

CHAPTER 5

HOLY AND DEMONIC COLLIDE

The battle began.

Renard was the vice captain of the Crusader forces, commanding them as they caught up with Hinata on her journey. He himself wasn’t a paladin, exactly—he was a Holy Wizard, a master of sorcerous magic. That was a special class, one that only those who mastered elemental, aspectual, and holy magic could claim to be.

And yet, Renard was just as adept with a sword, using his own to lead several missions. Even hiding his Holy Wizard side, he was still laudable enough as a paladin to serve as a commander and eventual Crusader vice captain. It all came down to his talents—those beautiful sword skills. If Arnaud’s sword was a blunt weapon, Renard’s had a softer touch. Both were exemplary fighters, but Arnaud had a slight edge, thanks to the tenacity that never failed him in battle. In a knockdown drag-out against a formidable monster, beautiful technique was often less important than brute force. That difference earned Arnaud the crown among his peers.

But thanks to that genius-level magic skill, Renard had proven himself more than worthy as a spellcasting swordsman. His physical technique wasn’t quite up to Arnaud’s standard, but if he fought in a more standard magic/sword hybrid style instead of hiding the sorcery like he usually did, he was just as phenomenal a talent. In fact, as Renard himself gauged it, he could probably outclass Arnaud in strength.

To a paladin, however, one’s proficiency in aspectual magic wasn’t really part of the evaluation. It was more of a given, with some paladins even capable of fusing their own elemental spirits with aspectual magic to launch powerful spells with no casting time. Aspectual magic, by itself, took longer to cast than spirit magic—and while it was often more powerful, in close-range combat, speed was the most important priority.

Renard was no exception to that maxim, hence his focus on sword skill. True strength, as he saw it, lay at the end of his quest to master the blade. Adding holy elements to his almost divinely quick thrusts allowed him to slice though pretty well anything, as he saw it.

This thought was with him ever since an experience that still rang vividly in his mind. Back when he was a student, he studied abroad in a small nation that fell under the threat of the demon lord Valentine. It was Hinata, freshly ordained as a paladin at the time, who came to the rescue; and in a word, she was strong. A single swipe of her rapier obliterated waves of teeming monsters. Even demons several times a human’s size were helplessly mowed down. Hinata’s arrival saved that nation’s people from the desperation they faced, and ever since then, Renard found himself attracted to the charms of the sword.

Even as he polished his spirit magic skills, he constantly recalled Hinata’s rapier in action, attempting to emulate her in his daily training. Once he had gained a mastery of magical arts, he returned to his academy in Englesia, learning about aspectual magic as he awaited a chance to move to the Holy Empire of Lubelius. This was a difficult task for outsiders, but his adherence to Luminism and proven skills as an outstanding talent earned him a nod from their government.

He pounced on the offer, even though it meant cutting ties with his family. Upon completing the move, he took up holy magic and earned a spot as a trainee paladin. The spirit he forged a pact with was affiliated with light—as pure and unblemished as the soul of the one they called the Paladin of Light.

After joining the paladin guard, it took comparatively little time for Renard to become Hinata’s personal aide. He took the initiative to volunteer for any mission, no matter how reckless, and the results he provided his newly adopted nation made his qualifications eminently clear.

Hinata could count many people as her rivals: Arnaud and Fritz, both of whom arrived at the same time she did; even Cardinal Nicolaus, who was just as coldhearted and crafty as Hinata herself. As for her admirers? There was no way to even begin counting them. Being an aide to such a paladin was a source of boundless pride to Renard.

And yet…

(Renard, there is something I want you, and only you, to know.)

Right after Archbishop Reyhiem’s sensational murder, Renard was beckoned by the Seven Days Clergy. There, he had an unspeakable truth revealed to him.

(Hinata, you know… She was involved, shall we say, with the demon lord Valentine.)

(We were about to kill Valentine, you see, but before we could, he revealed that to us as he begged for mercy.)

The revelation made Renard’s head go blank. Hinata, this woman he looked up to so much, in a liaison with Valentine. It meant she was pulling the wool over his eyes this whole time. If it was true, it was a betrayal the pure-minded Renard could never allow. It seemed impossible that the Clergy, these great heroes, would be lying—but it seemed just as impossible that Hinata would deceive her own paladins.

Perhaps, though… It is true that Valentine has been inactive as of late. Lady Hinata should be more than powerful enough to slay him, but she’s shown no interest in that at all…

Hinata had enough force to dispatch Valentine—Renard was sure of that much. The Battlesage Saare’s briefing made Hinata’s victory all but assured in his mind. She must have her own motivations, of course…but the thought still troubled Renard.

The Clergy continued:

(Of course, it may have been a desperate lie from Valentine. But that’s not the end of the story, you see.)

(As hard as it is to believe, we have seen signs that she has attempted to connect herself to the demon lord Rimuru.)

(Would it not be unthinkable, normally, to see someone like the good Archbishop Reyhiem killed in this holy land?)

“But…!” Renard’s mind was a whirl of confusion. “But Lady Hinata’s faith is more stalwart than anyone I know. How could she betray us, to say nothing of our god?”

(Yes, there’s the rub, Renard. We, too, have our suspicions about that.)

(But perhaps it is the other way around. Perhaps it is Hinata who is playing an intricate game against us—and Luminus. We cannot call it an impossibility.)

(There is one way we could settle these doubts for sure…)

“Wh-what is it?!” Renard half shouted, accepting the bait.

The Clergy was silent for a moment before continuing. (If we tell you, there will be no turning back.)

(This is not a question we can afford to make into a public matter…)

(Not until we prove Hinata’s innocence.)

But Renard’s mind was already made up, led expertly into the trap the Clergy laid for him with their words.

“I accept the risk. I promise I will prove to the world that Lady Hinata is innocent!”

(Mm, yes…)

(You will help us then, Renard?)

(It will likely be a dangerous task.)

Renard simply looked on, waiting for them to continue.

(Defeat the demon lord Rimuru!)

(Do that, and we will have our answer.)

(If Hinata is connected to him, she will no doubt stage a desperate rush to stop you.)

This was enough to throw even Renard’s confidence.

“But… But Veldora…!”

This response was what the Seven Days expected.

(Do not lose your resolve.)

(Calm yourself and think.)

(Has the evil dragon truly awoken? Don’t you think all of that is simply wishful thinking?)

This reminded Renard of a key fact. The only people who claimed to know firsthand that Veldora was back were Hinata and the Holy Emperor.

“So you are saying Veldora remains asleep?”

(That is highly probable.)

(Not even Reyhiem personally witnessed the dragon, as we understand.)

(It may even be the case that Hinata is deceiving the Holy Emperor himself.)

A whirlpool of doubt began to spiral around in Renard’s mind—just as the Clergy wanted.

(And Hinata has already encountered Rimuru once.)

(We believe that was the moment when she fell under the demon lord’s spell.)

(If she has been doing Rimuru’s bidding ever since…)

The scales in Renard’s heart began to tilt. Yes, he naturally began to think. Hinata needs to be saved. And I am the only one who can save her.

“Indeed. Yes, I am sure you are not mistaken! Lady Hinata would never willfully deceive us. If she is unwittingly doing someone else’s bidding, that would clear her of any doubt on your part, correct?”

The Seven Days Clergy nodded their heads solemnly.

(It would. If you are able to do so, there would be no suspicion.)

(But it will be dangerous!)

They seemed to be testing Renard’s resolve. They didn’t need to.

“Then please, allow me to take on the task!”

His mind was made up. Hinata needed his salvation. And if she had been deliberately lying to all the paladins that served her…he wasn’t afraid to strike her down, should it come to that.

(Very well. It shall be yours to handle.)

(Your resolve is strong, we see.)

(Do us proud, Renard!)

Thus, he set off, in direct violation of Hinata’s orders.

By the time he was inside the Forest of Jura, Renard’s suspicion had grown to indisputable fact in his mind.

Veldora resurrected? Nonsense. There were far too few magicules in the air to make that an even remote possibility. Which meant that Hinata had most likely betrayed all of Luminism—a fact that Renard hardly wanted to consider, even as he continued his undaunted advance.

And then, just as he fanned out the troops under his command and attempted to launch a Holy Field, he was attacked by monsters, as if they had waited for that exact moment to strike.

“Could it be that Lady Hinata has sold us out…?” his companion, Garde, asked. “That she learned of our actions and tipped the demon lord off to them?”

(If Hinata is connected to him, she will no doubt stage a desperate rush to stop you.)

The words of the Clergy rang in Renard’s mind. But now was no time for measured thought. He instantly sent the order to fight back, and with that, the battle was on.

Their enemies were stronger than expected…but as it turned out, he had not seen them all yet. Just as Renard was beginning to sense his position was in danger, out came the oni—those detestable, nightmare-like presences—falling out from the sky. They hit the ground, crushing it like an explosion and sending plumes of dust into the air.

“We got some big fish here,” observed Garde as he readied his spear. Renard nodded back at him, then calmly gave his orders. Apart from the two of them, there were four paladins nearby, the rest of the force engaged with other monsters. In a moment, these four finished their preparations as ordered. The entire group was enveloped in light, forming a powerful defensive barrier—spiritual armor, the ultimate in protection for a paladin.

This armor came in the form of holy mail, light as a feather and imbued with the power to summon the spirits each paladin had forged a pact with. This granted them unfettered access to these spirits’ powers, and what’s more, the evil-quelling abilities added to their weapons neutralized all resistances in their foes, letting them strike for damage at every opportunity. All of this consumed a great deal of energy and thus could not be manifested for very long, but with it, the paladins were the true natural enemies of all monsters.

Readied for battle, the four paladins spread out in all directions, focused on their targets. They would be deploying a simplified Holy Field, and not a moment too soon, because the enemies they detected ahead were almost uncannily powerful. In particular, the magic-born standing before them had a gigantic amount of magical energy, like none he had seen before. It was an A rank—and on the higher end of that scale. Not Rimuru himself, no, but likely one of his closest associates.

It was, in Renard’s mind, an appetizer before the main dish of the demon lord. He wanted to end this fast so he could move on to the biggest fish in the pond—and so he opted to leave nothing on the table for his first strike.

“Launch the Holy Field toward the target!”

But his lack of foresight would cost him. The order was laid out before he had a full grip of his adversary.

The four paladins sprang into action, deploying the holy barrier. The execution was perfect—nothing could have broken out of it from the inside. But it was not complete, a quasi-barrier with a short range and less of a weakening effect on monsters. It could prevent a foe from taking action, but could it fully block attacks from beyond the barrier? That was an open question.

This barrier was deployed in the shape of a pyramid, about fifteen feet to a side, but it left open the possibility of the target launching a large-scale spell before all its magicules were banished. In such a case, perhaps the attack could reach outside the barrier after all. That was one reason why most barriers were built to be much larger than this. But to be fair, even this quasi-barrier could fully prevent magicules from crossing over. It was a paladin’s killer move, one that not even the higher-level magic-born could break through.

Thus, Renard ordered his team to deploy the barrier, keeping a careful eye on all of them. The purifying light surrounding them wouldn’t be enough to kill a target like this, so a stout defense was a necessity. They could attack the foe from the outside—but they’d need to be sure what he was first. If it was one of the rarer types that could deflect damage, care would be required to avoid a massacre. They couldn’t afford any mistakes.

As the paladins wrapped up all their preparations, the dust from the landing finally dissipated. There, in front of them, was a single monster, a slender, tall female with long, purplish hair tied back. On her forehead was a single horn, jet-black in color, and the strange suit she wore struck the curiosity of anyone who saw it.

Her violet eyes turned toward Renard.

“My name is Shion, first secretary for Sir Rimuru. My leader has the following message for you: Choose between submission or death. I am sure you are all intelligent enough to know what those words mean. Drop your weapons and surrender to my forces at once!” she declared haughtily.

The monster calling herself Shion gazed down like some sort of deity as she spoke. Her emphasizing the word first was noticeable across the whole of the wood.

Renard sized up his foe, judging her abilities. He had thought her magicule count put her in the high As, but now even this seemed like folly.

“A terrific sight. Special A…or perhaps she could even become a demon lord, if everything came together just right.”

Judging by the horn, she was an advanced member of the ogre family. An ogre mage or maybe higher— An oni, Renard thought, a mere hop, skip, and jump away from demon lord. And a named oni—definitely a Calamity of a threat, or worse. Disaster, even, should she ever take that plunge into lord-dom. At least one oni of the past, he knew, held a force that was divine in nature, giving them control over nature itself. They were less monsters and more lower-level gods.

He was plainly right to have his team treat her with extreme caution.

“Hmph! Sorry to disappoint you,” Shion calmly replied, “but I am no god, as much as I may resemble one. I am an oni, and something tells me that you think I’m a lot nicer than I truly am.”

Niceness is something nobody facing Shion would accuse her of right now. They had no idea what made her entertain that notion, but really, it was just Shion’s way of warning them.

“An oni? Perhaps there is not much difference, no, but it matters not to us. Divine or not, you are nothing but an evil monster in our eyes. The only god in our dictionary is the one god Luminus!”

This was the core tenet of the Holy Empire of Lubelius, and it was not to be defied. They would never recognize another god, even one with some degree of regional support among the people. If they do not declare themselves to be gods, then fine, but if so, they must be destroyed. Plus, this was just a monster. No matter how much power it wields, there was no need to go easy on a minion of a demon lord.

It was this belief that made Renard respond the way he did. Shion’s retort to this was entirely unexpected.

“I don’t care about your god! You have your choice, now give me your response!”

Submission or death. The non-offer rankled Renard deeply.

“Silence, evil beast. The world shall be purified of unclean creatures like yourself!”

Enraged, he ordered his paladins to launch a Holy Cannon barrage. One of the few offensive spells in the holy-magic family, it worked on the magicule level, dissembling the particles to rob monsters of the very essence that formed their bodies. On a human target, it would merely knock them unconscious with its force; on a monster, it would wipe out their very existence. While it didn’t work on targets imbued with holy elements, monsters were particularly weak against it, for unlike the natural elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, the “darkness” element was incapable of canceling out the “holy” element. Without angelic holy magic, it was impossible to block the Holy Cannon.

Accepting Renard’s order, the paladins went on the attack, firing bolts of holy energy from all sides toward Shion. But she just stood there serenely, the massive blade in her hands deflecting all the energy away. Then, with a dejected why-don’t-they-listen-to-me expression, she turned to Renard once more.

“Is that your answer? If you refuse to submit, then that means it’s time to die!”

Even Renard was shocked. But he wasn’t about to submit to this. Whether this was some local god or not, she was already inside the Holy Field. All they had to do was keep that barrier going, wait for the target to falter under it, and strike the final blow.

But even as he thought that, Renard had to offer Shion praise for her masterful sword skills. She had to be at least a bit weakened by now, but the speed of her moves was every bit a match for his own. Not even he could hide his surprise.

That blade, whatever it was, had the ability to deflect holy energy, which was extremely unusual. Given Holy Cannon’s magicule-corroding effects, any demonic blade offered up against it should have disintegrated into dust. But that large sword looked as fine as ever.

Then one of the paladins handling the barrier and offense let out a pained groan. A Holy Cannon bolt had struck him.

No! Can anyone even do that?!

Renard was shocked. Here she was, apparently taking this holy energy within herself, focusing it on her sword, and literally firing it back at her foes. From a common-sense perspective, it was absolutely impossible, requiring precision on the level of single instances in time—and Shion was pulling it off without breaking a sweat.

Hurriedly, he stopped the attack. The paladin, fortunately, was still conscious, albeit rattled. They would just need to stay calm and figure out another approach—but this move had rattled them all. Attacks going through a Holy Field and striking them were beyond their imagination, an unthinkable circumstance for any paladin. Renard had to bottle it all up as he pondered his next move.

Shion, for her part, was alarmed (or really, annoyed) that she wasn’t seeing the full effect she intended. She had made a clean hit on that paladin, but the damage was negligible. It made her realize that whatever this attack was, it was much less effective on humans than monsters. She had underestimated her foes, and now she was inside this barrier—a clear mistake.

But she was expecting this from the start. She had her own ideas about this, and if anything, this was exactly what Shion wanted.

This binding force was something akin to the Holy Field Rimuru warned her about. It was similar in nature, and the magicule count inside it was beginning to fall. Soon, before very long, Shion’s own force would be affected—and the Spatial Motion she surreptitiously tried out a moment ago was blocked.

Still, this had all been factored into her plan.

“Hey… Hey.” She suppressed her anger as she forced a smile. “Surrender now while I’m still being nice to you.”

It was incredibly haughty of her, not to mention nothing that’d ever shake the will of a paladin, but she was dead serious about it. That, of course, didn’t come across.

“Fool!” Garde shouted back. “Enough of that bluster! You can’t do a thing, locked inside that barrier!”

This howling did nothing to ease Shion’s frustration. She was almost ready to explode—and given how short her fuse usually was, she thought she was doing an exemplary job at keeping it together. It may only be a matter of time now, but still, Shion continued trying to reason with them.

“Look, I’m being fully honest when I say that Sir Rimuru ordered me to avoid killing you as much as possible. Right now, I can promise you that I won’t hit anyone—in fact, I can even let you try some of my famous cuisine! A wonderful idea, wouldn’t you agree? This is your last warning. What’ll it be?”

Her proposal was far too haughtily given for anyone to accept. The Holy Field’s effects only accumulated over time as it purified the magicules caught inside. No magicules means no magic, no mystic arts, no divine force, no magical manipulation, and nothing that impacted the laws of nature. Only the special skills one may or may not have escaped its effects. To the paladins surrounding her, Shion’s bluster merely sounded like a barrage of poor excuses.

But it must be noted that the Holy Field was not a defensive barrier. It wholly shut off all magicule interaction but offered no resistance to objects or blunt physical energy. If you triggered an explosion inside the barrier, for example, it’d still send a shock wave and shrapnel outside of it. The paladins, fully aware of this, were approaching this battle in full armor for a reason.

“We in the paladin force,” Renard replied even as he failed to fully calm his anxiety, “do not negotiate with monsters. I see no need to discuss matters with you further!”

That was enough to push Shion’s patience over the cliff.

“Well said! Have it your way, then, and prepare to be subdued with a maximum of terror!”

Then she smashed her blade to the ground. The force of it ripped through the air, filling it with dust and rocks once more. She grabbed bunches of them at once, hurling a fistful at the knight in front of her.

“Ah…?!”

A single moment—and then a mighty roar, as a small explosion erupted in front of the paladin. The thrown rocks collided with the knight’s shield, pulverizing it into scrap metal. The force of it was astounding. This was her in a weakened state. If it wasn’t for the Holy Field, things would’ve been even worse.

“Don’t let up! Focus on your spiritual armor!”

“Yes,” Garde added, “keep it up! Consider this a demon lord we’re facing!”

The hapless, defenseless paladin hurriedly rebuilt a shield of light for himself, as Shion balled her fists and stared at them all. Undoubtedly, she meant that to finish him off, and seeing it fail enraged her all over again. The gap between that and her apparent intelligence and good looks was hard to swallow.

But at this point, even she had to realize this was going nowhere. Swallowing her anger, she spoke to Renard once more.

“I have an offer.”

“We do not negotiate with monsters. I just told you that.”

“Just listen to me. Like I said, I have orders not to kill you—but as part of that, I need to show you how much more powerful we are than you.”

“……”

“I tried to go easy on those stones I threw, but that’s far more difficult than it sounds. If I go any further with you, I think I might wind up killing one or two of you—”

“That’s a bluff!”

“Don’t listen to her! This is a monster tactic, meant to throw us into confusion!”

Shion smirked upon seeing the paladins’ instinctual response. “Ah, good, I’m glad you’re catching my drift here. So my offer…”

“Don’t let her deceive you,” Garde interrupted. “Let her sweet words enter your ears, and—”

Then, for just a moment, he felt something intensely hot around his right ear. Then came the impact, followed by the sound of the air being ripped apart behind it, rupturing his eardrum. Perhaps it was only his regular mental and physical training that saved him from a concussion.

“Wh-what was…?!”

Turning toward Garde, Renard was shocked to find a large tree behind him torn away from its roots, sending splinters flying as it tumbled to the ground. It made him forget how to speak for a moment.

“Ah…!”

Garde, blood dripping from his ear, realized what had just happened. Shion had tossed another stone—in essence, that’s all it was. But the fist-size stone she chose had brushed past Garde’s head at supersonic speed before smashing into (and through) the tree. She hadn’t missed her target, of course. That ear was her target, and she nailed it.

“Do you even need your ears, if you don’t bother using them? Now shut up and listen.”

The paladins did as they were told.

“You freak of nature…” Garde cursed her under his breath, but he couldn’t will himself to move. Even Renard realized by now that Shion had to be listened to. A direct hit by one of those could potentially kill one of his men. Not even spiritual armor was a bulwark against all physical force. With Shion’s full strength now demonstrated, they had to admit that this wasn’t a bluff at all—if she could fire bolts off faster than Garde the Battlesage could react, it was doubtful the rank and filers could fare much better.

Yes. Hear her out. The longer this dragged on, after all, the weaker she would become. Renard’s choice was clear.

“All right. Let’s hear your say.”

Shion gave him a satisfied nod, smiling defiantly. “Good. Listen to me. I want all of you to hit me with the most powerful attack you have. I promise you that I’ll take it squarely with my own body. If I stay standing, I win, and you submit to my forces. Sound good?”

Renard gave the utterly confident Shion a look of disbelief. Then a small doubt raised itself in his mind: …Does she really not want to kill us at all? Because that was exactly how Shion had been acting this whole time. What for, though…?

But Renard didn’t have time to think about it. Garde, half-deaf, was already pointing his rage at her.

“All right. We’ll take that offer. Men, sync up your spiritual force with me. Renard, you take control of it! That monster’s too dangerous to keep alive!”

Hearing his own name, Renard snapped out of it. “W-wait! We need to talk it over a—”

“Silence! Let’s do it!!”

The other paladins began to pool their forces together as instructed, a torrent of holy power right at the apex of the Holy Field. This was then reduced to pure magical energy, amplified by an injection of Garde’s own strength. Without Renard’s guiding hand, the force of these four paladins would fall out of control.

The midst of battle is no time to wallow in uncertainty. She deliberately requested this from us. She can’t complain about what comes of it.

If she wanted their full strength, he wanted to stake his pride as a paladin to provide it. Calling this a cowardly move—six fighters piling up against one—would be a cop-out. Against a monster, victory was the only thing that mattered.

“All right, Garde. I’ll guide it.”

“Right! Here we go! Infernal Flame!!”

With a spiritual force that blazed like a pyre from the underworld, Garde controlled the towering flames. This was an ultimate form of spiritual magic, borrowing the powers of an elemental lord for the job. It was more power than Garde could control by himself, and now it was all being slammed down into Shion’s body. It was even more powerful than Nuclear Cannon in terms of heat, a pure wave of destructive energy powered by the spiritual particles that formed magic itself.

As for Shion’s response:

“Hee-hee-hee! That certainly fit the bill! Not the attack I was expecting, but so be it. This ought to be the best way to strike fear into your hearts!”

She beamed with glee as she readied her enormous blade. The next moment, she mercilessly cut right through the Infernal Flame—a side effect of her Master Chef unique skill.

Although Shion’s behavior usually indicated no rational planning whatsoever, she had been utilizing multiple skills to produce this moment. First, she invoked the extra skill Multilayer Barrier to protect herself, keeping All-Seeing Eye and Magic Sense active to probe her opponents for weaknesses. Then, using Master Chef’s Optimal Action skill, she read the flow of those heat waves in a single, natural motion, cutting through them to avoid the direct attack. That, of course, didn’t mean the attack failed to burn her skin off and put her in a terrible state. Ultraspeed Regeneration, however, made that no sweat for Shion. Her skin instantly began to fix itself up, returning to normal in the blink of an eye. As brash and reckless as her actions seemed, they were all based on sane, even laudable, logic.

“A promise is a promise. Surrender to my forces and release this barrier.”

Nobody found a ready response to Shion’s declaration. The paladins just nervously glanced at Renard and Garde. Seeing such unrealistic sights in rapid succession froze their brains. Their pride as paladins had just been crushed.

Only Garde remained unconvinced.

“Don’t trifle with us, monster. As long as that barrier remains in place, you are completely helpless! It peeves me to suggest this, but I’d say we should turn this into a battle of endurance!”

“G-Garde?!”

Renard was shocked. Garde was a man of reason, even if his anger sometimes got the best of him, but here he simply didn’t know when to quit. As a paladin, that was perhaps the right choice, but it didn’t seem at all like the Garde he knew.

But time had run out on that proposition. Shion’s aura surged, projecting danger across the woods.

“Ha! You still refuse to accept it? I really will need to kill you now…”

Renard shuddered. All—all that force…?! If this monster willed it, we would all be dead in an instant. Holy Field or not, we can’t anger her…

“We can’t anger her! Stop with the provocation! Put your weapons down and—”

“You fool! A paladin never accepts defeat! Have you forgotten that as well?!”

Garde promptly shot him down. This display from him was unimaginable. If anything, he seemed like a different person.

“Y-you…”

But before Renard’s confusion could fully transform itself into doubt, he was interrupted.

“Hngh!”

With that grunt of force—accompanied by a sharp kreeeeen echoing across the sky—Shion’s blade cut through the barrier. The Holy Field, the source of confidence for all paladins, was shattered.

“N-no…”

“That is a holy barrier!!”

“Is this…some kind of nightmare?!”

“How can a monster destroy a Holy Field?! It blocks all magicules!”

The paladins murmured among themselves, their words and faces full of gloom. Shion, on the other hand, treated all of this as the obvious result.

“…I knew it. It’s not a dense Multilayer Barrier at all; it’s just a Special Barrier modified to change the rules a little bit. Modifying the laws of nature like that happens to be a specialty of mine. I’m good at cooking that up, you could say!”

Renard had no idea what any of that meant, but there was no doubting what she just did. Using Master Chef, she had modified the results the Holy Field projected on the world. Rewriting the cookbooks, in a way, overwriting the barrier with something more to her liking.

That was the Guarantee Results skill, the most valuable tool in the Master Chef arsenal and the main reason why her food had gotten much better as of late. It was perhaps a waste of such a powerful skill to reserve it for the kitchen primarily, the way that she did—but now, in dramatic fashion, she had just showed off its battle applications.

The final results: four paladins, plus two officers, struck dumb with fear. What possible way was there to defend against an opponent who was free to get the results she wanted just by thinking about them? It was useless. The only way to counter that was to overwrite her will with an even bigger one—but that assumed you could mess around with the laws of nature in the first place. If you didn’t wield that kind of power, there was nothing to be done.

Renard, genius that he was, immediately realized what this meant. The fear was numbing to him. Just as Shion predicted, terror had overtaken his heart. But as the leader of this squad, he refused to give up hope. If fighting meant destruction, then best to surrender and find a way to stay alive.

“It can’t be… It’s ridiculous… How—how can this monster…?!”

As Garde babbled helplessly by his side, Renard made his decision, his voice wobbly, as if waking up from a dream.

“…We surrender. I only hope you will offer fair treatment to my forces.”

Finally, mercifully, Shion gave him a broad grin. For the first time, Renard looked right at her. That firm, guileless grin.

Then, mulling over his own words, he regained his calm and reflected on the day’s events.

It seemed certain that this monster Shion really wasn’t interested in killing them. That wasn’t Shion’s will, but that of her master, the demon lord Rimuru. This made the story of Rimuru ordering a demon to kill Archbishop Reyhiem seem a little unnatural to him. And come to think of it, the whole reason Hinata traveled here was in hopes of building a friendly relationship with Rimuru. Why would the demon lord himself seek to interfere with that? If he was trying to plunge the world into war and chaos, it would make sense—but looking at Shion here, Renard could tell that wasn’t the case.

Which meant:

Wait. Am I the one being used here…?

Hearing that the demon lord Valentine, the nemesis that snuffed out the lives of so many of his fellow classmates, was connected to Hinata had made him lose his critical thinking skills. Had that been used to trick him…? By who? The Seven Days Clergy, of course.

Reaching this point in his mind, Renard felt the blood drain from his head. Now, he realized, the force he captained was nothing but a hindrance to Hinata and her mission. Stealing a glance, he could see her facing off against Rimuru right now, and neither side seemed in the mood to talk. It was the calm before the storm.

This, this is… I am so sorry, Lady Hinata! Thanks to me, any attempt at negotiation was…

Now Renard knew the truth. But the truth arrived too late to do anything apart from watch the battle. There was no room for him to intervene.

And then the battle started, Hinata and Rimuru crossing swords before Renard’s eyes…

It was a stroke of luck that Hinata Sakaguchi ran into Shizue Izawa. Even if it was just for an instant—a mere month—she was the only person that Hinata ever truly opened up to.

In that short period, Hinata had learned all of Shizue’s sword skills, and when she was done, she left. Hinata was afraid of being rejected, and in the end, she was afraid she’d lose the warmth she had managed to gain this one time. She was fully aware of how awkward this was, and she did it anyway.

She had killed her father for the sake of her mother—but all it did was break her mother’s heart. Despite it all, she loved her husband. Perhaps her mother got into religion because she needed prayer in order to deal with it. But there was no eradicating unhappiness from the world. That was the natural, obvious truth. Trying to make it all go away would accomplish nothing.

Hinata didn’t want to admit that. She wailed at the unfairness of reality, dreaming of a world where everyone could live in peace.

What if her mother prayed to make up for her daughter’s crimes? If that was the case, did her mother really hate her? Just imagining it racked Hinata with fear. That’s why she saw coming to this world as such a fortunate thing. Her being here freed her mother from the pain, no doubt, and Hinata wouldn’t have to go crazy any longer. She could just go on and on, like a machine, and not worry about anything.

Such were the kinds of fantasies Hinata lived with.

That was why Hinata could never accept Shizue. If she did, and wound up hated for it, Hinata would likely make an attempt on her life. She knew that full well, and it drove her to leave before it happened. The only broken one here, she thought, is me.

The power she gained allowed her to live in a world full of despair, one where people could take other people’s lives all too easily. But in the midst of it, she came across a scene that proved a shock to her. One where a calamity-class monster attacked, killing many, while others fought to keep children safe. None of them fled, as they formed a human shield to protect them.

And here she thought the world was full of nothing but people who cared only to keep themselves alive. It left an impression on her.

In this world, those who fight were called paladins. Individuals who put their bodies on the line for other people, even it meant the ultimate sacrifice. People who patrolled the area around this city, shouldering the duty of protecting humankind.

That way of life resonated with Hinata. She decided to become a paladin herself, taking advantage of her own power. If she could devote herself fully to battle, there was no need to worry about anything else.

Thus, Hinata found a way to atone for her sins. And now, ten years later, Hinata was another protector of humankind.

The days were packed with monster combat. She couldn’t really say when these constant moments, the same thing happening over and over again, began to bore her.

Once she became captain of the Crusaders, the measures she enacted had reduced casualties down to astonishingly low levels. They could make accurate predictions of where monsters would appear, and how much damage they’d cause. They worked better as teams now, revising their patrols for optimum efficiency. Reworking the system had reduced the mayhem, producing results that were nothing short of impressive.

Hinata could point to that as the reason the knights trusted her so much. She had to laugh at the irony of her behind-the-scenes connection to the demon lord Valentine, but she could see that was the best, most rational way to keep the peace in this land.

She didn’t let it bother her. She had no regrets. Under the god Luminus, all were equal—and only in a fully managed world can people enjoy true happiness.

Now, though, the situation was poor. Laughably poor. But it had also led to a breakthrough.

There was no longer any room for negotiation. She had to win, or else she wouldn’t even have the chance to explain her actions. It didn’t seem like he was willing to listen to her, perhaps as payback for ignoring him so willfully last time.

The shoe really is on the other foot this time around…

Hinata chuckled at herself. Things had changed so much that she began to miss those days of boredom.

There isn’t a single shred of kindness in this world, is there?

She could whine about it all she wanted, but her mind was already made up. There was no point worrying, or even thinking, about it. Victory was the only way she could break out of this. Were her beliefs right or wrong? That hardly mattered any longer, as her mind shifted solely to how she could win this.

Hinata sized up Rimuru. Arnaud and the others had moved away with their own opponents; it was just the two of them now.

Silently, she invoked her Measurer unique skill to look him over. He may as well have been a different person from before. Rimuru was a demon lord, and there was no telling how deep these waters went.

Oh boy. Look at all that growth. The idea of him warring with humankind makes me shudder.

If not even Measurer could fully gauge him, it meant Rimuru was either at her level or higher. She moved on, invoking Usurper, her other unique skill and the one absolute advantage she could always enjoy over those superior to her. It let her effortlessly see through and steal the target’s skills and arts—and while that didn’t mean she could use them all to their full potential, taking away the skills her opponent worked so hard to obtain was, in its own way, a cruel and merciless gesture.

If the target was below Hinata in skill, the evaluation results provided were always “not applicable.” It meant she couldn’t take that target’s skills, even though that had no effect on her eventual victory. If the target was better than her, Usurper could either “fail” or “succeed.” Ending with one of those results meant this was a pretty strong foe—but success meant she knew all the target’s skills and arts, and if it failed, she could just try again, as many times as she wanted. No matter how formidable the foe, she could always make the skill succeed given enough tries. It was just a matter of staying on guard, buying time, and waiting for the right moment. Pull it off right, and Hinata’s victory was assured.

When she fought Rimuru for the first time, Usurper came back with a “not applicable” for her. It convinced Hinata that she had nothing to worry about. She totally downplayed his chances, and while having Ifrit summoned on her was a bit of a surprise, it still wasn’t a serious problem. She had honed her skills to the point that she had Force Takeover, a rule-breaking skill that was fully effective against weaker foes.

Forcing her to turn to that, Hinata had thought, was impressive of Rimuru. But that was all.

Hinata thus invoked Usurper as a starter, just to see what kind of enemy she was dealing with. This time, though, it failed her. The skill went through the motions…and once it was done, the result it returned to her was “blocked.”

That was the second time she had seen that. The first was against Luminus Valentine.

So you’re in the same lofty heights as Luminus…?

Hinata was impressed. And in such a short time, too. Trickery wasn’t going to achieve much here.

She took the hefty Dragonbuster sword off her back and tossed it aside, realizing it would be no help at all to her. Instead, she drew the weapon Luminus gave her—Moonlight, a legend-class blade. Protecting her was her Holy Spirit Armor, the “original” that was granted to her other paladins in spiritual form. It was one of the Western Holy Church’s greatest countermeasures, an item wielded by the great Heroes of the past, built for tackling dragons and monsters. Only those truly beloved by the spirits could use it.

The light shrouded Hinata, settling itself into the shape of glowing armor over her form. Now she was free of all restrictions and stronger than an Enlightened—a Saint in terms of force. Now, it was a clash of power against power—and she was willing to put it all on the line.

The boring routine her life had become had just reached its end.

Waging war without any hope of winning was the work of a madman—but here, Hinata’s heart was singing. She smiled a little. Rimuru asked if she had received the message, which meant he was ready to settle this with a duel.

I suppose I can absolve myself with a victory here…

Her mind and heart made up, she let it beat out its frenetic rhythm as she pointed her blade at Rimuru.

Hinata pointed her sword at me.

She heard the message, and she still decided to tangle with me? I thought she wanted to talk when she threw that weapon away, but I guess not—she just whipped out an even meaner-looking one, eyes boring down upon me.

Ah well. Let’s win this and have her give me the story then.

Facing off against her like this, I couldn’t help but remember that this lady had no weaknesses at all. Out of any existing weapons in this world (the ones I had seen anyway), this had to be a far cry above anything else.

I took out my katana to address it. If I knew it was gonna shake out like this, I should’ve had Kurobe finish up that katana I had cooking for my own personal use. One had been sitting in my Stomach for a while, steeping in a steady stream of magicules and now a healthy-looking shade of black from tip to handle, but it was in Kurobe’s workshop right now. I had waited so long for it, I figured there was no major rush. Faced with Hinata’s blade, though, this substitute I had in my hand seemed a little lacking. Better keep it within my aura for protection and try to avoid a lot of swordplay.

So I had Uriel take control of my Magic Aura skill, covering the blade in dark, thundering flame. All set now. Let’s see what Hinata does.

We kicked off with a few ultra-high-speed exchanges. It had only just started, and she was going all out.

The speed of Hinata’s sword was staggering. Mind Accelerate raised my brain’s computational speed to a million times normal, and it still just barely let me react. It even reminded me of my fight against Milim. But I wasn’t losing. I’d deflect the blow, then return with a slash of my own.

We had exchanged a few blows at this point, but none of us had landed a strike. No grazing blows to my body, either, which I was glad for. We were testing each other out, but I still couldn’t fathom what she was capable of. Even with the support of Raphael and the power of a demon lord, nothing. She has to be some kinda monster. Frankly, I thought I was gonna overwhelm her a little more. I mean, yeah, she’s strong, but as a true demon lord, I figured that’d give me a decisive bodily advantage—but we were even.

Hinata, apparently reading the path of my sword with robotic precision, always lunged in at just the right moment. There were no extraneous movements in her flow, and even when I slashed back, she’d just shrug it off and give me a flurry of sharpened blows, poking at me in search of weaknesses. The old me wouldn’t have had a chance, I bet—meaning, in other words, that Hinata wasn’t really trying last time. Lucky me, I suppose.

I couldn’t hold anything back here, either, then.

Guess he’s not playing around, Hinata thought.

She had hoped to overwhelm him with her sword, making him accept defeat at an early stage. But Rimuru was easily her equal. It had taken her ten years to polish her sword skills, and he was countering all of them.

The human body has its limits. Only by using magic and skills and arts to their fullest could you finally duke it out against monsters. And Rimuru didn’t even need to breathe. His endurance would never wane, his muscles never ache, and no magic healing was required to ensure that.

Heh-heh… Standing in the same ring like this makes me realize all over again how unfair this is…

She understood the disadvantage she faced from the start, dealing with monsters. Survival of the fittest was the rule of law in this world, making it vital to set up all the conditions you needed for victory in advance. She revved up Measurer, speeding her mind a thousand times, even pushing it past the limit as she gauged her surroundings. It placed maximum pressure on her brain, even bursting capillaries—something she handled with self-regenerative magic before the enemy could enjoy a single glimpse of weakness.

In this state, the world seemed to be frozen to her—but it still wasn’t enough. She used Measurer’s Compute Prediction skill to figure out the paths of Rimuru’s attacks. That was how cornered she felt. Every arrow in the quiver needed to be used—but Rimuru still looked like he was taking it easy by comparison.

She wiped away the drop of blood that just dripped from her nose, ensuring it wasn’t noticed by anyone, and gathered her breath. If this went on for too long, defeat was guaranteed. Even in her present Saint-level status, Hinata’s human body limited her. If she wanted to become a demi-human spiritual body, she still had one more wall to overcome.

Usurper, her main lifeline, was blocked and useless. The one advantage she could always count on against stronger foes was gone. Instead, she had to overwhelm Rimuru with all the technical skills she had cultivated over the years—and this was the result?

The sword Luminus granted her housed a scary amount of power. Using her magic force to impart an aura into it let her pelt foes with the kind of lethal damage basic regeneration skills couldn’t cope with. Even foes with Ultraspeed Regeneration could be cut in half with this thing.

If she could just take an arm off with it, Hinata thought, this would be over. No killing. If she could have Rimuru accept her victory, then it’d be settled. But she just couldn’t land that strike. Rimuru’s masterful grasp of the air around them, plus his honed physical skills, let him accurately predict every motion of her sword.

I can’t get over his growth—but only in terms of physical ability. I’m not so sure his technical skill has kept up…

He had evolved, and greatly so, but his innate talents hadn’t changed that much from before. Even if he could steal arts the way Hinata could, all that involved was grasping the fundamentals and having your body remember the moves. Making full, actual use of them took years of repetitive practice. That had to apply to Rimuru just as much as it applied to her—and she was counting on that for her victory.

This might come down to fighting experience, and Rimuru was sorely lacking there. Hinata could see that, and so she switched tactics, alternating her tempo to throw him off guard. Feinting, in other words. Taking full advantage of her polished skills, she did her best to lead Rimuru to his doom…

Suddenly, Hinata’s sword began to speed up.

Her sword skills seemed to change gears every other moment. My brain was going a million times faster than normal, but it was like she’d have her blade here, then the next moment, bam, it’s there, like a jittery online video.

This isn’t funny, I thought as I did my darnedest to fend her off. It was Hinata Sakaguchi in full swing. I knew this already, but they didn’t call her “defender of humankind” just to be nice.

So I kept watch over her as we continued to exchange flurries of blows. She had a bit of a smile on her face, watching me as if her victory was assured. She didn’t need her eyes to pull off those moves. They were focused right on me, like sensors tuned to pick up on everything in the area, detecting attacks. The core of her body remained firm, keeping her in a natural position that could handle any advance or retreat. None of her moves were forced; she could pull off a variety of attacks from a relaxed neutral position without any windup required.

How she was reading all my attacks, I didn’t know, but I was clearly an open book to her. Meanwhile, I was watching her attack motions, then using my physical gifts to find a way to dodge. It wasn’t exactly smooth-looking, no. I was being toyed with, and if this kept up, I was guaranteed to lose.

I was pretty sure I was more physically gifted, but for some reason, she knew every attack before I unleashed it. As a technical fighter, she was clearly better. In this battle, she wasn’t letting her guard down at all. Everything—the atmosphere, her personality—was different from last time. And those strikes, laden with as much force as they were, were bound to sorely damage me if they hit.

Understood. The blow would not be lethal, but it would drain a large amount of magical energy.

Yeah, see? And not being lethal was great and all, but one poorly parried strike, and I was gonna pay dearly for it. A few in a row, and I’d be in danger.

According to Professor Raphael, that sword of hers had some kind of special force as well. Its wavelengths could change the local laws of nature, letting it break through my Multilayer Barrier. For real? It can’t be. But I doubted Professor Raphael was wrong.

…

Oh? Sorry? Something up?

Report. Next attack incoming.

Oops. No time to be lost in thought. Hinata had a sharp sword on her, and she worked it freely, moving from jabs to sweeps in a single, dance-like motion. She was nothing if not steady, shunning all magic or fancy moves and relying on textbook swordplay to engage me. To be honest, the only other person in this world who could take on Hinata in a swordfight was Hakuro—and unfortunately, Hakuro would probably lose. The difference in potential was just too great.

Looking at it like this, Hinata was truly a combat genius. No half-hearted attacks would ever work on her. For example, summoning a Replication of yourself to fight her was pointless, because ultimate skills could only be used by the original body, while Replications could only use up to unique skills. Hinata would just mow those clones down pronto. Even if you took Soei’s approach and assigned each copy only the skills they needed, that gave you no freedom to change your tactics midway, which meant you’d never keep up with her.

Tricks like that could leave you open, which was taboo. Perhaps it wasn’t the most exciting strategy, but it’d be wisest to wait Hinata out until she got fatigued. Fatigue never happened to me, after all. But now look at her—she’s speeding up her slashes!

…Wait, no. Hang on. I can’t read her anymore. I was watching her motion, taking evasive action, but now she was pursuing me with follow-up strikes, anticipating where I’d land each time. Wait, this can’t be right…

Understood. You are being lured into the area she plans to attack.

Ah, that makes sense. Wherever I try to escape to, Hinata’s always there with the perfect attack. In other words, she can make me go wherever she wants?

My clothing got ripped. The grazing blows were starting to pile up faster. Oh, crap. This is really, really bad. Professor! Professor Raphael!!

My only chance was to have Raphael bail me out. Isn’t there anything we can do? Think, dude!

Report. Predict Future Attack learned. Use this skill?

Yes

No

…Whoa. Glad I asked. This guy’s unstoppable. I always knew the prof would come through in a pinch. I had trouble figuring out what it said out of nowhere, but that sounded like one hell of a skill I just acquired, so…

Report. It was not acquired. It was learned.

Um, okay? I don’t care, I grumbled to myself.

As the professor put it, observing Hinata’s movements, it reasoned that she must be predicting my attacks in order to dodge them all so well. Meaning it had learned from watching her during our battle together.

…Wait, it can do that?!

Understood. Yes, it is possible.

Huh. Guess so. And I really did have the skill now, so it wasn’t lying.

I immediately used that skill, and when I did, I could see streaks of light in my vision—printed into my brain, if you will—like any of my other senses.

One of them was glowing. I brought my sword up to block its trajectory, then marveled at how effortlessly it let me block Hinata’s blade. Those light streaks must represent the slashes and thrusts currently possible from my adversary’s position, with their projected paths. A few more repetitions, and I noticed that some of these streaks were black in color—this meant unpredictability and a more threatening strike down the road. In other words, I suppose, all her feints and low-level attacks could now be pre-calculated, but a master like Hinata couldn’t be predicted all the time.

This pre-calculation wasn’t even the scary part about this move. That lay in its accuracy. The streaks of light didn’t represent possibilities; if the prediction was successful, there was a 100 percent chance of an attack coming down that way.

And if that was the case, Hinata was no longer a threat to me. Her feints were no longer feints; they were just another step down the road to perdition.

I won!

And with that newfound confidence, I let my body flow and followed Predict Future Attack’s guidance, attempting to wrest Hinata’s sword from her hand…

It was instinct, a baseless hunch in her mind, and it told her that letting her sword continue along this way would be a fatal mistake.

Hinata preferred a logical approach to battle. She never engaged in behavior that ran counter to the evidence at hand. But this time, she believed in her sixth sense. That saved her. It was only a feint, luckily enough, and she could force her blade away from its path—or really, she shoved her own body in the way, making contact with Rimuru and exiting to a safe distance.

Rimuru looked a little surprised at this but readied his blade once more, waiting for her. Hinata did the same—but something was different. Now, Rimuru seemed like a different fighter from before. She attempted a feint. He ignored it, letting the sword whiz by like it didn’t even register, and slashed at Hinata instead. There wasn’t a moment’s hesitation, as if he knew exactly what Hinata would do next.

…Was that a coincidence? No… It’s even more accurate than my Compute Prediction…

It was disturbingly close to predicting the future. She felt like he was almost perfectly reading her thoughts.

The speed he’s growing at is incredible. I may outclass him in sword skill, but his latent ability more than makes up for that. Nothing half-hearted will work against him. And if it doesn’t…

Coldly, impartially, Hinata compared herself to Rimuru. At that point, she realized, her chances of victory plummeted a shocking amount. She had hoped for a quick resolution, as more time would just shore up her opponent’s position, and here was the result. If she wanted to beat this guy, she now realized, she had to throw away all niceties, any effort to “go easy” or not actively kill him.

There was only one answer left. To break out a move she normally never showed in public and to grasp victory with it.

She kept her distance, aiming for a fresh start to work with.

It looked like things were largely settled around them. Everyone was stopped, as if time was frozen for them; they were all focused on Hinata and Rimuru’s battle. The two of them couldn’t even attack each other any longer—they could both read so far ahead in time, they could predict the results before they took action.

Time passed.

“…Rimuru, I have a proposal.”

“What is it?”

“Let’s settle this with the next strike. I have a finishing move, and I intend to put all my power into it. If you can withstand it, you win. If not…”

“I lose?”

Hinata nodded. “But let me warn you in advance—this move is dangerous. Are you willing to accept this?”

She thought he would. And now that Hinata had kindly provided this warning, Rimuru was no longer in danger of dying from the strike. It meant Hinata could use it without any regrets. If she did kill him, the high-level magic-born under him would turn into berserk menaces, striking at all humankind without prejudice. Hinata, her strength exhausted, would be killed at once, followed by all her weakened paladin fighters. To avoid that, Rimuru needed to be kept alive.

This move was called Meltslash, part of the Overblade family, and normally, she’d prepare it on the sly, not letting anyone notice it in advance. It was a combination of magic and swordplay, and its force was massive. There was no way to temper it in a feeble attempt to reduce its lethality. That’s why she could only rarely use it.

Besides, if I showed this to you, you’d just copy it like it was the easiest thing in the world, wouldn’t you?

She had reserved Meltslash only for foes she intended to kill. Revealing it to Rimuru, who could learn anything after a single repetition, frustrated her. But so be it. Nothing else was holding her back.

…I need to settle this here!

The only way to make Rimuru admit defeat was to show him just how overwhelmingly outclassed he was.

“But let me warn you in advance—this move is dangerous. Are you willing to accept this?”

She must’ve been pretty darn confident about this finisher of hers. But it didn’t make sense to me. Why would she give me advance warning?

Understood. No desire can be detected on Hinata Sakaguchi’s part to kill you. If she is cautioning you, it indicates just how dangerous a move it is.

I see. She doesn’t want to kill me.

Wait, what? Didn’t she come to do just that? I mean, yeah, something about this did seem kinda weird to me. Too late to stew over it now, though. There’d be a lot more time later—all the time in the world, in fact, once I win this.

“Sure. I accept your challenge.”

Hinata smiled at me. “Heh-heh… I thought you would.”

There was something really pure to that smile. It made her look younger than her years—in fact, she could almost pass for being in her teens. It felt much more natural than the usual, battle-hardened Hinata I was familiar with. This wasn’t some grin of cruelty, no derisive snickering. Maybe this was the real Hinata.

“But no hard feelings after this, okay?” I warned her. “If you lose, promise me you won’t mess around with this nation any longer.”

Hinata gave me a quizzical look, then nodded, shaking off her indecision. “…All right. I promise. I agreed to this duel because you requested it; I want to discuss the future with you as well.”

She seemed up to the thought, at least, but hang on. Something she said didn’t seem quite right.

“You accepted it because I wanted it…?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I received your message.”

My message had started with a few polite greetings, then moved on to the topic of Shizue and the children stranded on this planet, in an attempt to ease our misunderstandings. In addition, I offered her a forum where we could discuss our issues calmly with each other. In the end, I capped it off with this:

“So I hope you will agree to come to the bargaining table, but if I’ve failed to convince you, I’ll take you on. It can be you and me, in a one-on-one duel, so nobody else will have to be involved. If possible, though, I’d like to end this with verbal discussion, not physical destruction. So give it all the thought you need, and I’ll be waiting for what’ll hopefully be a positive response. For now, see you later.”

…Or something close to that anyway; I forgot the exact words. I definitely wasn’t gunning for a duel; it’s just that Hinata’s so stubborn that I figured I should throw that in or else she’d tune the whole thing out.

“Here I go.”

“Whoaaaa!!”

Oops. As I was pondering all this, Hinata had readied herself for the strike. We definitely still had some misunderstandings between us, but with things how they were, I could say nothing to stop her now. It was crazy, how focused she looked; no words would ever reach her brain.

Ah well. If I hold out, I win. Simple.

It appeared that Benimaru and the rest had secured victory while I was busy. Some of them were lying on the ground, some seated, and few had the energy to do much else. Only Benimaru and Soei looked like they had any gas left in the tank. Even the Three Lycanthropeers were as spent as the paladins; I guess they never got around to Animalizing for this fight.

Soei, though… What was he doing? The female knight he was engaged with seemed to be unhurt, but for some reason, she was looking at Soei and visibly blushing. I could see her fidgeting nervously on her feet, even, which only added to the mystery. It was like she had a crush on the guy or something. What’s up with that? Aren’t we kind of all locked in combat right now? I’ll need to inquire about that later.

Then we had Shion. She must’ve totally stormed through her battle, and she even had paladins meekly following behind her. Prisoners? Some of them looked wounded, but none fatally. A little recovery potion, and we’d be all good. I’d need to dole out some praise for that performance.

That just left Hinata and me. And we were just one attack away from wrapping up.

“Benimaru.”

“Yes?”

“If, by some chance, this fells me, you’re taking my post.”

“Ha. Surely you jest. Nobody here would ever doubt your victory, Sir Rimuru.”

I shrugged at his cheerful evaluation. Yep. I had people here that really loved me. Unlike my stash of “special” videos I kept in a hidden directory on my computer back home, this was one treasure I couldn’t afford to leave behind. I wasn’t that irresponsible.

“All right. In that case, wait for my victory right there!”

“Yes sir! Be brave!”

I nodded and turned my gaze to Hinata.

Looking around, it seemed to Hinata like the stage was set. She could see her exhausted squadmates nearby, but they appeared to be receiving better treatment than she’d expected. Prisoner abuse must have been strictly prohibited.

As it would be, I imagine. Judging by your disposition, I suppose I should have believed you from the start.

The thought certainly took some time to occur to Hinata, but it was a sincere one. And it still wasn’t too late. She could just win this fight, and they could build a new relationship.

She corralled her rising excitement, turning it into a prayer as she began to chant a spell in her clear voice. That wasn’t strictly necessary, but she wanted to show it off to Rimuru. If he was going to steal it anyway, she wanted to be sure his copy was a perfect one. This was a Disintegration spell, and now its force was gathered around Hinata’s left hand, letting out a blinding light. Glowing particles fluttered around it, creating an otherworldly sight, and then she imbued her Moonlight sword with this mystical force, as if gently caressing the blade with one hand.

Now everything was ready. Her sword contained the strongest magic possible now, and there was nothing it couldn’t slash through.

“Are you ready for this?”

“Bring it!”

“Here we go… Meltslash!!”

Hinata, a glowing orb of light, lunged for Rimuru.

A bright light. Not the glint of a sword, but her entire body, with shiny particles shooting out of it, as she advanced at a superhuman speed that went way beyond what I expected.

The sword she wielded had the power to dispel and evaporate all types of evil.

Report. Unable to defend. Unable to evade…!

I had never heard Raphael sound legitimately panicked before. Even with my senses enhanced a millionfold, the light looked like it was going at regular speed—a sign of just how fast she was going.

Between the distance, the angle, and the timing, Hinata was aiming below my stomach. She must have figured I wouldn’t die if my head stayed intact, but even if she didn’t intend to kill me, this move was way too dangerous. I couldn’t evade it, Multilayer Barrier was meaningless, and that light was spiritual in nature, evil-dispelling, capable of tearing down anything it touched. The moment we made contact, it would sear through my body.



Report. It is suggested to sacrifice your ultimate skill Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, to cancel out this attack.

I knew I could rely on old Professor Raphael at a time like this.

As much as I hated to let go of Belzebuth, I didn’t have much choice here. Out of all the suggestions it had, this was the most likely one to work, so there wasn’t much point wavering on a decision. At this speed, besides, aiming practically didn’t matter. It’s not like I could adjust my trajectory midway.

Raphael used Predict Future Attack to calculate the point Hinata aimed at, activating Belzebuth at that exact spot. The moment her sword hit me, Belzebuth would swallow it all up—or so the plan went.

Pretty simple. No reason to waver. And in another few scant moments, Hinata’s skill crossed paths with Belzebuth.

………

……

…

The result? Well, I survived. I thought I wasn’t gonna for a second, but I did.

“Heh-heh-heh… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

I could hear Hinata’s laughter ringing in my ears as I was lying there on the ground. All the magicules in the area had been purified; Universal Detect wasn’t working for me, making this the first time in a while that I “heard” using my actual eardrums. It was more unnerving an experience than a nostalgic one.

My body couldn’t move. Canceling out Hinata’s strike consumed a vast amount of magicules—in terms of damage, it probably wiped out over 70 percent of my store. Which, hey, it’s fine as long as I’m alive…but what a scary attack she had up her sleeve. If she busted that out without warning me… Well, just thinking about it made a chill run down my spine.

“I’m impressed. In the midst of that, you took the attack full-on? On purpose?”

Huh? What’s Hinata talking about? What kind of idiot would intentionally take an attack like that?

…

Um, hold on…

Perplexed at Raphael’s suddenly odd behavior, I decided to ask it a question. But the prof was silent. Hiding something, likely.

“Well, if you took it and lived, I lose. It’s not like I can fight beyond this.”

The protective light around Hinata disappeared…or fizzled out, really. She was spent. Even that amazing sword of hers was gone, gobbled up by Belzebuth. She could no longer offer any more resistance to anyone. Only her dignity was intact, her head held high, as she waited for my reply.

“Yeah. We’ll call it a win for me…”

The battle was over. But the problem hadn’t been solved.

As I attempted to declare victory over Hinata, I spotted something out the corner of my eye. Hinata noticed it, too, and turned toward it.

Up ahead, coming our way, was a large sword.

Report. Thought interference and magicule instability detected on target. It will explode soon.

The target was the great sword itself. If someone was interfering with it… Was it an attack aimed at us?!

“No! Are these the depths you’ll sink to, Seven Days?!”

Hinata screamed out as she stood in front of me. I was still immobile. And then, the promised explosion. And then I could see Hinata’s body slowly crumple.

