

She looked to me for permission, but there seemed to be no need for reserve; Kozelka had nodded, and Khosrow was giving us a big thumbs-up. I signaled it was okay, and Melissa pressed the Repository key against the frozen behemoth, teleporting it away.

“If defeating The Calamity weakened all the remaining Death Stalkers, your party will be awarded a predetermined amount of additional contribution points toward the monsters other Seekers eliminate as well,” Kozelka explained. “Please be aware these will only be calculated after all the fighting has ceased... If you’ll excuse us. Khosrow, it’s time we took our leave.”

“Roger that. Atobe, let’s grab a drink one of these days. I’ve got a feeling I’m gonna like shootin’ the you-know-what with you,” said Khosrow in parting, then together with Kozelka, he climbed aboard the battering ram vehicle. He

maneuvered it through a quick U-turn and went speeding out the way they'd come.

"Master, I shall transport you all to safety. O valiant wolf, do you have strength in you yet to carry your companions?"

"Bow!"

"Great job earlier, Cion. You really helped us out back there."

Cion sat in anticipation as I walked over to her. Igarashi joined me and started petting her. I decided it'd be best to leave Igarashi and Seraphina with Cion. Worst-case scenario, Seraphina would be able to deflect any oncoming attacks with her shield.

"Now then, Mr. Atobe...I've set your license to track my location. I'll guide you through the city, so please follow my lead," Nayuta told me. "Hah!"

◆Current Status◆

> NAYUTA activated ROPE ACTION

Nayuta cracked the taloned whip she had hung around her waist and leaped into action. Over and over again, she threw the whip ahead to propel her forward, the picture of a circus acrobat alight in midair.

"Y'know, I kinda figured she might've been some sorta performer after I saw the whip, but...what do you think?" asked Misaki.

"Whips, huh...?" mused Igarashi. "I guess you do see lion tamers using them in their shows."

"I've only met Captain Nayuta once before, but I believe she did, in fact, belong to a circus troupe pre-reincarnation. Excellent deduction, Ms. Misaki," said Seraphina.

We set off after Nayuta as we chatted. Theresia decided all on her own to sit on my lap; I didn't have a problem with that in itself since she needed my Recovery Support, but it was a little awkward, given how badly her suit had been damaged. A huge gash in the fabric had left her shoulder completely exposed.

“.....”

Perhaps unaware of the state she was in, Theresia offhandedly turned around to face me. I wondered whether we could get her Hide and Seek repaired—or at least that’s what I tried focusing on to get my mind off how dangerously close her body suit was coming to revealing something I definitely should not be looking at.

“I-it’s best if you sit still. I know this may be a bit too warm, but just bear with me...”

I draped my jacket over her shoulders, kicking myself for not thinking of this sooner.

“.....”

“Hee-hee... You’re really swimming in Atobe’s jacket, Theresia.”

“You’re one to talk, Kyouka. I wish you’d put something over that suuuper racy look you’ve got going for you,” teased Misaki.

“W-well...there’s not much point getting self-conscious about that now...,” Igarashi protested.

“Arihito, do you think we can get Theresia’s clothing mended?” Suzuna asked with concern. As Alphecca began picking up speed, I wondered if we could find a professional in District Five to do it for us—but that’s when I got a message on my license from Madoka back at the Guild Savior base.

Dear Arihito, one of the Guild Savors just let me know you all made it out okay. I’m so relieved. I also heard Theresia was injured. How is she doing?

Kozelka must have written to Madoka on her way to the next site. I mentally thanked her for thinking ahead and opened the next message:

We’ve officially been granted leave to stay in District Five for a while thanks to all your great contributions in battle. This means we can ask merchants from other districts to come here, too.

In that case, I figured I’d better have Ceres and Steiner come up and meet us. Maybe I could ask Luca from Boutique Corleone to join us after he finished my suit, too. It would be great if Falma could help us out with the Black Box, but I

guessed that would depend on what was going on with her kids.

But more important—most important, actually—this permission to stay meant one thing.

“Elitia, let’s talk this over again later. It’s time we rescued your friend.”

“...All right. But for now...I just want you all to rest. Theresia, you really...”

“.....”

Elitia had lost her best friend, left the Brigade where she once belonged, and been dubbed the “Death Sword.” Yet, she never abandoned her quest to save Rury. And now we had all made it here. But it was still too soon for her to celebrate. For one thing, we didn’t know if we’d even be allowed to venture into the labyrinths of District Five. All labyrinths were ranked in stars, and we were supposed to raid only those with up to three.

“We’ve already defeated one Named Monster... I’m sure they’ll let us into the labyrinths here. We’ll get your friend back, Ellie. I promise.”

“Thank you, Kyouka.”

Elitia’s resolve was as strong as ever, but I could see her begin to waver. Perhaps all the memories of losing her friend and the desperate battle against The Calamity had planted seeds of doubt in her mind. If so, I wanted to say something—*anything*—that might comfort her. But as I looked at Elitia gazing off in the distance, not a single word came to mind.

CHAPTER 5

The Simian Lord's Malice

Part I: Vice Captain of the White Night Brigade

Nayuta led the way to a Healer clinic; an update on the status of the stampede response mission reached us while my friends received treatment there. Adeline came to deliver the news in person and met us in the lobby. She told us she'd provided backup support in defeating the remaining Death Stalkers.

"Commander Seraphina, I've come to provide the latest report! The stampede emanating from five-star labyrinth The Dead Sea Sands has been successfully quelled! As you may have guessed, the greatest contribution to the mission was provided by Mr. Ato—"

"A-Adeline, would you please keep your voice down a bit...? We all worked together to suppress the stampede."

"...M-my apologies. I was just too excited to share the good news..."

"Adeline, where are Third-Class Dragon Captain Kozelka and Dragon Sergeant Khosrow now?"

"They are currently conducting a sweep of the area with the main District Five Guild Saviors platoon. They instructed me to direct our guests to their lodgings as they will not return for some time yet. We have stand-alone accommodations reserved for Advanced Seekers; would these be all right with you, Mr. Atobe?"

"Yes, that would be a great help, thank you. Some of my friends aren't done with their treatment yet. Could you take us there after that?"

Theresia and Elitia both needed their wounds treated, but fortunately none was severe enough to leave a scar. The Healers had also helped restore Suzuna's magic, and she was already feeling much better.

"After you and your party defeated the Named Monster, Mr. Atobe, the rest of the Death Stalkers' attacks significantly weakened, and many Seekers residing in District Five turned out to help eliminate them," explained Adeline.

“All told, about five hundred Seekers contributed their efforts to the cause. However, I imagine the promise of maintaining their contribution points without having to step foot in a labyrinth inspired at least some of them into action; getting just one attack in would suffice for that.”

“I see... Those were some vicious monsters to contend with. I don’t blame anyone for sitting out that fight, even Seekers who’ve worked their way to District Five.”

“The Dead Sea Sands is a notoriously dangerous labyrinth. Death Stalkers are known to burrow into the sand and attack unsuspecting Seekers. I expect plenty of people who live here had never seen one before today. They’re hard to avoid if you stay long enough, though, given those yearly stampedes.”

Living in the Labyrinth Country meant accepting a certain level of risk that a stampede could break out at any moment. You weren’t required to join in the fight once it did, but it was always a good idea to prepare measures to protect yourself for when the time came. That was obviously a higher hurdle for support staff and artisans since they had fewer opportunities to maintain their levels or hone their battle skills. It’s one reason I believed every Seeker who was able should pitch in, though I knew you couldn’t force people. Everyone, ourselves included, ought to contribute however they could without pushing themselves too far outside their comfort zones.

“If I may be blunt... I can’t tell you how unprecedented it is for a party of Advanced Seekers to come out on top in terms of contributions during a stampede. I’ll bet the District Five Guild Savors headquarters is going crazy over this.”

“Y-you don’t say...”

“Oh... Don’t worry, that doesn’t mean they’re going to come to you with tons of extremely dangerous missions out of the blue or anything. In any event, a Seeker’s duty is to explore the labyrinths however they see fit.”

“Thank you, Adeline,” I said.

“Please, we should be thanking you... Now then, I’ll start on those arrangements with the apartment while we wait for the rest of your party. You are nine people in total, correct?”

We were nine strong for the moment since Seraphina had received special orders to join our group, ten if you counted Louisa. I was about to explain this to Adeline when I saw Madoka walking in with Ceres and Steiner.

“Arihito, what a relief you’re okay... Although I am worried about that Theresia girl. That must have been a mighty attack to have completely ruined her bodysuit.”

“I wish I could share my armor with her.”

“What sort of nonsense are you spouting? Your Living Armor is there to protect your— Oh, never mind. We came to do our part as professionals. Is there a rental workshop we could use?”

“Yes, there is an opening at a workshop near the apartment building. So, Mr. Atobe, what do you plan to do while you’re in the district?” Adeline asked.

“Actually, there’s a labyrinth we’d like to check out, time permitting. To be honest, that’s part of the reason we decided to accept the request to join this mission.”

“You certainly waste no time... B-but I do apologize, I’m not familiar enough with the relevant regulations to know if that kind of permission is something you could get so quickly after skipping a district to come here...”

I probably needed to ask Louisa to look into that for us. We had only so much time to wait, given the circumstances, and ideally I wanted to raid the labyrinth with the Simian Lord as quickly as we could get ourselves back in fighting form. But what if we weren’t allowed to access it unless we met some other conditions first? I didn’t think we should let our haste push us into blatantly defying orders. That said, I completely understood Elitia’s desire to get to her friend at the earliest possible moment; a real dilemma, to be sure, but now was not the time to lose our heads. Not now that we’d finally gotten all the way where we needed to be.

As our conversation went on, Theresia, Elitia, and Suzuna finished with their treatment and came out along with Igarashi, Misaki, and Melissa.

“Theresia, how are your injuries?” I asked.

“.....”

“I see... Glad to hear it. Don’t worry, Ceres and Steiner are gonna fix your suit up for us, okay?”

Theresia nodded and gently touched my jacket, which she had over her shoulders. Maybe she was trying to give it back—or at least that’s what I thought.

“.....”

“Hm? Theresia...?”

Theresia fixed her gaze on me. If that was her way of telling me she wanted to borrow it a little longer, that would be fine by me. It might be a little chilly in District Five for my taste, although I figured that was all the more reason to lend it to her. I wondered if she’d be fine with my jacket or if I should pick something else up for her in town.

“...Atobe, how about you let Theresia hold on to that for a little while?” suggested Igarashi.

“Ooh, is this what I think it is? Is our Akihito having trouble understanding the inner workings of Theresia’s heart again?”

“M-Misaki, watch yourself... You’ll embarrass her...,” said Suzuna.

“...I get Theresia a little better now. She doesn’t talk, but her body language says everything,” added Melissa.

“.....!”

Theresia’s lizard mask was definitely turning a bright shade of red—and that’s when it hit me. She knew she should give me back my jacket but also still wanted to keep it. The chill in the air must be part of that, but maybe in this case it also meant... *No, better stop there or I’ll be the next one to blush.*

“Theresia, don’t worry about the jacket...”

“.....!”

“I-it’s fine, calm down... You can give it back when we get to the apartment.”

“.....”

Theresia nodded. Maybe Misaki was right; I still had a lot to learn about

reading people.

Just then, a band of Seekers walked out from the treatment area and toward the lobby. A woman whose flaxen hair was woven into three braids appeared to be leading the group; every person in it wore matching white outer garments.

“.....!”

“Ellie, what’s wrong?” asked Suzuna. “Do—do you know them?”

Elitia’s eyes flew wide open when she caught sight of the white-clothed troupe. It wasn’t too hard to guess why; they must’ve belonged to the White Night Brigade. There were about fourteen of them, just enough for two parties. I couldn’t tell from appearances alone if any others had cursed weapons like the one Elitia was bound to.

“Elitia...are they from the White Night Brigade?” I asked her.

“...Yes. Those are the second and third parties... I’d bet anything they helped quell the stampede.”

“Honestly, that’s a little surprising...,” started Igarashi. “I didn’t expect them to do something like that. I guess I shouldn’t make assumptions.”

“Agnes, the leader of the second party... She doesn’t agree with everything the captain says. She has her own way of doing things.”

The leader of the White Night Brigade was none other than Elitia’s older brother. Seeing these members here meant he was also most likely somewhere in District Five, and yet, the Brigade’s first party had stayed out of the stampede entirely. Maybe they didn’t think the situation called for their assistance, or maybe they preferred not to get involved in the town’s defenses as a rule. Whatever the case may be, it was certainly surprising, as Igarashi had said, to learn a division of the Brigade had joined in the fight.

“...Let’s get out of here,” Elitia pleaded before I could ask her how we should respond to the Brigade. No surprise that her harried voice couldn’t hide all the worries at the forefront of her mind.

“O-okay...got it. Are you guys ready to go?”

“Oh, Arihito... Suzu’s still a bit pooped...”

“I’ll be fine, Misaki. Don’t worry about me, I’m... Ah—!”

The powerful combined effect of Pan’s Flute and the stagnation stone came at an extremely heavy cost in terms of magic. It seemed you’d need to really get some quality rest to recover once you bottomed out on magic, even if your license said you were all topped up. I held on to Suzuna to support her. She appeared to lose consciousness for a moment but immediately came to once more and smiled up at me a little sheepishly.

“I-I’m sorry... I always cause you nothing but trouble, Arihito...”

“No, I’m the one who should apologize. I wouldn’t have pushed you to use those skills if I’d known they’d drain you this badly. Let’s hold off until you’ve leveled up a bit more before we try using Pan’s Flute and the stagnation stone together again.”

“Okay... But please do let me use them if we really need to.”

Suzuna had played her flute and then activated Auto-Hit without much time to recover in between. I had no doubt she meant what she said and wouldn’t hesitate to put herself through such an exhaustive experience again for us if the need arose. In that case, I needed to find out how to increase her maximum magic capacity or come up with a way to reduce the toll this combo took on her.

“Bow!”

“Cion... I’m sorry, you must be exhausted after fighting so hard for us, and yet...”

Cion had been waiting patiently in a corner of the lobby but now walked over to us and scooped Suzuna up onto her back. She took great care not to sway as she walked out of concern for her charge, a gentle giant in every sense of the word.

Elitia broke into a tiny smile at the sight. She was worried about Suzuna, but I was pretty sure her mind was occupied with concern for her imprisoned friend. I wanted to believe our victory over The Calamity made picking a fight with the Simian Lord less of a reckless venture, but one look at Elitia was enough to tell me our next foe would prove even stronger than the last.

These thoughts ran through my head as I passed the Brigade. A few of the members turned to look at Elitia in bewilderment.

“Hold up, she made it back here *already*? Found some useful muscle? She better not kid herself and think any old ragtag team of idiots’ll be enough to save her ass out there.”

“Souga, they’re here because they earned the right to be. You’re in no position to assume we’re superior.”

“R-right... Sorry, Agnes. But should we tell the captain that Elitia’s back...?”

“I’ll handle it. Elitia...”

The woman her companion had addressed as Agnes called out to Elitia, who stopped for a brief moment, bowed her head slightly, and kept on walking. Our friends went after her to make sure she wasn’t alone and followed Adeline out of the Healer clinic. Soon enough, I was the only one left. I felt all the Brigade members’ eyes turn to me.

“I understand Elitia used to belong to your group. I’ve also heard the reasons for her departure,” I said.

“...I see. So Ellie’s still trying to save Rury, isn’t she?”

The way Agnes called Elitia by her nickname made it clear how much seeing her had tugged at her heartstrings. I no longer believed everybody in the Brigade had written Elitia off completely. This Agnes very clearly cared about her—and I didn’t want to stoop to the kind of cynicism I’d need to believe it was all for show.

“I have no right to say anything; I’m one of those guilty for abandoning Rury in her time of need. I’ll bet you despise us, too.”

There was only so much I could say without properly explaining my position to Agnes. And I knew I shouldn’t stay to talk with the Brigade for long without Elitia present. Nevertheless, there was one thing I had to tell them; they needed to know why we had come.

“Elitia told us about her friend, and I... No, we decided to help rescue her. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“...Is that...the only reason you’d risk your life in that labyrinth? The Guild Savors themselves say the Simian Lord is best left alone. If even they don’t recommend trying to take it on, why would you?”

“You also had your own reasons for risking your lives in that same labyrinth, with that same Simian Lord, didn’t you? It’s not for me to say if whatever you gained there was worth losing one of your own. But we’re making a different call... If Elitia believes Rury’s still alive, then we believe her. It doesn’t matter how much time has passed.”

“...I don’t know how the hell someone with that kinda devil-may-care, glass-half-full, rosy-posy take on life made it here, but I’m telling you now: Every single Seeker in District Five does whatever it takes to stay far, far away from the Simian Lord. Only those with a death wish would even *think* about trying anythin’,” said the man called Souga. He glared at me, the whites of his eyes giving him a menacing look. He bore a battle-ax on his broad, muscular back and had probably never skipped a day of strength training, but even he was urging us to reconsider.

“...What’s so dangerous about the Simian Lord? Would you mind telling me?”

Souga opened his mouth to respond, but Agnes cut him off.

“The Shining Simian Lord...sometimes also called the Satanic Simian, is believed to be the strongest, longest-living Named Monster in District Five. He and his underlings have built up a series of fortresses in a labyrinth called the Blazing Red Mansion that start on the second floor and extend as far down as it goes. He rules over this domain...an extraordinary trait among monsters. The devil incarnate.”

Now that wasn’t a title bestowed lightly. She was trying to tell me he was on an entirely different level than anything we’d seen thus far.

“...Y’all don’t stand a chance against him. You’re just gonna end up losin’ more people you care about. Not that I’m about to try and stop you if you’re so hell-bent on it,” said Souga, the concern in his words belying the aggressive image his short, spiky, black-and-gold-dyed hair and earrings lent him. I knew his warning was well intentioned, but I wouldn’t stand for the way he’d already decided our fates. We’d come here because we had faith; we believed that Rury

was alive and that we would save her.

“I’m glad I got the chance to talk with you. I’d thought most people in the Brigade stood ready to abandon their friends at any moment, but I’m relieved to hear you don’t all feel that way. I was worried we might at some point have to face off against any group who’d go that far to get their hands on what they wanted... We’ve run into similar situations in the past.”

“Don’t get all touchy-feely on me just yet. We’re workin’ toward our own goals, and I’m willing to risk it all for that, even if that means one day they’d need to leave me behind. I hadn’t forgotten about that girl. I prolly would’ve pretty soon if I hadn’t run into Elitia, but it is what it is.”

“Souga, you’re getting too worked up. I apologize for his behavior. I’m sorry I didn’t ask sooner, but your name is...?”

“Arihito. Arihito Atobe.”

“Arihito Atobe... I’m Agnes Fille, vice captain of the White Night Brigade. We’ll be moving up to the next district soon, but if possible, I’d like to see Elitia and...” She started to say *talk to her* but stopped when she saw the looks on her companions’ faces.

“We’ll take care of her,” I said. “To be fair, she’s been the one taking care of us so far. But being in a party is all about give-and-take.”

“Arihito, you’re gonna get lost if you don’t keep uppp!” yelled Misaki as she doubled back to get me. I raised a hand to let her know I was on my way and turned to leave.

“...If you insist on raiding the Blazing Red Mansion, you’d best get all the intel you can. This map covers all the land we explored when we went there... Will you take it?”

“H-hey, Agnes, why’d you do that much for—?”

“Because I want to. I’m not asking your permission... I just...”

You never could tell what kind of people you’d find, even in the Brigade. Agnes pulled out her license and sent me a map, which cut off at some point in the middle of the second floor.

“Thank you very much. There’s one more thing I wanted to tell you... We ran into Shirone. She committed crimes with heavy karmic penalties and is now in a District Seven prison.”

“—! Shirone... What did she do to Elitia...?”

“I still don’t know what she had in mind, but she tried to lure me away from my party... If the Brigade drove her to do all that, then I think one day I’ll have to talk to your captain, face-to-face.”

I was expecting they’d sneer at me for daring to talk so big when I was still such a small fry, but no one so much as batted an eye. Souga, however, did look a little lost for words.

“...Looks like I jumped the gun a bit. Shouldn’t have called y’all a ragtag team of idiots. My bad. But talk is cheap. If you’re gonna do something, you better be damn sure you’ve got what it takes. And you need power.”

“I couldn’t agree more. We do need power, something that Elitia’s sword has provided us time and time again. I’m always thinking of how we can get even stronger.”

“Shit... *Tch*. Looks like Elitia won the friggin’ lottery.”

I could’ve sworn he also muttered, “At least the guy’s got a spine,” after which a woman in the group slapped him hard on the back.

“Ow...! What the hell?!”

“Quit your dopey mumbling. I kept quiet while Vice Captain Agnes was around, but stop acting like you speak for the rest of us.”

“Shut up. The captain’s been in a crappy mood lately. Just let me have this.”

A few of the other second party members bowed to me in parting and walked away. Each and every one of them was probably decked out in the highest-quality gear, but in the end they were still Seekers, just like us. And now I knew they weren’t outlaws bent on following nobody’s rules but their own. I wondered what could have stopped such a formidable group from going back for Rury. Maybe the Simian Lord’s reputation as the “devil incarnate” had something to do with it.

They had the numbers and the strength, but even they chose not to take down the Simian Lord and raid the labyrinth he reigned over. Would we have what it took? Or should we focus only on rescuing Rury and getting out of there? I needed to consider the possibility.

And if Rury was already— No, I wasn't gonna go there. She *was* alive. I had to plan everything around that.

What we needed more than anything was to stand up, look that menace straight in the eye, and strike back.

Part II: The Chef

District Five also had Upper, Middle, and Lower Guild divisions; it was the Middle Guild building we'd visited when we'd transported here from District Seven, and it was here we returned to meet up with Louisa once we'd left the Healer clinic. She'd obtained special permission as our personal caseworker to follow us to District Five and was waiting for us there.

The Middle Guild building—or the Forest Diner, as it was also called—doubled as a large dining hall. Restaurateurs had come from all over the district to serve hot meals to the people gathered beneath its roof, perhaps because they'd seen the damage the building had sustained in the stampede. But since we'd been officially designated Most Distinguished Seekers for our efforts in quelling the stampede, our guide took us past the bustling hall and showed us into a private room also reserved for meetings.

The Forest Diner seemed to be constructed from much sturdier materials than its counterpart in District Seven, but the interior design looked almost exactly the same. A table cut from a black, marble-like stone stood in the middle of the room; we all took our seats around it and presently a woman wearing what appeared to be chef's attire came out to greet us.

"My name is Maria Millers, and I am the Chef who will be taking care of you this evening. Thank you for all your efforts assisting with the stampede today," she said somewhat matter-of-factly, then bowed deeply before bringing in a wagon she'd left waiting in the hall. A rather large, dome-like metal lid concealed whatever dish lay beneath. I couldn't help but wonder exactly what she had in store for us.

"D-don't tell me... This isn't that scorpion thing we just defeated, is it...?" Misaki asked nervously. The thought sent a chill up Igarashi's spine, too. I liked to think I'd eat anything as long as it tasted all right, but even I might have trouble adding scorpion to my diet.

Maria said nothing and removed the metal lid to reveal: another dome, this

one made of something like clay.

“Might this be...a steamed rock salt brûlée?”

“Precisely. It’s a steamed dish liberally filled with District Five specialties, all locally sourced.”

Louisa had been spot on. The dome I thought was clay turned out to be rock salt. Maria cracked this open with a utensil and unveiled several bundles further wrapped in some sort of seaweed. She left the bundles intact and transferred one to each of our plates then bowed. It seemed we were free to dig in.

“A-are you sure it’s okay for us to have these...?” Igarashi asked. “This all looks so expensive...”

“.....”

“Ah! T-Theresia, try to be a bit more delicate...!”

Theresia could wait no longer and stabbed her knife into the seaweed wrapping to cut it open. The inside was stuffed with an abalone-type shellfish, meat, and vegetables. Theresia piled vegetables and the shellfish onto her fork and brought it to her mouth. The instant she gulped it down her pale throat, Theresia’s eyes flew open in surprise and locked on to the plate before her. At least I imagined they did, since I couldn’t see her eyes behind her mask.

“.....!”

Theresia turned toward me. I’d never seen her react this way before. She clearly had her own tastes when it came to food, but I couldn’t imagine how good the dish must be for her to rate it so highly.

“I-is it *that* good? All right, let’s dig in... Thank you for the meal.”

“Mm...! Mmmmm...?!”

“Wait, wait, this meat is outta control... It’s steamed in salt but it’s not toooo salty at all and tootally melts in your mouth...!”

“This is delicious... I can feel it warming up my whole body.”

Suzuna’s comment got me thinking. I looked at my license on a hunch and saw that her magic was recovering faster than it had been. Drinking the mana

potion came with side effects, but evidently, nutritious meals didn't have that problem. The cook must have taken Suzuna's condition into consideration when planning out this meal.

"I prepared this dish for its medicinal benefits after speaking with the Healers at the clinic. I hope you'll enjoy your time here this evening. Please call me whenever you're ready, and I'll bring in your next entrée."

"Thank you very much. This is incredibly good. I can't wait to try your other dishes, too."

"I'm pleased to hear it. I've brought some alcohol for the table, but do let me know if I can offer you any other beverages as well."

She had anticipated our every need and pampered us with first-rate service. I could've sworn there was a fine dining gem hidden somewhere in the Guild. Actually, this must've been it.

"S-sure pays to be a Most Distinguished Seeker... We didn't get *any* of this back in District Eight," noted Misaki.

"Apparently there's a limited number of cooks in each district... Maria's dishes are seriously incredible," added Igarashi.

"...Hope she can teach me."

Misaki and Igarashi marveled over the meal. The food seemed to have piqued even Melissa's interest and gotten her thinking about how she could use her cooking skills to learn the recipe. Homemade dinners brought great comfort, but every once in a while it was also nice to treat ourselves to such luxurious fare. Honestly, your body is your moneymaker in the Labyrinth Country, so we basically ate whatever ours craved.

Elitia had looked glum since we first sat down to eat. She realized Suzuna, who was sitting next to her, had begun to worry, so she took a few bites.

"...This is amazing. I guess there's still lots of cuisine I don't know about in this country."

"Ellie..."

"I'm fine... I just got lost in my thoughts a bit. But I know I can't get too far

ahead of myself.”

Elitia forced a smile, one all too clearly meant to alleviate our concerns. She’d seemed forlorn during the entire battle with The Calamity, but I couldn’t bring myself to encourage her with empty platitudes.

“Louisa, does it look like we’ll be allowed to enter the labyrinths here in District Five?”

“You’ll receive special contribution points for your work today as well as extra points for the impact that had on the stampede... However, even these two together will not suffice to grant you immediate access to a five-star labyrinth. You do, of course, have the right to submit a request for that permission, but I cannot guarantee it will be approved...”

The Guild’s laws had served us thus far, but they also restricted our options. I could certainly understand the Guild’s motives behind putting these prerequisites in place for the more challenging labyrinths as they probably served to reduce the number of Seekers who went missing.

“I understand it might be difficult to get access to a five-star labyrinth when we don’t even have clearance for four-star ones yet... Still, would it be possible to try and ask?”

“Yes, of course, and I intend to. Elitia has—that is, all of you have worked so hard to come here. No one can attest to that more than myself. However, I confess I do have one concern.”

“A concern...?”

Louisa’s eyes fell and landed on her cup filled with alcohol. That alone told me whatever it was she had to say did not come easily to her.

“The fact that you, your party, and Ms. Kozelka and Mr. Khosrow—both members of the District Seven Guild Saviors platoon—earned the most contribution points in this mission has gravely alarmed the District Five Guild Saviors platoon.”

“Huh? ...Wh-what the heck’s up with that? *They* called *us* here, and we worked our butts off for them...!”

“Have they by any chance...taken offense to a lower-ranked district’s unit garnering higher commendation?” I guessed, and Louisa nodded in affirmation. Seraphina said nothing on this, but her expression hardened and took on a new severity.

“As we speak, the Guild is considering whether to award you and your party another honorary title even more distinguished than Advanced Seeker,” she began. “The District Five Guild Savors headquarters would most likely process the change if it does go through... I expect Third-Class Captain Kozelka to inform us as soon as the matter is settled.”

“I see. We’ll be happy with any contribution points we can get.”

Everyone had their own sense of honor and pride, but I wanted to keep my nose out of those kinds of adversarial confrontations as much as possible—though maybe that sentiment was a bit out of place since we were, in fact, competing for contribution points.

“It’ll take a little time, but I will make sure to submit a request for at least temporary access to a five-star labyrinth.”

“I’d appreciate that. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll do our best to fulfill all the necessary requirements.”

“Glad we have that settled... We can pick this up again back at the apartment. Let’s try to enjoy this lovely meal they’ve prepared specially for us,” said Igarashi, and everyone nodded in agreement. Even Elitia smiled a little; everything looks a bit better when you’ve got some food in you.

After we ate the steamed salt rock dish, Maria brought out plates of grilled white-meat fish wrapped in a piecrust, along with soup, salad, and fruit, every single course more delectable than the last. I helped Theresia make her way through the dishes since she was still nursing her injured arm. Hopefully it would heal quickly.



All that remained after the main courses was dessert. We had three choices; one called “Mighty White Peach Mille-Feuille” caught my eye.

“Maria, is this one made with fruit that boosts your stats?”

“Yes. I made it specifically with your party in mind.”

“Then we’ve just *got* to go with that one, right? The menu says the other desserts are supposed to help with ‘calming sleep’ and, um...‘passion’?”

“P-passion might be a little too, um... I mean, I’ll bet it gives you a boost, but I have enough trouble staying asleep as it is...”

“...! Kyouka, we’re not supposed to mention that in front of Arihito...,” Suzuna cut in quickly.

“You’re having trouble sleeping, Igarashi? Maybe you should try this Calming Bavarian Custard.”

“N-no, I’m fine. I’ll take the added strength wherever I can get it... Honestly, Atobe, you don’t have to go butting into every little thing.”

I didn’t know how, but I’d upset her. I guess women do love their desserts, though. It wasn’t my place to choose for her.

“Louisa, you could probably use a little bump in your defenses, too, huh? I bet all those men leering at your lady lumps can get creeeeepy.”

“Wha—?! L-look, Misaki, I can’t exactly say I’m shocked, but you really shouldn’t talk like that...,” I chided her.

“I-it’s fine... I’ve learned to live with it. I’m the only one who suffers if I worry too much, so I simply wear whatever strikes my fancy.”

“...Yeah, I get it. I wish my armor’s design reflected the defense it provides me.”

Louisa and Igarashi sighed in unison. Someone chuckled at the sight—it was the chef, Maria, surprisingly enough.

“If I may, I’d recommend you ladies try the Passion Strudel. It’s infused with a lovely white wine.”

“Y-you don’t say... Then maybe it would help lull me to sleep...,” said Igarashi.

“All right, then I’ll have that, please.”

Louisa was sold with the promise of white wine and made her choice on the spot. The option tempted Igarashi as well, but she and Louisa agreed to split

their desserts, so she went with the Mighty White Peach Mille-Feuille instead. I didn't particularly dislike wine, but I wasn't exactly drawn to it, either. There probably wouldn't be too much alcohol in the strudel, whatever that might be, so the thought of Louisa having it didn't really worry me.

"Madoka, wanna take a walk on the adult side of dessert with me?" Misaki offered.

"Oh! ...U-um, no, I don't think I should have any alcohol yet, so I'll just order the Mille-Feuille."

"...I'm curious about this 'passionate' fruit, but I'll have the Mille-Feuille, too," said Melissa. "I want better defense."

"Bow!"

It looked like most of our battle-oriented members chose to go with the Mighty White Peach Mille-Feuille. It worked in mysterious ways, but we all saw the value in gaining even the tiniest bit of strength from something as simple as a meal.

"I've gotta remember to brush your teeth later so you don't get any cavities, Cion," I told her.

"We have what's called a mastic stick made for guard dogs. It should help if she chews it like gum," Maria suggested. She'd really thought of everything. Once she confirmed our orders, Maria briefly retired from the room.

Ceres and Steiner had been with us the entire dinner but seemed to feel a little out of place. After all, they were artisans, not Seekers. They'd kept relatively quiet—that is, until the alcohol started flowing and loosened their lips.

"Arihito, why don't you have that fine young lady make something out of the fruits you picked up? It'll save you time looking for an Herbalist, and she might have the know-how to enhance their effects."

"Yes, I'd like to ask if that might be possible later. I'd probably come back another day to work out the details."

"I'm basically swimming in defense as it is, so I went out on a limb and ordered

the wine dessert."

"Steiner can't really hold their liquor, but they do try to act like it when we come to places like these. What a sorry excuse for an apprentice."

"It's not like you're some expert, either, Master. I mean, should you even be drinking at all?"

"Gr! ...Why, you little... Don't you dare run your mouth and let slip anything Arihito doesn't need to hear..."

I decided to take this little back-and-forth as friendly banter showing how close they were. But what could those things I "didn't need to hear" be? Did Ceres have some kind of secret she wanted to keep hidden from me?

"Arihito, you must never pry regarding a lady's age or pedigree. Do you hear me, young man?"

"Y-yes..."

There was no way I could press her for more details after a warning like that. I could feel Igarashi's and Louisa's eyes bearing down hard on me, too, and decided I'd better hold my tongue, even though I knew Igarashi was younger than me, and I had a feeling Louisa, the picture of a lovely lady, was as well.

Part III: The District Five Commander

We met up just outside the Guild headquarters with Adeline, who'd eaten with her troop, and she took us to the apartment where we'd be staying. Along the way she filled us in on the latest news she'd heard from her troop mates about the stampede.

"That Named Monster draws its strength from the souls of other Death Stalkers. It's much like a queen bee. We may not have been able to stop it at all if it had sucked up any more souls. So in a way, the fact that the stampede broke out all over District Five at such an early stage and that so few Death Stalkers were destroyed before the main battle against The Calamity worked in our favor. Or at least that's what the guys in the analysis unit told me."

"Wow... I can't imagine this was the first time a monster like that instigated a stampede. What was the battle like last time?"

Adeline quickly pulled out a leather-bound notebook, almost as if she'd been expecting the question to come up. She'd apparently borrowed a report log from one of the District Five Guild Savors.

"Let's see... The last stampede occurred one year ago; the District Five commander at the time was gravely injured in battle, and it took three days for reinforcements to come from upper districts and suppress the outbreak. Someone had to take over for the District Five commander back then...so even though the stampede was quelled in one day this time around, I believe he feels some guilt for once again failing to lead his troops to victory."

"Three whole days...?" said Igarashi, astonished. "Did they try to fight the Named Monster without catching it in one of those traps? Maybe it scurried off like the other scorpions."

"But we took that sucker down in just a few hours... I totally get why these Guild Savors are so stunned," added Misaki.

Hearing all this gave me the first real sense of how deeply our actions must

have shaken the people around us, even if we had done only what needed to be done. What did the Guild Savors here think of us? I had a feeling that our standing with them might be key in gaining access to the Blazing Red Mansion, and that meant one thing: I'd better go formally introduce myself as soon as possible.

Just as the thought occurred to me, I noticed two Guild Savors walking toward us from the other end of the street steeped in the last rays of sunlight. One was Nayuta and the other a man with a somewhat dark and mysterious air to him.

"...! Third-Class Dragon Major Dylan... To what do we owe the honor...?" asked Seraphina.

"Th-this is a little unexpected, I mean... Have you come with a directive for us...?"

Seraphina and Adeline straightened to attention. The man in the military uniform walked right up to me; we were about the same height and maybe the same age, too.

"Huh... So you're the famous Atobe. I'd heard rumors of that one runaway rookie we're supposed to get every few decades, but turns out it was all spot-on. You got me good, I'll tell you that."

"N-nice to meet you... I take it you're familiar with us?"

"No need to be so stiff. Although I'm officially a Guild Savior, I started as a Seeker, too. Seriously, what a show. I had a feeling we were in for something good when Kozelka and Josh came up, but man."

He spoke frankly and didn't sound like a real military officer, rude as that might be to think. It was like nothing ever fazed him, for better or worse.

"Excuse me? Josh...?"

"Ohhh, you probably know him as Dragon Sergeant Khosrow. He's got it so his last name's what shows up on his license."

I'd heard Khosrow's name before and was actually trying to ask about their relationship, but the explanation I got felt a bit evasive. Was this man called

Dylan old friends with Kozelka and Khosrow? He seemed to know exactly what to expect from them and not in the way a commanding officer might understand his subordinates' abilities; it felt like they must have experience fighting together, side by side.

"Commander Dylan, I witnessed myself how Mr. Atobe and his party lured The Calamity into the trap corridor and assisted in its destruction... No. It would be truer to fact to say they led us to victory against the monster," Nayuta advised Dylan, who nodded in response. He then pulled out something from a pocket in his uniform and presented it to me.

"I owe you all an apology... There are some among my troops who're claiming you were out of line and racked up those contribution points by ignoring orders and taking matters into your own hands. Defeating a Named Monster constitutes a great service to our country; by all rights they should be honoring your accomplishments and thanking you for what you did, regardless of how you got there, and yet... I'm very sorry."

"I-it's fine. Nobody has said anything about it to us directly."

"Rightly so. Anyone who dared would be hearing from me. As the party responsible for the victory against The Calamity, you have all been designated the Most Distinguished Seekers...and now it's been decided you are to be awarded an honor even greater than your current Advanced Seekers: the title of All-Star Seekers. Will you accept it?"

◆Magistite Medallion◆

- > Certifies Guild-designated All-Star Seekers title
- > Increases maximum magic
- > Possesses a hidden power

"This..."

"It's an award medal. Its effects kick in when you just carry it around with you. Would you hold on to that for me? You can think of it as a good luck charm."

The medal was forged out of a metallic material I'd never seen before and had the Guild's crest engraved on its face. I decided to keep it in my pocket since it

was small enough to carry without issue.

“As I’m sure you’ve already heard, you’ve been granted exceptional leave to stay in District Five for the next seven days. I hope you understand this is a very special case. While you’ve clearly met the requirements to advance to District Six, you’re only here because of the request for your assistance. I know this is no way to talk to our Most Distinguished Seekers after you played such a big part in quelling the stampede, but rules are rules.”

We had seven days—one week to save Rury.

“We need access to a five-star labyrinth. I’ve already addressed the issue with our Guild caseworker, but is there any way you might have the authority to grant us that permission, Commander Dylan...?”

Dylan shook his head. Rules were rules: That had to be his position as a Guild Savior.

“You’ll be awarded special contribution points for your work in the stampede. If you add those to the other contribution points you’ve earned here, you should be able to get that clearance in a few days. You’ve already checked off the ‘defeat a Named Monster in District Five’ box, after all.”

“A few days...”

We didn’t have that kind of time. I wanted to gear up and go as soon as we were all rested, or now if we could. Commander Dylan had recognized what we were capable of. If only I could get him to approve our request, then—

“Arihito.”

I felt a tug on my sleeve and turned around to see Elitia shaking her head; she was warning me.

“You guys have what it takes. Your party’s got exceptionally rare strengths... Build on those and you’ll go as far as you could ever want. One day you’ll come to District Five through the proper channels and then keep on climbing at a speed no other party could dream to replicate.”

“...Right.”

“Mr. Atobe, Captain Kozelka and Sergeant Khosrow have also decided to

remain in the district for a few days. They have requested you contact them should you require their services at any point during that period.”

“I understand. Thank you for telling me.”

Commander Dylan and Nayuta walked off. Elitia released her hold on my sleeve and smiled. For once, it didn’t feel like she was putting on a brave face.

“I really appreciate what you tried to do, Arihito... But we can’t rush headlong into this. I say this because I’ve seen the Simian Lord with my own two eyes. If we go before we’re ready, I’ll lose someone again...so...”

“.....”

Theresa walked closer to Elitia as if to say, *Don’t worry*. But Elitia shook her head.

“There’s no point if we don’t all get out of this safely...so please. I think if we just go back through District Six and work on ourselves first, then...”

“No...we held our own, here in District Five, and even took down Death Stalkers, which leads me to believe we won’t be completely outmatched in these labyrinths. Maybe there are some three-star ones we can explore. We can always work on building up our levels there.”

“I agree; we’ll need contribution points earned in District Five anyway,” added Igarashi. “We’re so close. I’m sure we’d regret wasting these precious seven days in another district.”

Elitia hesitated for a while still, but eventually dropped her protests and nodded quietly. The turmoil she felt continued to rage within her, pitting her desire to rescue Rury against her fear of bringing harm to her friends. But she wasn’t the only one bearing those burdens.

“We should be able to get some good experience here. I’ll bet we’re probably the lowest-level party in the whole district... If we focus only on gaining one level, it’ll definitely be much more efficient to fight monsters here than in District Six.”

“...All right. I’ll try to see what intel I can scrounge up about good training labyrinths,” Elitia said, then turned to walk not toward our lodgings but back in

the direction of the bustling town.

“Elitia, you should really get some rest. You took a big hit in that last battle...” I called out to try and stop her. Elitia looked back but did not stop. She held out her hand to discourage her friends from following after her and, with a smile on her face, said:

“Even if I go back now, I’ll be too worked up to get any sleep. Don’t worry about me... I’ll be back before it gets too late.”

We had only so much time in the district, which meant we had only so much time to gather information. I knew I should respect her decision; still, I couldn’t help but worry as I watched her walk away.

“...Elitia has experience living in District Five before, I understand. She may know more about it than I do,” offered Adeline.

“That’s...true. Let’s head to the apartment and wait up for her.”

Elitia had already rounded the corner and disappeared from our sights. She felt the time crunch deeply—I understood that all too well. But it’s moments like these when you need to really keep your head on straight. I could only trust Elitia knew that, too.

Part IV: The Monster and Its Minions

I first came to District Five as part of the White Night Brigade's third party and raided a labyrinth called the Mystical Lakeshore with them. It was by no means the easiest labyrinth in the district, but at level 7, I was still able to join the fight and in doing so grew to level 8. Rury had been with me back then and used her healing skills to nurse my wounds.

"Ellie, I'm sorry. It's all my fault you got hurt so bad. If only I'd healed you quicker..."

"That's not true. It's my job to do whatever I can so one day people will count on my blade."

"I've always counted on you, ever since the day I met you. And I still do."

Rury activated a skill called Heal Wound and cured my injuries. It was truly magical: It sent a gentle wind whirling around my body, healing every hurt. Many reincarnates elect this kind of job when they arrive out of a desire to wield such magical powers. However, only a rare few are cut out for the position, and fewer still ever manage to become a Healer with the ability to conjure up these sorcerous effects, even among those whose jobs allow them to acquire recovery skills.

And yet, my brother, the captain, never once asked Rury to help him. I couldn't understand why. He openly proclaimed a Healer was a bounty for the Brigade but always turned to potions or other remedies whenever he found himself in need of the exact assistance Rury could provide.

I lost the ability to read my brother after he changed. We hadn't exactly been very close in our past lives, but he'd never been the kind of person to completely disregard whatever anyone else said.

"So you went with Swordswoman, huh? Wish you'd chosen a position in the rearguard to round out our group better."

Maybe the red flags had been there from the start. My brother started

manipulating every aspect of the people around him to coordinate labyrinth raids just the way he wanted; in the beginning, our father, who led the group as our first captain, would reproach my brother for his behavior. But then my father suffered a serious injury and gradually stopped voicing his concerns.

Keeping up with the others was the most I could manage. Always at a lower level than our group average, I did nothing but hold everyone else back. My brother gave me the Scarlet Emperor to try and change all that.

“This sword could be your key to pulling your own weight despite your level. Even if you fail to master it, I’ll give you one more chance to prove yourself.”

“What a relief it would be if my good-for-nothing sister could contribute something to the group.”

“.....”

I could tell my brother saw no value in keeping me in the party, but his eyes sparkled with boyish excitement the moment I succeeded in equipping the Scarlet Emperor. It was degrading, groveling before him to secure a place where I could belong. And yet, at the same time, I felt truly happy I got to stay in the Brigade and would never have to part with Rury.

...Shirone and I are no different. I have no right to criticize her for anything.

I’d just gotten lucky. The Scarlet Emperor punished me with its powers, which I knew carried great risks, yet I drew from them over and over and became a force to be reckoned with. That force could have turned against my friends if Suzuna hadn’t been there for me. But she showed up and stayed my hand; it was nothing short of a miracle we had all made it to District Five.

I didn’t want to lose them. I didn’t want any of them to get hurt. But I knew that’s exactly what lay in store for them if they set out to rescue Rury. I’d known it all along, but those fears finally hit home during our fierce battles against the monsters in this district.

This party could surely go the distance. But this mission I’d embarked on would send them to a labyrinth even the Guild Savors dared not touch, a place other Seekers spared no thought in avoiding. My selfish desires might very well kill all their dreams.

I wanted to return Theresia to her human form. I knew Arihito hoped for nothing more earnestly than that, and I wanted to fulfill his wish with every fiber of my being.

The truth was, I already had the right to enter a five-star labyrinth so long as I went in alone, but I'd kept that from Arihito and the others. I'd earned it back when I belonged to the Brigade. I'd break no rules and incur no karma if I went as an individual separate from any party.

...I have to find Rury. But...what if she's already...?

No; she had to be alive. All the others had put their faith in that—I had to believe it, too. But the labyrinth had no mercy to spare for us. That's why I had to go before everyone else and face it on my own. I was the one who had failed to save Rury; I had to do this alone.

Visions of my friends' faces filled my mind's eye. I knew I would cause them worry, that I was clinging to my childish ways, and couldn't even convincingly leave them with a reassuring smile.

"...I'll be back soon. I just need a few minutes..."

My legs trembled as they carried me down the all-too-familiar path to the mouth of the labyrinth. Streetlamps illuminated the road even after the sun had abandoned it for the day. It was almost completely deserted. The Guild Savors didn't need to warn anyone to stay away; that wisdom had long ago taken root deep in the hearts of the local Seekers.

There stood the round, red pillars of metal. I had only to descend the stone steps beneath their arches to finally enter: the Blazing Red Mansion. I stood petrified beneath the fiery, flickering glow of the streetlights. It felt as though nothing existed in that moment but my heart beating so hard, it hurt.

"Shit, that sure is nasty."

I overheard a man close by and snapped back to my senses. Two Seekers were talking about the Blazing Red Mansion.

"They say Seekers get put in the same category as monsters if they're forced to serve one for long enough. I get that it's a Guild rule and all, but damn..."

That was the one thing I had been dreading most.

If a Seeker-turned-demi-human attacks another Seeker, they qualify as targets you can legally hunt. In other words, they get written off as monsters. But the Guild had one other special rule. If an enslaved Seeker becomes hostile toward other Seekers...they show up on your license as allies of their captor and are officially designated monsters themselves.

“Kinda hard to argue with that logic when they come at ya lookin’ for a kill, no mercy, no nothin’. Still, I can’t believe there are jerks who would go after these poor souls for their equipment. It’s just not right...”

“And then go on to talk about how there are bound to be fewer prying eyes at night. They gotta know they’re no better than thieves in the dark...”

“Is that true...what you just said?” I cut in. “Did you overhear someone going into this labyrinth talk about doing such a thing?”

“—! ...H-how long have you been standing there?”

They hadn’t noticed I was there and jumped when I spoke. But I didn’t have the time to care about that and pressed one of them for answers.

“Did they mention anything about one of those enslaved Seekers being a Healer? Please, you must tell me!”

“N-no...you don’t hear anything that detailed going around, but there’s hardly a soul in these parts who doesn’t know the Simian Lord gets all the Seekers it catches to do its dirty work.”

“...H-hey. That sword—she’s not the girl from the White Night Brigade, is she...?”

“Ahhh, right... I get it. There was a rumor a while ago that even the mighty White Night Brigade gave up and turned tail in that labyrinth. If you’re sayin’ one of y’all got caught back then, they’re probably showing up as monsters by now. They might’ve already been done in, for all we know...”

“...That can’t be...! I won’t allow it!”

I broke out into a run—I heard the two men calling out from behind to stop me before I ran beneath the red pillars, but I didn’t care. My body registered

the familiar sensation of teleporting. Moments later, I saw rows and rows of trees laden with burning red leaves. I'd find the Simian Lord's fortress on the second floor just past this forest.

One of this labyrinth's defining features was that no other monsters aside from the Simian Lord's minions lived here. The Guild didn't classify it as dangerous because there was little risk of a stampede breaking out. Anyone with the proper qualifications was free to explore it, with the caveat that they should expect no assistance regardless of what happened inside.

I could see a high-level party successfully raiding this labyrinth without much difficulty. Nevertheless, the Simian Lord, a Named Monster hoarding the type of loot Seekers would normally jump at the chance to acquire in spite of the considerable risk, lived on. One major aspect of his battle forces checked most ambitions: the human Seekers he'd enslaved and forced to join forces with his loyal underlings.

At my current level, I know I can keep up with the Simian Lord's movements if I activate my Red Eye. If my party was here...he'd go after them, and they might get hurt again like when we fought The Calamity. But since it's just me...

I'd find Rury and lead her out of this cursed labyrinth—if only I could manage to do that, there had to be some other way to undo the curse that bound her to the monster's will. I'd come this far; I wasn't leaving without her.

I'll bet other Seekers would go straight for Rury if they found her... She always wore valuable rearguard equipment given her vital role as a Healer. It would all fetch a high price on the market if whoever plundered it from her failed to wield it themselves.

“.....!”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated SONIC RAID

I was done with regrets. Someone I cared for had been stolen right before my eyes. I'd abandoned Rury in her time of need, but I would never allow either of those things to happen again—never, ever.

Part V: The Flaming Forest

I ran through the next set of red metal pillars and teleported to the second floor. Time shifted; the sky was pitch black, but it was light around me.

...This...wasn't here last time...!

The Simian Lord's fortress commanded vast swaths of the second floor, but it still should have taken me a while to find it. Instead, I caught sight of its outer walls after walking for only a few minutes. It stood bathed in bright orange light amid the flaming red forest.

That party... Thank goodness, I caught up to them...

"Look! ...I see a human, just like they said...!"

"Looks like they've still got whatever they had on them when they got captured and maybe even a little extra... What kinda shit deal is that where you get better service working for the Simian Lord than bustin' your butt like a normal Seeker?"

"I can tell this is gonna be way more fun than takin' on a run-of-the-mill monster... And no one can say shit about it. That monster's got a hold on 'em. It's self-defense, pure and simple."

They laughed at their despicable banter I could barely stand to hear. What if these lowlifes found Rury...? No, I didn't want to even entertain the possibility.

I trailed the four-person party, hiding in the shadows of the trees so they wouldn't notice me. A river ran through the labyrinth, but the Simian Lord's fortress extended over and past the bridge that crossed it. It appeared there were two separate strongholds, one each in the west and the east.

The Simian Lord was incredibly cunning, something we found out the hard way when he sprung that surprise attack on us. So cunning, in fact, that he'd spread out his growing forces among the two towers to make it that much more difficult to pin down his own location.

“Doesn’t this fortress look bigger than what we heard?” said one of the four Seekers.

“Looks like he’s tryin’ to set up his own little country down here...,” said another.

“Maybe, but he still ain’t more than a dumb monkey,” said a third derisively. “Look, there’s a lever over there to open the gate. I’ll bet he thought he hid that well and good, but you can’t get nothin’ past me.”

“I swear I saw that girl go in through there. Whaddaya say we go save that little lady from the big bad monkey?”

Is that actually...hidden...?

One of the men pulled the lever, and they all made their way into the fortress. I imagined they probably had some kind of surveillance skill active to keep an eye on their surroundings, but I couldn’t shake the feeling something wasn’t right. They’d found a way in so easily for a reason. I wasn’t sure if the figure they’d seen was Rury or someone entirely different, but I had to risk it and find out.

“Hey, we know you’re in there! Stop hiding and show yourself!”

“Dumbass! Stop screaming. Every damn monster in this place is gonna know we’re here.”

The gate began closing once more. I had to try and slip through while the men had their attentions turned to whatever lay behind it. I crouched low to the ground and just barely squeaked past the gate made of wooden stakes.

The four men had walked into a large hall the gate opened up to. I hid in the shadow of one of the several statues standing there before they could realize I’d followed them in.

That’s when I heard a scream rise up to the rafters.

“...H-hold up, somethin’s off!”

“There’s some weird pattern on the floor behind us...! Aaaaaah!”

◆Current Status◆

> ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD activated PURGATORIAL PRISON → Area effect:
Impossible to escape, high heat

And then I saw it: that deep, blazing blood red.

It was a hue I could never forget. It had invaded countless nightmares and to me represented evil itself.

◆Monsters Encountered◆

★SHINING SIMIAN LORD

Level 12

Normal

Resistant to Fire

Dropped Loot: ???

SIMIAN LORD MINION: MARTIAL ARTIST

Level 11

On Guard

Dropped Loot: ???

SIMIAN LORD MINION: DANCER

Level 11

On Guard

Dropped Loot: ???

SIMIAN LORD MINION: TERRAFORMER

Level 11

On Guard

Dropped Loot: ???

Three Seekers appeared wearing black cloaks and eerie monkey masks—and behind them...

“O-oh shit! Not that one!”

“Dammit! Did he send that dancer out to lure us in...?!”

“The Return Scroll won’t work! You gotta be friggin’ kidding me! How did this—?!”

“It’s getting so damn hot... He’s gonna boil us alive!”

“Hey, eyes ahead! They’re coming!”

“Wha—?!”

◆Current Status◆

> ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD activated WAR DRUM SIMIAN → LORD MINIONS’ attack and speed increased

> ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD activated HORIZON ROAR → GARF was STUNNED

> ELITIA activated SONIC RAID

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: DANCER activated ENTRANCING DANCE → GARF and KAZAN were Charmed

GUIDO and REAGAN resisted Charm status

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: MARTIAL ARTIST activated FEROCIOUS TIGER DOUBLE PALM HEEL STRIKE → Hit GUIDO

Big knockback

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: TERRAFORMER activated TARGETED COLLAPSE → REAGAN became incapacitated

“Whoaaaaaa!!”

The man wielding a curved blade who I assumed was the group’s leader took a direct hit to the gut and went flying—I couldn’t reach him in time but felt his blood land on me as he shot past. All four men had been taken out in a split second. The men called Garf and Kazan no longer had any desire to fight left in them and approached their fallen comrades; the Simian Lord meant to initiate them all into his army.

It was all too clear why so few Seekers ever tried to challenge the Simian Lord. They knew the monsters were not the only foes to fear here; battling fellow

Seekers meant risking incalculable danger.

“...This ends here and now. It has to.”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated BERSERK and RED EYE → Increased attack and mobility

Initiated magic consumption

> SCARLET DANCE increased offense and decreased defense

“I’ve been waiting for this moment...ever since the day you stole everything from me!”

How many people had this monster tortured? What must the people who cared for these enslaved minions be feeling—myself included?

“HOO-EEE HOO-EEE HOO-EEE!!”

The huge monkey was easily several times bigger than an average person. It looked down at me like a pebble in its path then decided I was no match for it and sent its minions out ahead to form a human shield.

But I had no intention of fighting them. I had one target: the Simian Lord.

If only I could pull this off, I’d never ask for anything again. I didn’t care if I lost everything else—as long as I had Rury.

“HOO-EE HOO-EE!”

“...Don’t you dare laugh.”

I knew the depths of my own stupidity better than anybody. And yet, dumb as I was, my friends had all come with me this far on my quest. And they’d never once laughed at me.

I had to bring Rury back, no matter what. For them.

If I could have just one more wish, I’d pray they would forgive me my stupidity.

“Raaaaaaah!!”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated SONIC RAID

> SCARLET DANCE's effects activated → ELITIA gained a SCARLET SHADOW

Vitality further decreased

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: MARTIAL ARTIST activated ROUNDHOUSE GALE → Hit ELITIA's SCARLET SHADOW

No damage

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: DANCER activated FULL MOON LEAPING BLADE → Hit ELITIA's SCARLET SHADOW

No damage

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: TERRAFORMER activated AFTER SQUALL → Area effect: Quagmire

> ELITIA activated AIR RAID



*

I dodged the volley of attacks coming toward me at terrifying speeds with nothing but sheer instinct. Every single one pierced through the shadowy figures I left in my wake; not even the quagmire that suddenly appeared beneath my feet could stop me. I activated Air Raid and jumped to reach my maximum speed.

And then I was above him. The Simian Lord looked up at me in astonishment, his eyes wide and fangs bared as I spun through the air and slashed my blade down upon him.

“...Haaaaah!”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated BLOSSOM BLADE

> SCARLET DANCE increased offense and decreased defense > 24 stages hit ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD

> ELITIA activated additional attack → 16 stages hit ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD

“HOO-HEE...EE!!”

“It’s not over yet... I’ll put everything I have on the line and bring you to your knees!”

If only Arihito had been here to support me, these attacks would have packed a greater punch. But if what they lacked was power, then...I’d just keep attacking until I took the Simian Lord down. I’d dodge every other attack, reserve my aim for the one foe I had to defeat, and shower the beast with all the razor-sharp petals I could muster.

“Fall to your death!”

The dancer kicked out her foot and sent a dagger hidden in her shoe flying toward me, but even that couldn’t reach me now.

◆Current Status◆

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: DANCER activated DANCING SICKLE → Hit ELITIA's SCARLET SHADOW

No damage > SCARLET DANCE activated chain of attacks > ELITIA activated BLOSSOM BLADE

> SCARLET DANCE increased offense and decreased defense > 24 stages hit ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD

> ELITIA activated additional attack → 16 stages hit ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD

“AAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

◆Current Status◆

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: MARTIAL ARTIST activated FEROCIOUS TIGER DOUBLE PALM HEEL STRIKE → Hit ELITIA's SCARLET SHADOW

No damage > SCARLET DANCE activated chain of attacks > ELITIA activated BLOSSOM BLADE

> SCARLET DANCE increased offense and decreased defense > 24 stages hit ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD

> ELITIA activated additional attack → 16 stages hit ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD

“HOO...EEE...!”

The Simian Lord lost his balance and fell to his knees.

The next blow would take him down. One last push—but my vision darkened the moment I went to activate Blossom Blade. I couldn't use that attack again. I had to try something else. But I could still win.

I just needed to land one more hit.

At least that's what I thought.

◆Current Status◆

> ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD's BODY DOUBLE disengaged → Transformed

into ★DEMON MONKEY GUARD

The monster before me began transforming; its blazing red fur blackened over and it shrank a full size smaller. I had no idea what had just happened. I had definitely been fighting the Simian Lord—and yet. The monster I’d showered with three rounds of Blossom Blade smiled with self-satisfaction as blood bubbled up from its mouth. That’s when I finally caught on and realized just how late that epiphany had come.

A wall of flames licked the edges of the great hall. Yet another monster stepped out in front of the fire, with one more masked figure at its side.

◆Monster Encountered◆

SIMIAN LORD MINION: HEALER

Level 11

On Guard Dropped Loot: ???

“...Rury...”

◆Current Status◆

- > SIMIAN LORD MINION: HEALER activated OPEN WOUNDS → Target: ELITIA
- > ELITIA lost blood

“Ah... Aaaah!!”

Not a single attack had hit me. And yet, the wounds The Calamity had inflicted on my body began to burn—then burst open. I knew this skill. It was the one attack available to Healers, the one Rury was too kindhearted ever to use.

◆Current Status◆

- > SIMIAN LORD MINION: HEALER activated HEAL WOUND → Target: ★
DEMON MONKEY GUARD

I knew I wouldn’t survive another minion attack and jumped back. As I did, the black monkey’s wounds began to heal.

This brought back so many memories. Right then, though, I felt nothing but a

terrible sadness. This must be the real Simian Lord. I knew without a shadow of a doubt Rury had been kept captive with these monsters this whole time and forced to use her magical skills to heal what should have been our greatest enemies: the Simian Lord and his minions.

I had no idea what kind of expression Rury was making. The black leather cloak and monkey mask shrouded her features entirely. But I could still see one familiar item, the Healer's weapon Rury always carried: her wand.

"How dare you hide and send a sorry knockoff to fight me...and make Rury dance like a puppet!"

Rury pointed her wand toward me. *If she sends another Open Wounds my way, I'll—!*

I cowered in terror before my dear friend, afraid of how she'd hurt me next. The Simian Lord looked down on me with a twisted sort of pity. He pulled his lips into an evil smile and then, laughing all the while, stayed Rury's hand. I knew he'd done it for no other reason than to demonstrate exactly how much control he had over her.

"I'll never...never forgive you, never... You're not getting away!!"

Even the Simian Lord's body double had proved too tough a foe for me to handle alone. It rose to its feet, wounds healed just enough so it could move again, and walked toward me with the three other minions.

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA lost vitality and magic > ELITIA's BERSERK and RED EYE disengaged

The red staining everything I saw faded and my vision returned to normal. The explosive, violent force surging through my body drained away, and even the overwhelming, equally powerful sense of great loss was gone. All that remained was the leaden heaviness of my body I could no longer move and the Scarlet Emperor's oppressive weight.

I began to drift out of consciousness. The wounds Rury had reopened grew ever more painful. One last emotion took over my entire being. I had to let my

friends know. Let Rury, whom I'd failed to save, know.

"...I'm so sorry. I...couldn't do...anything..."

The Simian Lord might try to enslave me as well. In that case, I had but one task left. I gripped the hilt of my sword with all the strength left in me. I had wandered in confusion ever since the day it chose me, but at least in my final moments, I could make sure this blade would never turn against Arihito and the others—and end it myself.

And yet, my hand would not budge.

The Simian Lord's hulking ape henchman and the three minions stopped in their tracks.

A loud bang broke out behind me. All the feeling I'd lost returned to my body. And then, the first thing I heard was that voice that always had my back: his voice.

"It's not over yet... I'll be damned if I let that happen!"

Arihito had come for me. The others, too, even though I'd done something so foolish.

I heard the sound of Alphecca's wheels spinning. Someone jumped off the chariot, ran toward me, and came around to support me from behind—Kyouka.

"Ellie! ...You're so hurt... I swear, you're just too reckless!"

"...I'm sorry. You have to...run... That monster will..."

My vision was fading. Kyouka's warmth enveloped my body; from a distance, Arihito's recovery powers began healing my wounds. There was nothing I could do now but pray—pray that everyone would be safe, that they could all escape this evil fortress.

Part VI: The Escape

I had suspected all along Elitia might head to the Blazing Red Mansion. We went through Kozelka and Khosrow and obtained temporary clearance to follow after her into the five-star labyrinth. Seekers with an honorary title could apparently request permission to enter labyrinths they wouldn't otherwise be qualified to access if there were some sort of extenuating circumstances. Elitia venturing into such a dangerous labyrinth fell into that category.

I had Adeline determine Elitia's precise location with her Arrow Familiar once we made it to the second floor and drew from Alphecca's magnificent speed to race toward that point. We busted down the outer gate to the fortress by applying the set damage from Attack Support 1 but soon realized we would also need to break through the Purgatorial Prison walls.

"Master, no mere flame can stymie the great Arianrhod. I shall pierce through this barrier."

Silver Traces, one of Alphecca's skills, had an extra-special effect: It gave her the power to smash through any obstacle created by an area effect in her path. We flew through the flames and found Elitia standing all alone against the Simian Lord and his minions.

Four of us had plunged into the fortress aboard Alphecca: Igarashi, Theresia, Seraphina, and me. We'd have to rely on her Silver Traces to make our escape as well. But that would only be possible after we shook the enemy off our tail. Igarashi had almost managed to get Elitia onto Alphecca's chariot when one of the Simian Lord's minions, a Seeker whose face was hidden behind an ape mask, went after her.

"Haaaah!!"

"Ariadne, I request your support!"

"I, Ariadne, grant the guardian of the mighty shield my protection!"

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: SERAPHINA > ARIHITO requested temporary support from ARIADNE → Target: SERAPHINA > ARIADNE activated GUARD ARM

> SERAPHINA activated AURA SHIELD

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: MARTIAL ARTIST activated SEISMIC SKY WAVE → Hit SERAPHINA Damage reduced by half > SIMIAN LORD MINION: DANCER activated DANCING SICKLE → No damage

“Urghhh!”

“Seraphina!”

“Mr. Atobe, cover me...! Haaaaah!”

“I can do that, too! ...Yaaaaah!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT (STUN) > SERAPHINA activated SHIELD SLAM → Hit SIMIAN LORD MINION: MARTIAL ARTIST

Inflicted STUN status > KYOUKA activated THUNDERBOLT → Hit SIMIAN LORD MINION: DANCER

Electrocution nullified Inflicted STUN status

Seraphina rammed the Martial Artist with her shield and sent him flying back while Igarashi, still holding on to Elitia, raised the spear in her right hand and sent a lightning bolt down upon the Dancer to check her advance. But the last minion, the Terraformer, was preparing some sort of attack. My instincts immediately told me whatever it was would mean trouble.

“Oh no you don’t!”

◆Current Status◆

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: TERRAFORMER prepared to activate GRAVEL PATCH

> ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT (FREEZE) → Hit SIMIAN LORD MINION:
TERRAFORMER

Inflicted FROZEN status Action was canceled

The impending attack's name alone told me it would somehow alter the ground—I know it might sound strange coming from me, but this felt pretty darn close to magic.

“Almost there... Atobe!”

I jumped off Alphecca, took Elitia from Igarashi's arms, and quickly carried her onto the chariot. Theresia bought us time by distracting the Martial Artist, who had regained his footing, and dodging his every attack. She managed to evade his blows, but perhaps owing to the gap in their levels, the Martial Artist was still gaining on her.

“Theresia, fall back! We can't use the Return Scroll here; we'll have to leave through the gate!”

“.....!”

“Atobe, that Demon Monkey's aiming at us! Oh no, my Thunderbolt won't make it!”

The Simian Lord took one of the iron clubs he carried on his back and handed it to his underling, the Demon Monkey, who wound it up high above and aimed it straight at us.

“GRAAAAH!!”

“Master, that monster's true target is—!”

If the Silver Chariot was destroyed, we would be completely stranded. The Demon Monkey saw this and set his sights on Alphecca. We had only one hope of stopping that gigantic club.

“Haaaaah!”

“Seraphina, I'll support you! Ariadne, please!”

“O armaments of this Stellar Mechanical God, become a shield to block all harm!”

◆Current Status◆

- > SERAPHINA activated DEFENSIVE STANCE
- > SERAPHINA activated DEFENSE FORCE
- > SERAPHINA activated AURA SHIELD
- > ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 2 → Support Types: DEFENSE FORCE, AURA SHIELD
- > ARIHITO requested temporary support from ARIADNE → Target: SERAPHINA > ARIADNE activated GUARD VARIANT
- > ★DEMON MONKEY GUARD activated CATAPULTING CASTLE SIEGE → Hit SERAPHINA No damage Physical attack reflected > Reflected attack hit ★DEMON MONKEY GUARD

“GAHEEE!!”

The enormous projectile that dwarfed Seraphina’s shield in size made a terrible crash as it collided—but the shield held true and expertly reflected the club right back at the Demon Monkey.

Unfortunately, it was nothing but a distraction. All along, the Simian Lord had only intended the Demon Monkey to serve as a diversion meant to ensure that his own attack would land without fail.

“GROAAAAAH!”

◆Current Status◆

- > ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD activated CONCEALED WEAPON CAST → Hit ALPHECCA Capture skill locked on

Chains stretched out behind the iron ball the Simian Lord hurled our way; they tangled themselves in Alphecca’s chariot and immobilized her.

“This was what you were after... You wily beast!”

“Hang on, Alphecca, I’ll get you out of those chains!”

“They’re huge! What do we do?!” cried Igarashi. “It’s no use... He’s pulling us in!”

The Simian Lord dragged Alphecca, with Elitia and Igarashi on top, toward him using just one of his mighty arms. Alphecca spun her wheels and strained with all that she had away from the beast, but the Simian Lord dug his heel into the ground and hauled them closer and closer to him.

“...Master...I am unable to release my material form now.”

“Alphecca...don’t give up! I’ll save you, I promise!” I screamed.

Alphecca’s voice trembled with fear as she stared down the Simian Lord’s overwhelming power.

“I request only one blow. O Hidden God, I beseech thee to wield this Stellar Sword with thy holy hands!” I heard Murakumo say. I retrieved her from my back as if under a spell; a brilliant light pulsating like a heartbeat shone from her blade.

“Devotee in confirmed peril. Stellar Sword request approved. Ten seconds to device startup. Severance target: Helltect Steel.”

“We need ten seconds! Igarashi, come attack the Simian Lord with me!”

“?! ...Okay... Yaaaaah!”

I wanted to stun him, if only the once. It might not get us to the full ten seconds, but it would at least buy us some time.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT (STUN) > ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD activated DEMON HAND

> KYOUKA activated THUNDERBOLT → ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD blocked attack Resisted STUN status > ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT (STUN) → ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD blocked attack Resisted STUN status

“He bounced us right off... That hand’s covered in magic!”

“HOO-HEE HOO-HEE HOO-HEE!”

The Simian Lord sneered at us as if to say, *Nothing you do will work on me.* This monster made a mockery of all the Seekers it met, taking pleasure in torturing and toying with them. He had left a deep wound on Elitia’s heart ever

since the fateful day she met him. He'd also victimized untold numbers of Seekers. We couldn't allow him to win. And yet, none of our attacks were making a scratch on this monster, this devil incarnate.

"Atobe!"

"Not yet. We're not done yet!"

I took out my magical gun and loaded it with the frost stone—and then remembered we'd been here so many times before. I had to believe *she* would be there once again. It's how we'd always done it.

"Theresia, I'll support you!"

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FREEZING BULLET

> THERESIA activated SNEAK ATTACK → Damage to ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD doubled > THERESIA activated BUTTERFLY FROLIC → Increased number of attacks > THERESIA attacked Hit ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD 4 times Critical hit > FREEZING BULLET activated 4 times Weak spot attack FROZEN status progressed to second stage

Theresia had concealed her presence in the heat of the chaotic battle and snuck around behind the Simian Lord.

Suddenly, a blue butterfly took off in flight. Theresia slashed at the Simian Lord from his blind spot, slicing through his thick fur and spraying his blood everywhere. I left the frost stone in my slingshot as it was and loaded the other one I had into the magic gun, creating magical bullets that blasted toward the monster with considerably more force than my Force Shot (Freeze).

"GRO...OO!!"

The Simian Lord howled in pain. The attack had caught him completely off-guard. He was far stronger than us, but these blows hurt. Not to mention, it looked like we'd found his weak spot: attacks with attributes opposite of fire.

"GRAAAH...AAAAAH!"

It seemed like the Simian Lord rarely ever took a real hit, because his Demon Monkey underling and minions were frozen in shock. The Simian Lord waved his enormous hand at them and ordered them to attack.

“Well...too late. Time’s up.”

“Devotee, thank you for the assistance. Stellar Sword activation initiated: unlocked Arms Device Limiter.”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIADNE summoned GUARD ARM

> ARIADNE used MURAKUMO to activate BLADE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH:
STEEL SLICE

The Mechanical God’s Guard Arms that had protected us for so long appeared once more and went to grasp Murakumo, who had already left my hands. In that instant, Murakumo swelled to a size befitting those gigantic hands. They brandished the enlarged blade exactly as Murakumo always did—and unleashed the Blade of Heaven and Earth on our foe.

◆Current Status◆

> BLADE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH: STEEL SLICE hit PURGATORIAL SHACKLES →
Destroyed PURGATORIAL SHACKLES

ALPHECCA’s Captured status was removed

“The chains broke! Ariadne, you’re amazing!” exclaimed Igarashi.

“To think Murakumo would change so drastically in the hands of the Hidden God... Ms. Theresia, come this way! We must escape!”

“.....!”

Theresia activated her Accel Dash and raced toward us. I reached out my hand to pull her up on the chariot—however.

“GRAAAAAAH!!”

The Simian Lord’s roar shook the ground beneath us. A cryptic symbol rose from the tips of his fingers as he wove his arms through the air, then in the blink

of an eye, it shot out and latched on to the back of Theresia's neck.

"Theresia!"

◆Current Status◆

> ★SHINING SIMIAN LORD activated ETCH-A-HEX → Hit THERESIA > ★
SHINING SIMIAN LORD began SLAVE SEAL inscription

".....!"

Now aboard the chariot, Theresia writhed in anguish. The Simian Lord had done something to her. Alphecca set off racing toward the exit; I brushed aside the hair covering Theresia's neck and saw the mark he had left on her.

It's a Slave Seal... The Simian Lord had something to do with this. He must have the power to control these symbols... That's how he enslaves all those Seekers!

A large, dark, bruise-like marking appeared on the skin of Theresia's neck. She would be forced into slavery like all the others the moment the Simian Lord finished his inscription.

"Master...," Alphecca called out, urging me to halt our escape.

If we leave like this, then Theresia will...

But we had no other option.

"Get us out of here! Full speed ahead, Alphecca!"

"...Understood."

◆Current Status◆

> ALPHECCA activated BANISHING BURST → Speed increased and broke through limit Added FLOATING SPECTER

> ALPHECCA activated SILVER TRACES → Passed through PURGATORIAL PRISON

We tore through the raging flames and made it out of the fortress.



◆Current Status◆

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: HEALER activated HEAL WOUND → Target: ★
SHINING SIMIAN LORD

> SIMIAN LORD MINION: HEALER activated SANITIZE → Target: ★SHINING
SIMIAN LORD

I managed to read these last notifications just before we moved out of the range my license could pick up signals. It was Elitia's friend, Rury—and she was administering aid to the Simian Lord.

"Arihito... I'm so sorry... I promised we'd do this together, but..."

Elitia came to, safe in Igarashi's arms. An endless stream of tears spilled down over her cheeks.

"This isn't your fault. I knew this might happen... I had a feeling you'd rush in here as soon as you could. But we've gained valuable intel thanks to that."

Rury was alive, slave to the Simian Lord or not.

"I promise you—we will come back... We've got a huge score to settle with that Simian Lord now. We're gonna make him pay."

"....."

We had to bring him down before the Slave Seal inscription on Theresia's skin took permanent hold. It was a bitter end to our first encounter with the Simian Lord. And yet, I felt a calm determination where there might have been anger. We would be the ones to draw the final curtain on this farcical tragedy the Simian Lord had begun.

Theresia gently laid her hand over the fist I'd unknowingly clenched.

I swore to myself I would undo the hex that had befallen her. We had seven days here. Seven days to take back all that was ours. As we put more distance between us and the fortress burnished with hundreds of blazing flames, the gears in my mind began spinning. I was already planning for our inevitable return.

EXCLUSIVE BONUS CONTENT

A Night in the District Seven Spa

District Seven boasted several establishments popular among the locals, including a Guild-run spa. This beloved watering hole provided Seekers a place to rub elbows with other parties and a chance let loose and have fun, a rare find in the Labyrinth Country. It had separate baths for men and women, so Arihito expected he would finally be able to take a relaxing dip in peace—but it was not to be.

“You must be Mr. Atobe. Your party’s request to rent out the family bath for the evening was approved, so please make your way there.”

“Okay... Wait, what?”

Arihito responded without much thought to what the receptionist had told him and then did a double take when the completely unexpected information sank in.

“S-sorry...I’m quite sure all my party members who arrived before me are women. I am a man, after all, so for what it’s worth, I think I should probably just use the men’s bath...”

“Unfortunately, the men’s bath is currently at capacity. Our establishment has quite the local following, so we have to limit how many people can access the baths at once. We also have several customers on a waiting list.”

Arihito’s heart fell when she showed him the register of names. He’d signed similar lists before he reincarnated to get a seat at a family restaurant and other establishments, but he’d never confronted a situation where fifty people stood ahead of him in line.

“Of course, we asked all your party members to sign this consent form before they entered the facility, so I don’t believe you’ll risk losing their trust if you join them, Mr. Atobe,” the receptionist explained.

“I—I see...”

Theresa's name headed off the list, as if for some reason she represented the group, followed by a column with all the others' signatures. Arihito had seen this handwriting before; it looked like Kyouka's.

Does this mean Igarashi's gotten that used to our relationship now...? I'm definitely not there yet. I mean, I still have pretty mixed feelings about bathing together with Theresa as it is...

“We have towels and bathrobes you may borrow, as well as a dining area where you can purchase light refreshments. Please be sure to wear the bathrobe, as well as underwear, if you do make your way there.”

“O-okay...”

The receptionist handed Arihito the key to a rental locker before he could make up his mind about what to do. It all reminded him so much of the public baths he'd been to in his previous life; memories, and some nerves, hit him as he headed over to one of the three family baths set up in the spa.



The family bath was much larger than the bathing room back at their apartment and could comfortably fit up to sixteen people.

“Wheeee! I've never gotten to try out a huuuge private bath like this before. Suzu, wanna breaststroke race me to the other side?”

“Misaki, you know Arihito'll get angry if you fool around too much, right?”

“No waaay, I'll bet he'll tootally swim with me.”

Arihito puzzled over what exactly Misaki must think of him and was about to undress when a thought hit him—wasn't it best to wear a bathing suit when sharing a coed bath so nobody would feel uncomfortable?

“I imagine it must feel a bit daunting for Mr. Atobe to be the last one in. Perhaps we should leave word that we have our bathing suits on.”

“Good idea, Louisa,” agreed Igarashi. “But honestly, I feel like even with your suit on...you kinda put guys in a tough spot. I mean, it's hard not to look...”

“...Your boobs are just as big as hers, Kyouka,” added Melissa.

“I wish mine were a little bigger... U-um, Kyouka, Louisa, how can I grow up to be just like you two?” asked Madoka, though Akihito personally thought she was too young to worry about looking so mature. He started to feel pretty awkward standing there outside the room and eavesdropping on their conversations.

“Bow!”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Cion?” asked Igarashi.

“Oh, do you think he’s here?” asked Misaki.

“...M-Misaki, I’m going for a dip in the cold bath...”

“Suzu, you’re gonna catch a cold that way, y’know. It’s fiiiine, it’s only Akihito. Just stay for a little while. I promise I won’t do anything.”

Akihito realized Cion was trying to open the door from the inside and took a step closer. Guard dogs weren’t allowed to bathe in the water, but they could soak their paws in the foot baths in private family rooms—or so Akihito remembered the receptionist explaining as he put his hand on the door.

“...I haven’t seen Theresia for a while,” noted Elitia. “Where could she be?”

“...Hm?”

The door to the bath slid open before Akihito could move it. And there, standing right in front of him, was Theresia: stark naked, stripped of all armor but her mask, just like she was every night at bath time.

““””

It was too much for Akihito to take in. Words failed him the minute his eyes met hers. He’d never expected her to conceal her presence so no one would notice her go to greet him in her birthday suit—the sight set Akihito’s eyes spinning and her innocence delivered a devastating one-two punch.

“T-T-T-Theresia... Weren’t you wearing a bathing suit when you got in...?” stammered Igarashi in a panic, though she was too shy to leave the safety of the water and expose herself in front of Akihito. Louisa sat along the edge of the bath and blushed as she crossed her arms over her chest to hide anything

visible through the robe; unfortunately, that made her look even more seductive to Arihito, who averted his gaze to Theresia and then, realizing she was no spot to land on, looked up at the ceiling.

“.....”

Theresia reached up and sandwiched Arihito's cheeks between her hands then angled his face down toward her.

“T-Theresia... Um, I know it's a little late to say this, but you know...”

She had clearly spent some time soaking in the water; a red blush had crept all over her pale skin and even tinted her lizard mask a shade of scarlet. She didn't look overheated to Arihito, though he did worry another dip might prove risky for her. Maybe she had almost overshot her timing and was riding the resulting high?

“.....”

“Heh-heh-heh, looks like the time has finally come... I get to wash your back, get you to wash mine, and go exploring for your most ticklish spots! Suzu's gonna help me, of course!”

“M-Misaki... I told you not to go too crazy...”

Suzuna would never choose to try something like that on her own—or so Arihito thought until she quietly stood up in the water and walked over to him with Misaki. He couldn't help but think the thin bathrobe fit Suzuna so well, it looked like it might have been custom-made for her. He quickly turned his eyes away; Suzuna saw this and smiled.

“...Arihito, I know Misaki brought the idea up before I had the chance, but... the truth is, I would like that. I want to show how grateful I am to you... P-plus, you did so much for me and Ariadne the other day...”

“S-Suzuna, you don't have to worry about that. I mean, we did it to raise our devotion levels, so you really did me a favor. Would you mind if I asked you to help me out again sometime?”

“O-of course. I'll be happy to, whenever you want...”

“I trust that you're doing something really important, Atobe, but...you can't

keep Suzuna up too late, okay? We stay up late enough as it is with the—”

“A-ahem... Kyouka, loose lips sink ships, you know, and your lips are looking dangerously loose. Why don’t you keep quiet for a bit?” cut in Elitia.

“...S-sorry. You’re right, Louisa and I have helped Atobe wash up before, so I think maybe we should sit this one out today.”

“Actually, I can’t recall much of that day...,” said Louisa. “Would you mind if I made up for that now?”

In the end, the task fell to three ladies: Louisa, Suzuna, and Misaki, not to mention Theresia, who never left Arihito’s side. He sat himself down in one of the little chairs in front of a washing station and reluctantly entrusted his body into his friends’ hands, wondering how it would work if even more people tried to scrub him down at once.

“Whoa... Arihito, I didn’t realize you were so ripped...,” said Misaki.

“I—I guess...I just haven’t really stopped moving since I came to the Labyrinth Country.”

“I’m going to clean between your fingers now. Spread your hand out... Thank you. Okay, next I’ll work over here...”

“Ms. Suzuna, your technique is so surgical... I mean, precise. Mr. Atobe, do you feel an itch anywhere I may scratch for you?”

“N-no itch, but...”

Something soft pressed up against Arihito’s back, forcibly calling all the nerves along his skin to attention. To top it off, Theresia was squatting in front of him and washing his legs; Kyouka had wrapped a towel around her, but it didn’t do much to cover her up.

“...Y-you know, this... It kinda makes me think about our nightly ritual...”

“Hm...? Misaki, did you say someth—?”

“Nothing to concern yourself over, Mr. Atobe. We ladies have lots of little secrets, after all...,” Louisa whispered into Arihito’s ear, making him unconsciously gulp.

He couldn't betray their trust; he couldn't let himself react. The more he repeated these mantras to himself, the more Arihito noticed feelings he had not thought existed growing larger and larger.

We're going to District Five tomorrow... Do we really have time for this...? Shouldn't we be steeling ourselves somehow...?!

That's when he remembered. Four Seasons were currently staying over at their apartment, which meant those four ladies should also be here; it was at this very moment that he understood why he hadn't yet seen them.

"Haaah... I can't take it anymore!"

"Kaede, aren't you giving in a bit quick? I bet I could go for another ten minutes."

"You push yourself to too many extremes, Ibuki... I can barely stand on my own two feet," said Anna.

"Phew..." Ryouko sighed. "I can already feel my skin glowing. I'd forgotten how much I love saunas, and they're so good for your metabolism... Oh?"

The four ladies of Four Seasons walked out of the sauna connected to the family bath. They were all wearing bathrobes; the heat had left their skin flushed and dewy with sweat, and not even Arihito could ignore how much more captivating it made them look.

"Oh, Kaede, wanna get in on this?" offered Misaki. "We've pretty much got him good and clean, though."

"O-oh...Arihito's here already. Pretty cold of you to start without us, Misaki."

"Kaede, you're making it sound like you planned to do that all along..." said Ibuki.

"...It's a well-known fact that the bath is precisely the place for deepening bonds by washing each other's bodies. There's nothing untoward about it," countered Anna.

"Th-that's true... If you say so, then I'd love to. But is it really all right...? I wouldn't want to go over your heads, Kyouka, Louisa..."

"R-Ryouko, you're putting them on the spot...!" said Anna.

Kyouka and Louisa turned toward each other. Kyouka seemed troubled at first but then looked over at Arihito and chuckled.

“...Atobe, is there anything else I can do for you? I could clean your ears after you take a bath...but maybe that’s a bit too intimate.”

“In that case, I could give you a massage, Mr. Atobe...,” offered Louisa.

“I’d like to do something for him, too! Louisa, can I help you?” asked Madoka.

“...I can groom you if you want, Arihito,” added Melissa.

“Bow!”

Arihito wondered if it was really all right for him to receive so much from his friends without giving anything in return. Soon enough, the four ladies attending to him switched places with Four Seasons.

“...Wh-whoa, this is a bit more embarrassing than I’d thought... Arihito, thank you again for everything. I figure you’ll be all rushed tomorrow on your way to District Five, so I wanted to get that in now while I can,” said Kaede.

“Arihito, I know I always call you ‘Teacher’...,” Ibuki started, “but it’s only ‘cause I learn so much when I’m with you. I really do think of you as my teacher. Even after you go to the next district, that’ll never change.”

“You’ve taught me so much as a fellow rearguard, Arihito. I swear you’ll see a new and improved version of me the next time we embark on a joint expedition. I promise I’ll have new serves to show you.”

“At first...I admit I thought you looked a little unreliable. It’s a bit embarrassing to remember how terribly I read you. Mr. Atobe, we’re going to do everything we can to get to District Six very soon and catch up with you. But it may take a while until we meet again...”

“Right... But there’s always a chance we’ll go back and visit previous districts. Please don’t hesitate to reach out if you need anything,” Arihito reassured them. For a while, none of the four ladies could say anything. Kaede’s eyes filled with emotion and glistened with tears; she opened her arms wide and went to hug him from behind, from where he couldn’t see her.

“Kaede, I *know* you’re not gonna glom on to him like that. You’re *such* a good

friend.”

“...M-Misaki, don’t be so sure of yourself, or next time I really will steal him away,” Kaede retorted, and everyone in the bath laughed. In that moment, Arihito took her comment as nothing more than a joke. Theresia stood off to the side, staring straight at Arihito and holding a bucket filled with warm water as if to silently say, *But that’s my job.*

AFTERWORD

Happy New Year! This is (or should be) my first publication of 2020, the second year of Reiwa. We're still deep in midwinter, and as I write to you now, I have to wonder: Do they have kotatsu in the Labyrinth Country? It has been a long time since I've had one at home, but even now I still miss it at times. Peeling mandarin after mandarin beneath the warmth of a kotatsu on a cold day is one of the greatest pleasures winter has to offer. Apologies for my quotidian passions.

The weather does, in fact, change in the Labyrinth Country, though its climate is not plainly divided into four seasons. Conversely, some labyrinths have only one unchanging season. This trend is especially strong in District Five: The Dead Sea Sands, which our heroes have not yet explored, is a desert as its name implies; meanwhile, bright red leaves adorn the trees of the Blazing Red Mansion year-round.

It's quite impossible to capture the landscapes of the Labyrinth Country with words alone. Thankfully, our illustrator, Huuka Kazabana, and Rikizo, the artist behind this series' manga adaptation, have literally brought color to this world and have even helped me expand my vision for it. I will endeavor to provide as much vivid detail in my descriptions as I can.

As this world has so many labyrinths, I'd also love to ask my readers what kind they'd like to see next. I'm sure Arihito and the gang would appreciate one chock-full of both experience points and scrumptious monsters. At the same time, Seekers would surely try to monopolize that kind of place with more vigor than any crabs could inspire. You can't have everything.

The plot twists and turns in this volume will not allow our heroes to resume normal seeking activities until they've run their course. I can't even start talking about what the team might do if or when they tie up those loose ends, since that in itself would give too much away. Instead, nothing would make me happier than if you would put your trust in Arihito and all the members you

know and love, and stay by their side as we find out who they are yet to become. My goal as an author is to make you feel as though you are exploring these labyrinths right along with them as you read.

I wrote and rewrote the stampede against The Calamity—the second stampede so far—several times while first formulating the story until it became the finished product you saw here. As I did, I kept thinking about how Kozelka's Active Feint is an amazing skill to have on your side but would be terrifying if turned against you. Skills with the power to switch up attack order or cancel them entirely are extremely powerful in this series. I'm sure the Gaze Hounds' faces would light up with joy if you thought of them whenever someone used Stun (though they'd still look scary, even if they warmed up to you).

There is not much I can reveal about the Simian Lord here; I'll focus my efforts instead on delivering the next volume as soon as possible. I imagine the weather will have warmed up quite a bit by then, and I hope you enjoy reading about Arihito and our heroes' desperate battles while stretching out in the sun.

Two editors are now gracing me with their kind assistance as of this volume, and I would like to apologize to them both for causing such worry over my progress. I'm pretty sure I've gotten to the point where "putting my heart" into anything won't cut it anymore, so I promise I'll put my very soul into this next volume and work under the assumption I should prepare for reincarnation myself if I need to request another extension.

Thank you once again to our illustrator, Huuka Kazabana, for your incredible artwork. I always look through previous volumes whenever I check my drafts, and the illustrations there move me anew every time I see them. I truly believe that image of Arihito in the depths of his first real predicament set the tone for the entire series. The illustrations in this sixth volume feel like a natural extension and evolution of that.

Rikizo, the artist behind the manga adaptation, packs so much of the *Rearguard* world into every chapter; each one gets me more excited as a reader myself. They are available on Nico Nico Manga and Comic Walker. If you haven't read them yet, I strongly encourage you to check them out whenever you have a minute.

I feel I must prostrate myself, and stay in that position, before the feet of the proofreaders, whom I once again worked to the bone. However, I'm quite sure that would do my back in for good, so please know my heart is full of remorse for all the trouble I've caused and gratitude for all you do. I swear I will spare no effort to ensure I don't make the same mistake over and over again next time. I know I say this in every volume, but I promise to approach the next installment as a new man and hope you will lend him your kind support.

I would also like to once again give my thanks to the people at Kadokawa Books and all those who have devoted their efforts into getting this book out into the world and delivering it to our readers.

And above everything, to those lovely readers who have supported me every step of the way, I devote a level-100 Recovery Support to you. Thank you very much.

Farewell for now to you and the ever-deepening days of fall,

Tôwa

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