

Chapter LV: Aetna

Of course, as we were getting ready to leave, I realized that things had been suspiciously calm for too long, because Spartacus was missing in action, and that led to the whole group spreading out to look for him throughout the imperial palace. It wasn't strictly necessary, since I could just search using my bugs, but there *were* a few places I couldn't check myself, courtesy of our new friend, El-Melloi II.

Naturally, I was the one who found him. It turned out that he had never left the baths the night before and had spent the entire time relaxing in there, just enjoying the hot water for hours on end. I couldn't be sure, but he may even have fallen asleep at some point. It was impossible to tell, because unlike a living, breathing human being, he hadn't shriveled up like a prune.

I was a little jealous of the fact that he might actually have slept better than I did, and in a position that would have had me waking up sore, to boot.

With Spartacus retrieved, we had no more reason to stick around or waste time, so we grouped up and began the trek south towards the city gates. Even so early in the morning, with the sun still on its way up into the sky, most of the city had already woken up, and the citizens were out and about doing their daily tasks.

We walked in silence for a while, with Arash and Emiya taking the head and tail of our group to act as both guard and deterrent for any would-be pickpockets or rabble-rousers, before Ritsuka spoke up.

“Senpai,” he said, addressing me.

I glanced over at him.

“Need something, Ritsuka?”

“There's something I've been wondering about,” he admitted. “I...don't know if you could answer it?”

If he was looking for a solid answer to *that*, then he hadn't given me anywhere near enough to go on.

“Ohoho,” Rika chortled, grinning a cheshire grin, “is Onii-chan about to confess his heartfelt feelings?”

Ritsuka shot her a glare, unamused.

“Go ahead and ask, Ritsuka,” I told him, cutting off any argument that might have started.

He held the glare for a second longer, and then turned back away from her.

“I know it's not the only reason we're going to Mount Etna,” he began, “but couldn't we heal Boudica if we made a contract with her, so she could just get energy from the Holy Grails we recovered from Fuyuki and Orléans? Or even use our First Aid spells to help speed things up?”

“Hey, yeah!” said Rika, realization dawning in her voice. “Queen Booty could be up and at ‘em way faster like that, couldn’t she?”

“U-um,” Boudica stuttered, her expression pained, “I-I mean, about that, Ritsuka, Rika...”

“There are a couple of reasons why we can’t,” I answered him. “Or, well, even if we tried that, it wouldn’t work as well as you want it to. First, the energy the Grails provide may be virtually limitless, but the entire reason we can’t just bring everyone along in these Singularities is because all of that energy has to get channeled through us to reach our Servants. As far as I know, none of us is particularly spectacular when it comes to our Magic Circuits, so even with all three of us splitting the burden, the amount of that energy that we can channel to Boudica would still take at least a day to rebuild her arm.”

Probably. At the very least, it would take hours, and that would be hours of us keeping our Circuits active and open as long and as wide as we could. The sort of stress that would put on us would be very dangerous, especially out in the middle of nowhere, and it would have the equally dangerous side effect of hobbling the Servants who would have to take much greater care not to overstress us while we recovered.

“That fits,” El-Melloi II added. “Whatever system Chaldea is using provides the lion’s share of support to keep your Servants manifested, but for anything more than that basic support, the Master has to at least act as the conduit.”

“Second,” I went on, “the First Aid spell is designed mostly to repair flesh wounds. For Servants, that means we can just keep throwing it at them until they’re healed, as long as everything is still attached and there hasn’t been major damage done to their Spiritual Core. For Boudica...”

I gestured at her missing arm, which was most definitely not still attached to her body. If it hadn’t evaporated away the instant she lost it, then even if she and Spartacus had carried it back, I wasn’t sure we could have reattached it like that. Aife might have had something that could help, what with those Primordial Runes being as powerful as they were, but since it was gone, the point was moot.

“Oh,” said Ritsuka, disappointed.

I looked his way again. “Have you been worried about this since she came back from that fight?”

He shook his head. “I’ve just been thinking about it since we fought Caligula. Boudica had to stay back then, and if she’d been able to help...”

“Not every Stray Servant you meet will be willing to make a contract with you, Ritsuka,” Boudica said quietly. “Even the ones you count as allies. For some, it’s a matter of freedom, and some will just have personal hang-ups about it.”

“You said that you couldn’t agree to a contract unless Spartacus did, too,” Ritsuka began. “Then, if he agreed to a contract, would you be willing to join us, as well?”

“It’s not that simple,” Boudica said reluctantly.

“You may not have much of a choice,” I told her. “Depending on who else the United Empire has, having the support of us Masters and our Command Spells might make the difference between winning and losing for you.”

Boudica glanced at Nero, a brief shift of her head and eyes that I wasn't sure anyone else caught. “I'll think about it. If we find out things are truly that dire at Mount Etna, then...”

She trailed off, refusing to commit even now.

So there were limits to how much even someone like Boudica was willing to set aside her own grudges. I guess it really was too much to expect someone to be that perfect. We all had our limits. Things we just couldn't bring ourselves to do, because the pain was too sharp or too fresh, or even just the trust was too lacking.

I didn't think I would ever have been able to work alongside Jack Slash, for example. Not unless I had had him firmly under my thumb as Khepri.

“Emperor Nero may have something to say about that,” Aífe commented slyly.

“Mm-mm! It is perfectly acceptable!” Nero replied. “I can't say I fully understand how it all works, but as long as Ritsuka, Rika, and Taylor are my cherished friends and comrades, then it matters little whether Queen Boudica is technically working with them or with me, for it is functionally the same in either case!”

“You know it, Best Buddy!” Rika held out her fist, and Nero tapped it, as was becoming their custom. Together, they mimed an explosion.

It didn't quite work like that, but since there was no way for us to really fight the United Empire without Nero and Rome, there was no reason to say anything about it. Not for now, at least.

Getting to the outskirts of the city and past the gates took a lot longer than it had the night previous, owing to the sheer number of people that now filled the streets. “Congested” would be a good term for what it looked like, and even if the regular citizenry was giving us a wide berth as we walked through them, the sheer number of people who had to get out of our way in the first place slowed us down much more than I really would have liked.

There really wasn't anything to be done about it, though. Even at my most callous, I wasn't so cruel and inhumane as to suggest that we didn't have to worry about trampling them underfoot because everything would be put to right once we solved this Singularity. Whether or not it was true didn't change the fact that it was wrong, and it was definitely a mindset that shouldn't be encouraged regardless.

What it did mean, however, was that it took the better part of an hour and a half to reach the city's southern gate, and by the time we were outside and far enough away to breathe and mount up, it was closer to noon than dawn. Once we got that far, however, another concern cropped up.

“So how does this work?” I asked El-Melloi II. “I know that a Demi-Servant like Mash can't go into spirit form because she's actually a living human being, but does that apply to you, too?”

El-Melloi II opened his mouth to say something, but stopped, and his brow furrowed in thought. “You know,” he said at length, “I never thought about it. It wasn’t something that ever came up before.”

“If a Pseudo-Servant and a Demi-Servant are the same result of different processes,” Mash began.

“Except you’re a living human base who has been possessed by a Heroic Spirit,” El-Melloi said, cutting across her. He gnashed his teeth, as though he was chewing on the butt of a cigar that wasn’t there. “Technically, I was, too, but it’s more like my base pattern was used as a support structure for a Heroic Spirit who doesn’t possess one. But then, even so, as a human being of the future, I’m also technically dead, since I don’t exist yet. For that matter, when this whole thing has run its course and my combined Saint Graph fades, will my memories of these events return to my living self, or will they just be recorded in the Throne...?”

“Perhaps you’re like Saber was during the Fifth Grail War,” Emiya commented, sounding amused by El-Melloi II’s quandary. “That is, the you of the future is technically suspended in the moment of your summoning, and your personal timeline will resume after your Servant form is destroyed.”

El-Melloi II grunted and glared. “You’re not helping.”

Emiya smirked. “Who said I was trying to?” he asked sardonically.

A grimace pulled at my mouth, and I prepared to intervene if they got into another squabble. It turned out I didn’t need to even bother.

“Is it really something we need to worry over?” Arash asked. “It seems a simple enough question to answer. Either you can or you can’t. If you try and fail, then that’s all there is to it.”

“Cutting through to the heart of the matter, huh?” El-Melloi II grunted again. “Fine. You’re right. Either I can or I can’t, and nothing will be accomplished if I sit here pondering the implications all day.”

For a brief moment, his face screwed up in concentration, and then his form flickered and vanished.

“Guess that answers that question,” said Rika. “Hot Pops can take Spooky Ghost Form, too.”

El-Melloi II faded back into view, a constipated expression on his face. “Hot Pops?”

“Eh, I can’t think of anything better right now,” Rika admitted. “Gimme a few days and we’ll see if I can find something that fits.”

“Hot Pops?” El-Melloi II reiterated, like he was questioning her sanity.

“At least it’s not Queen Booty,” Boudica said with a smile.

“Or Super Action Mom,” Aífe added, smirking.

“Perhaps you should consider it a compliment,” Nero chimed in brightly. “Mm-mm! After all, is not the gifting of a nickname an act of camaraderie? You are being acknowledged as an ally worthy of trust!”

El-Melloi II sighed and closed his eyes briefly, and again, he muttered something about a ‘flat’ something or other beneath his breath. “Fine,” he said at length. “Let’s just get going. The longer we stand here debating it, the more time we waste when we should be making our way to Mount Etna.”

Emiya chuckled. “You’re not going to escape it that easily, *Hot Pops*.”

El-Melloi II clicked his tongue, and then he vanished. This time, he didn’t reappear a few seconds later.

“Well, that’s one way to beat a hasty retreat,” Arash said wryly.

“Not a very effective one,” said Aífe. “He’s still here, just now he can’t defend himself.”

“But it feels kind of like talking behind his back, doesn’t it?” Ritsuka said.

“So don’t,” I said. “Besides, he was right. We should get going. Aífe, Boudica?”

Aífe rolled her shoulders. “Right.”

“Of course.”

The two of them stepped away from the group, and a moment later, in a flash of light, had summoned their chariots, and then they climbed up to take the reins. Taking that as their cue, Arash and Emiya both vanished into spirit form so that they didn’t have to take up physical space in the carriage.

“Alright,” I said, turning to the twins. “Same as last time. Ritsuka and Rika with Mash and Boudica, Nero and I will ride with Aífe.”

“Um, Senpai!” Rika’s hand shot into the air. “Can I ride with Best Buddy this time?”

“Mm-mm!” Nero said cheerfully. “I, too, find that idea most pleasing!”

When I turned to Ritsuka, he gave me a shrug. “I don’t have any problems with it, Senpai.”

To begin with, the whole arrangement was about Command Spells and making sure that the two of us holding Mash’s were both in the same place while at least one of us was with Aífe for the same reason. In case of an emergency, that was the best setup for our group. It was tactically and strategically sound, and it afforded us all the best protection in the scenario an enemy Servant attacked.

“Please?” Rika pleaded.

I sighed.

But we were as safe as we were going to get, here. This was the heart of the Roman Empire. If they could reach us down here with impunity, and more importantly, if they felt they were *able* to reach us down here without worrying about reprisal, then we were in a much worse position than I thought.

“Fine.”

Rika jumped, throwing her hands into the air. “Yes!”

“Mm-mm!” Nero hummed, smiling a satisfied smile.

“Rika and Nero will ride with Aife,” I said. “Ritsuka and I will ride with Mash and Boudica. Any other objections?”

“Nope!”

“None!”

“No, Miss Taylor.”

“Works for me, Senpai.”

“Fou, fou!”

Overruled, I thought at the little gremlin. I kept going like it hadn’t said anything at all.

“We’ll go south along the road Via Popilia,” I told them. “We’ll skirt around Regium along the southern tip of Italy and cross the sea to Messana, then up the northeastern face of Mount Etna. If the information we have on this era is right, then there should be an old volcanic tube about halfway up the mountainside that will lead directly into a cavern beneath the surface.”

“Just like Fuyuki!” said Rika, grinning.

I nodded. “Basically, yes. It should go deep enough to put us right on top of the ley line without forcing us to try tunneling into an active volcano.”

It would also probably be swelteringly hot, even if that volcanic tube hadn’t seen any lava flow in decades, but with how active that volcano was, that was a sucker’s bet. There was probably going to be lava close enough beneath our feet that we were going to be sweating our toes off.

“Mm-mm!” Nero said, nodding her own head. “Perhaps we will be lucky enough to discover the forge of Vulcan himself!”

Personally, I didn’t think that one was particularly likely. Forgetting the fact that the Age of Gods had supposedly ended something like half a century ago, if the forge *did* still exist, then it would either be completely inaccessible to us for one reason or another or in such disrepair that we wouldn’t recognize it even if we *did* see it.

And on the off chance it still existed and we found it and it wasn’t a crumbling mess, what would even be there? Nothing any of us could use. Da Vinci would probably be in heaven, but the rest of

us wouldn't know what to do with whatever magical tools had been left behind, and sending them to Chaldea would probably be impossible.

"Maybe," I said noncommittally. No reason to rain on the parade, as it were. "So let's get going."

Without any more delays, we mounted up, with Ritsuka, Mash, and me squashed together on Boudica's chariot and Rika and Nero together in Aífe's. A crack of the reins set those majestic horses into motion, and then Boudica snapped hers with her remaining hand and we lurched into pace behind them.

I closed my eyes and took a deep, steadying breath, trying to prepare myself for the ride to come. It didn't help.

Linebreak

The ride from Rome to Mount Etna was almost half as long as the one from Thiers to Rome and no more comfortable for it. After over an hour of standing in the same position without reprieve, I felt more like a statue than a human being, and my companion, Ritsuka, didn't seem any better off than I was. The instant we stopped, he almost sagged against the rail, rubbing at his lower thighs and kneading his thumb into the sore muscles.

My knees ached, too, but it was going to take a minute for me to convince them that they weren't made of stone.

"Five minute break," I told him, "then we'll continue on foot."

He grimaced. "On foot?"

"Whoa," Rika breathed as Aífe's chariot came to its own stop next to us, only facing the complete opposite direction. "A-almost forgot how much I hate traveling like this."

"You could be riding one of Da Vinci's e-bikes," I reminded her.

"On second thought, Chariot Express all the way," Rika said immediately.

"E-bikes?" Nero asked curiously. She, on the other hand, seemed none the worse for wear.

"You wanna handle this one, Mash?" Rika asked.

"U-um, well," said Mash. "I-I'm not sure how to describe them in a way Emperor Nero would understand."

"Too bad we sent them all back to Da Vinci-chan," said Rika.

We had. So much had happened that I'd honestly forgotten it was one of those things we took care of while we were at the Thiers camp, once it became clear that we wouldn't need them and Aífe and Boudica's chariots were just faster and more convenient. Da Vinci had promised that the next version would be "even more compact," whatever that meant.

Ritsuka climbed down from Boudica's chariot as his sister and Nero did the same, and so did I, taking a seat on the edge of the carriage so that I could subtly massage the feeling back into my lower legs.

"I guess...they're kind of like a chariot?" Ritsuka ventured. "A chariot meant for a single person, powered not by horses, but by a kind of mechanism that lets you push it forward with your own legs using pedals."

"Mm? Your own legs?" Nero asked, confused. "But wouldn't that get tiring?"

"In the modern world, it's considered a form of exercise," Mash chimed in as she climbed down, too. "There are even sports based around it, or so I understand."

"Marathons and races and that sort of thing, yeah," I agreed.

I couldn't even remember what happened to the bike I used to own. Had Dad sold it at some point? Maybe. Things had been pretty tight all throughout my teenage years, so he probably sold it to help pay the bills once I outgrew it and I just never got a new one. Taking a morning run instead of a morning ride was much less expensive, and day to day, probably safer.

"I see." Nero shook her head. "No, I really don't!"

Ritsuka shrugged, as though to say, "I tried." If I was being fair, he'd done a decent job of it, but it really wasn't easy to explain the things you took for granted every day to someone who didn't have the first clue what they even were.

The conversation continued a little as Mash and Rika joined in to try and help, but I tuned them out as I pulled up the map on my communicator. A few presses here and there added crisscrossing lines to the regular sort of "satellite view," snaking over the landscape — the ley lines. Da Vinci had sent us the data for it after we solidified the plan to go to Mount Etna, a useful feature that was coming in handy now.

"Is that what I think it is?" Boudica asked, crouching down next to me.

"It is," I confirmed.

"What, what?" Rika bounded over, gasping at the wavy lines overlaid atop the island. "Cool! Da Vinci-chan does it again!"

She fiddled with her own communicator and brought up the same map, after a little trial and error. Ritsuka, on the other hand, looked down at his own communicator and grimaced. When we got back into contact with Da Vinci, we'd have to see about getting him a replacement, at least until his current one could get fixed.

"We're here," I said, pointing out the dot that represented our group — or me specifically — and then I moved it up one of the flowing lines. "If we follow this up the mountainside, we should eventually find the volcanic tube we need to take that will lead us down into the cavern where the ley lines converge."

In theory. My understanding of ley lines and how they worked wasn't the best, but I thought I understood it well enough to say that natural flows like lava tended to follow the path of the ley lines down the mountain, so it should hold that following the ley line back up would take us to the volcanic tube we needed to find.

"And then we can get Queen Booty back in fighting shape!" said Rika.

Boudica smiled gratefully, and this time, didn't try to convince us that we didn't need to rush on her account.

"That's going to be a lot of open ground to cover," Aífe noted.

"We'll need to split up," I agreed. I cast a critical eye over the group, imagining in my mind's eye the Servants who hadn't rematerialized yet. "Boudica, Emiya, and Nero will go with Rika on the right while Aífe, Arash, and I go straight up the middle. Ritsuka, you'll take Spartacus and Mash and go left."

The Servants I named shimmered into existence as I called for them.

"Looks like you're stuck with me, Master," Emiya told Rika.

Rika herself turned to Nero with a grin, "You, me, and Queen Booty makes three, Best Buddy!" She glanced at Emiya. "And Emiya is tagging along, I guess."

Ritsuka eyed Spartacus, then turned towards him and gave a short bow. "I'll be in your care."

"Hahaha!" Spartacus picked him up in a bone-crushing hug and lifted him off the ground. "My fellow comrade, there are no oppressors here, only adventure!"

Ritsuka couldn't respond except to squeak as whatever breath he had left his lungs.

"S-Senpai!" Mash shouted, panicking. "S-Spartacus, please let him down! Before he passes out!"

Spartacus did, and Ritsuka wheezed as he was set back on his feet. "L-looking forward to working with you, Big Guy."

"Senpai!"

"I'm okay, I'm okay."

"Guess he got a little too enthusiastic," Arash remarked lightly. He turned to me. "Pretty balanced spread, though. Defense and offense for most of the groups, although I did notice ours doesn't quite match."

Because they need it more than I do, I didn't say. Arash might have seen straight through me anyway.

"Isn't that a saying in the modern world?" Aífe asked. "The best defense is a strong offense?"

"Well, I guess so," Arash demurred.

A final figure appeared, scowling. “And where do I fit into this plan of yours?” El-Melloi II demanded sourly.

“I don’t know what you’re capable of, so I can’t tell you where you’d be best fit,” I told him bluntly. I’d honestly forgotten he had come with us, but it wasn’t any less true. “Go with whoever you want.”

He eyed Rika for a moment, grimaced, then glanced at Ritsuka, and finally, he sighed. “Guess I might as well join your group. My offense isn’t the greatest, but I do have some defensive capabilities that should serve well enough in group formations.”

“Then it’s settled.”

I stood up, and my knees weren’t back to normal, but they were feeling well enough that I shouldn’t have any trouble hiking up the mountainside. Once more, I missed my flight pack, and more than that, I missed the Dragoncraft that could have made this trip in twenty minutes or less.

It couldn’t be helped.

“We’ll split up and each take a side of the slope,” I summarized. “Make sure at least one of you has the group closest to you in sight as much as possible so that no one gets lost. If your group finds the lava tube we’re looking for, contact the other two groups via your communicator and stay put. We all go down together. Got it?”

Ritsuka, Rika, and Mash all replied with, “Got it!”

Our groups divided themselves up and we spread out, hiking up the mountainside in search of the tunnel we needed. It only took five minutes for me to want a tour guide.

Mount Etna wasn’t a simple incline like the image of a monolithic, sky-scraping pillar the idea of a volcano etched into my head. No, it was a series of slopes, mounds of blackened earth and crumbled rock that had formed from one eruption or another around the main peak and across the surface of its edifice. Each one itself was a steep climb that reached upwards of twenty feet tall, like there was a miniature mountain range jutting up from the surface of Etna itself.

My already aching knees screamed their protest. I did my best to ignore it.

It also made finding the right volcanic tube much harder, on account of the fact that it could have been hiding anywhere among those hills, tucked away in one of the valleys that dipped down between them, and the dirt was so dark that it was entirely possible our eyes would slide right over the entrance without realizing it.

Fortunately for me, I wasn’t limited just to my eyes. The ground here wasn’t very hospitable to life, not with how active Etna was — unless I was mistaken, the peak high above us was still smoldering and smoking — but that didn’t mean that no bugs had made their homes up here. It did mean, however, that there weren’t quite as many as I was used to, and that many of them had burrowed deep into the mountainside.

Which, it turned out, was just what I needed.

My communicator turned on with a click. “Rika, Mash, I’ve found it.”

“Eh?” Rika asked incredulously. “Already? Senpai, you cheater!”

“B-but it hasn’t even been half an hour yet,” Mash protested.

“Meet up with us and we’ll go in,” I ordered them.

After they acknowledged and agreed, I shut it off. To either side, their groups started back over our way, and I made a beeline for the tunnel’s entrance.

“That power of yours really is convenient, sometimes,” Arash said with a grin.

“Cuts some of the hassle out of this sort of thing,” Aífe agreed.

“Power?” El-Melloi II asked, confused. “What’s this about her power?”

My next step was a second slow. Right, he was the only one in our group now who hadn’t heard anything about it.

“I control bugs,” I told him simply.

His eyebrows rose. “Bugs?”

I nodded.

“Everything and anything with an exoskeleton in a radius of about half a kilometer.”

His nose wrinkled. “That’s…” He trailed off, and then revised what he was about to say. “I don’t *think* that should be possible. Not with modern magecraft.”

“I’m a bit of a unique case,” I agreed vaguely.

He scoffed, clicking his tongue. “That’s all you’re going to give me, isn’t it?”

“Basically.”

El-Melloi II sighed, and his fingers twitched as though he was tapping a cigar that wasn’t there. Arash set a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re in good company,” Arash told him warmly. “She hasn’t given much more to anyone else in the group either.”

“Magi and their secrets,” El-Melloi II groused sourly. I didn’t bother to correct him.

“Senpai is a cheating cheater who cheats,” Rika said as her group reached us, cutting off the rest of the conversation before it could go anywhere else.

“It’s only cheating when the other guy does it,” I said simply.

This time, El-Melloi II snorted. “Tactics in a nutshell.”

“Just because you’re hot doesn’t mean I’ll forgive you for taking her side,” Rika told him petulantly.

“If you think that means anything to me, then you’ve still got a lot to learn, girl.”

If he was really as old as he claimed, then I could only imagine how much more childish seventeen-year-old Rika must seem.

“Why did we split up if Senpai was just going to find it anyway?” Rika asked, changing the subject.

“Because I’m not perfect,” was the answer I gave. “It was better to have all of us looking instead of having most of us sit around and twiddle our thumbs.”

“Taylor might not always be around to lead you, too,” Emiya chimed in. “It’s better you learn to handle yourself now, when we’re all here, than later, after you’ve been separated from everyone else and have to figure things out alone.”

She lanced him with a glare. “Curse you and your logic,” she muttered under her breath.

“There’s no need for concern,” Nero insisted. “Mm-mm! My best buddy handled herself very well!”

She held out her fist, and Rika, grinning, tapped it with her own. Together, they mimed an explosion.

Those two were getting way too much mileage out of that.

“Senpai!” Ritsuka called as he and Mash jogged back over, Spartacus trailing behind them. “You found it?”

He glanced behind me at Nero and Rika, who were giggling to themselves over that stupid fist bump, and he grimaced suspiciously, like they were plotting something nefarious.

“I did,” I said. “It’s this way.”

I led the procession further up the mountainside, trying to keep my breathing regular and evenly paced as we climbed the uneven slope and its loose dirt. The distance wasn’t even half as long as the trip up Mount Enzo had been in Fuyuki, but the ground that crumbled and slipped and gave way under our feet made it four times as hard to navigate, especially without a well-worn footpath that had been compacted down by all the people who had walked upon it.

Half an hour on the stairmaster every day didn’t really prepare you for this. Made it easier, sure, but it wasn’t anywhere near the same.

Eventually, however, we came to a break in the incline, a spot in the climb that was not quite even, but shallower, and there, tucked away on the opposite end, a gaping darkness was wedged beneath an outcropping of hardened stone.

The lava tube.

In a low, ominous voice, Rika said, “The Crack of Mount Doom.”