

CHAPTER 5

THE TRAP OF GREED

Once I’d rounded up all my officials together, I shared everything I learned with them, introducing Glenda and ensuring they accepted her. This, of course, meant exposing Glenda to their surveillance; she’d need to earn her trust with all of them.

I also introduced her to Kaijin and Kurobe, so they could get a chance to examine her handgun. She oughtta be able to restock her ammo here, too. Maybe we can even mass-produce those things? Honestly, I’d like one, too. I wasn’t gonna put them on sale, but maybe I could give them out to important people on some kind of licensing system. They’d be cool to have, too, I wickedly thought as the days passed by.

Soon, the day of our ruins expedition came. We were all set to go. Our expedition outfits were perfect, and I even had a prototype gun on my side.

It had piqued Kaijin’s interest enough that he produced a mold during the off-hours of his research. Dold then carved a seal into them that used magical power to trigger a small explosion inside the chamber—no gunpowder needed and no ejected cartridges. All you needed were some elliptical bullets, and off you went. It was sized at a third of an inch and could hold sixteen bullets. It used a blowback system that made the bolt retract with each shot, in order to load the next bullet and eliminate the impact of the explosive charge.

The construction was more like a toy than anything, but even this had the power of a .44 Magnum. That was thanks to the gun’s magisteel make, which improved its shock resistance, and the inscription-driven explosive charge also delivered the maximum amount of power possible.

By the way, the force of this gun depended on the type of bullets used. Normally, it’d use plain old lead bullets, but for monsters, we also had magic-infused mithril shots. The force could differ depending on how much magic you put in, so you could say this weapon needed the right person using it to excel.

In terms of classification, it was a Rare, albeit one that could hit as hard as a Unique. A really interesting weapon to have around, one that even surprised Kaijin’s team as they made it. With the capability it had, I’d really like to make it standard-issue with our new troops, but as mentioned, that was up for discussion.

Frankly, this was something we’d normally never do. In a way, I made it to play out the classic tropes more than anything; I was reluctant to formally adopt it. We’d have to see how things went, perhaps lending it out only if we determined it to be truly necessary.

Such as today, for example. Carrying this around definitely completed my look. Any man’s got to have a little classic adventure in his life.

“Ooh, this is really cool! The way it kind of recoils in my hands feels so awesome!” Gobta cried.

See? Gobta and I share the same good taste. Typically, these were for lending out only, but let’s give Gobta one as a present.

“You see what I mean, Gobta? But don’t go pointing it at people, all right? It’s dangerous.”

“Of course not! I’ll be real careful!”

He was overjoyed, while Ranga looked on jealously. Ranga, you can’t use that thing. I’ll give you a fancy scarf, though, so make do with that.

“Hee-hee… I have Goriki-maru V2 with me, thank you. Not to mention the clothing you chose for me, Sir Rimuru…”



“Shion, no going on an expedition in that, all right? Safety’s our top consideration here!”

She must’ve really liked the clothing I gifted to her, because Shion wore it every chance she got. But it was meant for fashion, not exploration.

“A pity…”

Her head drooped down as she changed to her normal suit. That wasn’t exactly a great improvement, but it was her de facto battle gear, so ah well.

“Rimuru, what do you think of me?”

Milim was practically jumping up and down with excitement.

“Ah… Looks good on you. Definitely worth getting for today.”

Like Gobta and me, she was in expedition gear we obtained for this day.

“You bet! It feels good—and talk about easy to move in! Can you believe how many pockets it has? So cool!”

She was in shorts, which I wasn’t sure was such a great idea, but they suited her, so we’d go with it.

“That it is. Be sure to thank Shuna, okay?”

“Okay!”

“That’s right!”

Thus, we were all in high spirits as we headed for our meeting point—the Free Guild headquarters in the Englesia capital. The plan was to head to the Puppet Nation of Dhistav from there.

Kagali was waiting for us at the front entrance.

“Good to see you again. We have a lot to do today!”

“I guess this is the first time? I’m Milim. Good to meetcha!”

“My name is Kagali. It’s a pleasure to meet you as well.”

They all smiled at one another before Kagali guided us forward.

“Milim?”

“Mmm… I don’t think there’s any problem. But it’s a little…um…”

“…?”

Kagali gave our conversation an odd look. She worked for Yuuki, so we eyed her with suspicion, just in case. I was having Milim check her out with Dragon’s Eye just now, and it sounded like something caught Milim’s attention—but nothing especially problematic. It still bothered me, though, so I resolved to keep my guard up.

“Our team’s all here, so let me introduce everyone.”

Rolling her eyes a bit, Kagali began introducing the expedition team to us. They were lined up in a row, waiting for us in an open area near the HQ. It was a team trained by Kagali herself, and the more talented and experienced among them would be joining us today. They all volunteered for the job, around ten men and women in all, even after being told we could be attacked. Some of the passers-by were giving them curious looks, but nobody minded. They seemed well trained enough.

Their equipment, meanwhile, was the full, complete deal. Not the make-believe stuff we had on, but a lot of heavy stuff—thick upper and lower clothing, with large backpacks. Each of them carried tools for the role they played in the expedition—walking sticks, pickaxes, shovels, you name it.

“We’ll carry your equipment for you, Sir Rimuru, but where did you put it?”

We didn’t have any. Just these cool new outfits.

“No, um, we didn’t prepare anything, so it’s just this.”

“Huh? That’s an amusing joke.”

Yeah, I know, but…

“Look, you really shouldn’t have any of your skin exposed. You might get stung, and it’s easier to get hurt that way, right?”

Work clothing did its job best if it covered all your skin. Plus, Milim’s outfit was just downright slovenly.

“Hmm, you think so? But my skin’s protected by an aura at all times, so I’ll be okay!”

“Yeah, but you wanna have Kagali get mad at you?”

“You’re just the same as her! From my perspective, you’re both far too lightly equipped! You’re treating this expedition like a walk in the park!”

Oof. Harsh. What was so bad about this, really?

“All right, all right, all right. We’ll be fine, okay? I may not look it, but I’ve got a lot of adventuring experience!”

To be more exact, I had gone light since I didn’t really need to camp outside anyway. That was better demonstrated in person than explained at length right now.

“Well, if you insist…but if you have any trouble, please let us know at once.”

I doubted we’d have that much trouble. We were treating this like a fun outing, but we did have an eye out for danger. I made sure Gobta, Ranga, and Shion were all aware of that.

Time to head out, then.

“Right. I have a wagon prepared for us…”

“Huh? We don’t need a wagon, do we?”

Kagali stared blankly at me. I stared blankly back at her. What? I mean, it’d take, like, two months to reach Dhistav by wagon. That was never an option.

“What do you mean?”

I invited the quizzical Kagali to just take us out of town for now. Once we found ourselves in a deserted area, I used Dominate Space to open a transport gate straight to Dhistav. This process was familiar to me by now; if I’ve been somewhere before, it was easy to open a gate there.

“All right, come on in. It won’t disappear on you or anything, so don’t panic.”

The dazed expedition party began talking all at once.

“You’re kidding me! How far away do you think we are…?”

“Truly…a demon lord is an amazing thing…”

“Impossible. Now the majority of our preparation has gone to waste…”

I felt a little bad about that, but—hey—at least I looked cool.

So we were at the Puppet Nation of Dhistav.

The first people to greet us were the dark elves, lined up at the castle entrance and bowing deeply.

“Welcome to Dhistav! You must be exhausted from your journey!”

The elder among the group stepped up to me. I say elder, but she looked maybe in her twenties, a woman with blond hair and dark-brown skin.

“Oh, no, not really. But do you have rooms for us?”

“Of course. We could provide individual rooms for each of you, but if necessary, we have larger group rooms as well.”

I gave them advance notice, so they were entirely set up for us. For now, I figured we could drop all our stuff in the larger group room.

“Okay, let’s head to the group room first. We can keep our luggage in there, so maybe we can get a tour around the castle today?”

“Very well. I’d be happy to guide you.”

The elder guided us into the room. I told the team to drop their stuff there, and they did so, walking like out-of-sync robots.

“Um, what is going on here?! It hasn’t even been an hour since we came together, and we’re already at our destination?!”

“This is insanity! I must be going insane!”

“What? Individual rooms? They’re treating us like guests in this castle?!”

I guess the robotic walking was because their brains were still catching up to all this. It was a departure from the usual sort of expedition, and I suppose it confused them.

“Sir Rimuru has directed us to look after all of you. If you run into any issues during your stay, please don’t hesitate to inform us.”

The elder flashed a soft smile at the dazed team as she spoke. That was enough to make them face reality. I watched them all, warm fuzzies running over me.

Then we took the team on a tour of the castle, the former residence of the demon lord Clayman and a place that brought the word opulence to new heights. The dark elves were fully maintaining the palace, and everywhere I looked, it was spotless.

“This is gonna be yours once the expedition is over, Milim, but I think all these people still want to live here.”

“Mmm. Yes, I see that. Let’s have them provided with regular food and supplies.”

“Thank you very much, Lady Milim.”

“Don’t worry about it! You’re my people, too, so if you carry out your roles, that’s great.”

Wow, Milim’s really getting smarter. Frey’s efforts must be paying off.

Impressed, I asked her some more about the castle and whether she had any issues with it. It’s a big palace, enough so that it had space for all the dark elves. There was no surrounding castle town—dwellings for magic-born existed, but they were all out working under Geld right now. The elves were tending to them as well, for when they eventually came back.

“And this is the entrance into the ruins. It’s divided into three sections, with the deepest one serving as a crypt. Only the higher officials among us are allowed to enter, and only the demon lord Clayman himself knows what lies in the middle section and beyond.”

Hakuro mentioned this in his own report, but the ruin entrance was right inside the castle.

“So you know how the topmost section is structured?”

“Yes. All the treasure in the top section has already been recovered, so we are currently using the area for our residences.”

There were so many empty rooms inside that it could easily house over a thousand beds.

We opened the door and went in. It was supposed to be underground, but the space was filled with a soft light.

“What’s this light…?”

“Ah yes, this is a perpetual magic-driven effect. It is synchronized with the passage of the sun, so it gets dark at nighttime.”

“Heavens! Magic from the distant past is still in operation today?!”

“This… This alone is a huge discovery. It’s being treated as the most normal of things in here, but I’d like to thoroughly investigate it…”

“Is this magic active in the other sections?”

“Yes. I had a glance deeper in when I accompanied Lord Clayman, but the central section was just as bright.”

The elder patiently answered all our questions, a back-and-forth that continued for a while to come. I could see how excited the team was, and that energy was starting to rub off on us.

“Better stay out of their way, Gobta.”

“Right! Gettin’ kinda nervous, huh?”

We whispered at each other as we looked around the first section. It looked pretty lived in, so I could believe the dark elves called it home.

“So if you live in here, you don’t see any monsters come up from below? ’Cause if there’s a crypt, I’d expect ghosts ’n’ stuff…”

The elder snickered at Gobta’s query. “No, no need to worry about that. There is only one door leading to the underground, and only Lord Clayman could open it.”

“Hmm?” Milim raised an eyebrow. “Well, if it won’t open, let’s just break it down.”

“Certainly. One swing of my blade, and all shall be pulverized!”

“No! We need to examine it first! Please, no breaking anything!”

I rushed in to keep the extremists from having their way.

“R-right. Good point. Better be more careful than that, Shion!”

“Yes, that was close. If I didn’t hear that, I would have lost hold of myself.”

That’s just what I was anxious about, but at least they were open to guidance.

So we made our way through the rather extensive ruins, past the dark elves’ settlement and up to a single, very large door, the same size as the first but with a very apparent magical seal on it.

“…Ah. This appears to be part of a defense mechanism powered by ancient magic. It might wake up the entire city defense system if we touch it.”

“Defense system?! Is it still active?”

“We’ll need to be careful. If we trip it, the expedition might have to be called off very quickly.”

Kagali stiffened as she gave the warning, and her team’s faces all tightened up, too. I wonder how Clayman got this thing open.

“Was Clayman involved with running these ruins or something?”

“No, he came to the forefront only just recently. I doubt he was involved with them before that point.”

“I think he managed to undo this magical seal. Follow the correct procedure, and I think it should open without complaint.”

Mmm, yes, yes. Even Clayman could tackle this one, if he had enough time. Didn’t he have some unique skill along those lines?

Affirmative. Manipulator, the power to convert information into encrypted messages that can be sent and received.

Right, that one. He could probably use it to decrypt whatever data he saw, which was a good way to analyze and break open magic seals like this one.

By the way, have I obtained that skill yet?

Understood. The skill was an inferior version of the powers my master already has, so it was dismantled and absorbed as energy. As a formality, Control Terrain has been added to Control Laws.

Ah. No wonder I didn’t hear about it. If it’s not worth reporting, Raphael doesn’t tell me about it. But if Clayman could do it, so can I. It’s really Raphael doing it, but whatever.

“This could be a long battle.”

“Quite a challenge to start out with. But this is still a good environment compared to what we’ve dealt with before. Let’s settle down and start deciphering this!”

The team was enthusiastic about getting to work, for sure. Meanwhile, I laid a hand on the door. The energy flowing through the veins in the earth, I could tell, was spreading out across the wall as it went through the magic seal.

“I see. If we break down this door, that’ll knock out all the light in this section. All this energy would be diverted toward eliminating the intruders, and then it’d heal itself once everything was safe again, perhaps. Staying in operation like this for over a thousand years… This is the work of a highly advanced civilization of magic.”

It was Greek to me if I was alone, but thanks to all the support I had here, this was pretty easy to follow. It was even kind of fun, like a puzzle.

Working my way through the magic seal like a worksheet full of mathematical problems, I managed to figure out how to open it.

“Oh, here we go. Run some magic power through here, and that’ll open up an input window for an encrypted spell.”

I turned back toward everyone…only to find the team staring at me, jaw down on the floor. Oops. In an instant, I knew I had gone too far. It was so much fun analyzing it, you know, but this was their job, wasn’t it?

“Sorry, kinda got carried away…”

“N-no, not a problem at all.”

Kagali offered me some comfort, but I really felt like I was stepping on some toes here. Butting in too much would be regrettable, so I decided to sit back and fluff up Ranga’s mane for a while…

…but with the kind of gang I brought along, that wasn’t gonna happen.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I just solved it, too!” Milim was already bounding around the door.

“Oh? I’m pretty stumped, I guess.” Meanwhile, Gobta was bringing a quizzical hand to his head.

Several of the team members were debating among themselves, voices and eyes bright.

This all happened thanks to a question from Kagali.

“Sir Rimuru, would you mind explaining how you deciphered this?”

I was deep into giving Ranga a grooming session, but if she was asking, I had to answer her. So in front of an eager-to-learn audience, I went over the steps I took to decipher the magic seal.

“First, before you examine the complete shape, you need to examine what kind of magical formula has been added to it. Then you divided that formula into individual sections.”

“So you look for the newest spell first?”

“Right. You’re figuring out which formula will keep the complete shape from working right if you take it out, and then you repeat that as you try to grasp the core features of the spell. After that, it’s just a matter of taking all the correct answers and stacking them atop one another.”

“I see…”

“So get rid of the false data and keep the spells that work correctly?”

I had heard this was a team of elite explorers, and they certainly were quick learners. Just a little advice from me, and their understanding grew deeper and deeper.

“So with trap spells, they’re usually complete packages in and of themselves, right? They’re kind of like leaves and branches coming out from the main tree, separate from the flow at the foundation. That’s assuming the main purpose of the spell isn’t to activate the trap, of course, but…”

“…Hmm. So they’re in the main flow of the seal, but we can’t afford to ignore them, huh?”

I guess my experience educating children was paying off. The team found my teaching style really easy to grasp. Having so much success lifted my spirits, so I kept on demonstrating my approach to magic seal analysis.

In the midst of this, Milim went and got the door completely unsealed. A few others followed quickly after her, but it was then that the dark-elf elder spoke up again.

“Everybody, we’ve prepared dinner for you. I’m sure you’re tired from your long journey, so why don’t we finish up work for today?”

Only now did I realize we were into the evening hours. Yeah, the real expedition could begin tomorrow. Let’s wrap things up for now—we can get the door open for good soon enough.

“Okay, wanna stop here?”

“Sounds good. It feels strange describing it as a long journey, but we can get down to business starting tomorrow.”

With Kagali’s agreement, our work ended for the day.

The next morning, Kagali formally opened the door, her fully equipped team lined up behind her. A blue light flickered as the door silently slid away.

“And there we go.”

The team cheered. “Well done,” I said as I took a step inside.

In this middle section, the light wasn’t as bright as above. It was more of a dimmer glow, eternally shining from candlesticks installed in the stone walls. Another impressive piece of magical technology—not real candles, but magic-driven illumination.

As I walked along, astonished by them, Milim came up to me.

“It feels a lot more oppressive all of a sudden, huh?”

“Yeah. The ceiling’s a lot lower, and it feels like these stone walls are closing in on us. Pretty narrow corridor, too. I bet this is set up like kind of a maze.”

The corridor was maybe six and a half feet wide; two people standing next to each other would feel a little cramped. Milim and I were on the small side, so it wasn’t a problem, but the people carrying large packs behind us probably had a rougher time of it.

“Sir Rimuru, who should we have up front?”

If this was a mazelike area, we’d have to figure out a path to take at every fork in the hallways. There might be traps in place, too.

“We can detect traps for you as the leaders. Do you mind if we stay in the front?”

“If you don’t mind handling that for us.”

“Sure thing! With me around, you’re safe no matter what shows up!”

Milim gave a reassuring nod before I could speak up. Nobody had any issue with that, so we were now leading the whole team, Kagali and her assistant behind us. Shion and Gobta took up the rear, serving as bodyguards for the rest of the team; Ranga was in my shadow; and the elder was watching the door for us. I couldn’t wait for dinner from her tonight.

I ambled along, using Magic Sense to survey the path ahead. The corridor was stone, but sometimes we’d pass by murals on the walls—very pretty ones.

“Wow. These murals alone have a lot of artistic value.”

“Do they?”

“Sure. They must be depicting scenes from ancient times, so they’ll be great to research. They’re really worth a lot.”

“Hmm. You know, thinking about it, they do remind me of things I saw way back when.”

Oh, right. To me, it’s the faraway past, but to Milim, this is probably just a nostalgia trip. That’d make anyone a bit emotional, I bet. Better be careful with our expedition here—I wouldn’t want to add any more damage to the wear and tear of time.

Our explorations continued apace, with no booby traps to speak of. We were now taking a break for lunch.

“All right. I’ll begin cooking, then.”

“Oh, wait one minute. The elder made some box lunches for all of us, so let’s go with those.”

I stopped a team member as he was trying to start a campfire, then took out enough lunches for everyone. It must’ve looked like I conjured them up from nothing, but they were in my Stomach, of course. That kept them well-preserved, making it a useful skill for long journeys like this.

“Umm…”

“Is that even possible?”

I could hear people whispering about me. Let them. Despite their confusion, they readily accepted the boxes.

“Oooh, this does look good,” exclaimed Milim when she opened it up. On the menu today were sandwiches with tons of veggies, eggs, and smoked meat. Dark-elf cuisine was all about uniquely heavy sauces; the one used here was a bit like mayonnaise, doing a great job of softening up the rather hard buns. If people still had trouble biting through them, that’s where the vegetable soup came in, poured into large wooden bowls. It used a hearty chicken broth, giving it a nice, tasty body that really worked its way into the veggies for a satisfying treat.

“I have lots more, so don’t be shy!”

The moment I shouted it, I was mobbed by team members, empty bowls in hand. Milim was first in line, so I guess she was a fan.

“We almost never get food this good outdoors. You’re making us a very happy team today.”

I couldn’t help but feel Kagali was needling me a little when she said that. I had just resolved not to butt in too much, after all, so I could read between the lines—but if she thought this was cheating, I hoped she was willing to overlook it.

“Well, you know, I’d like to avoid using fire in this place if we can.”

“Fire?”

“Right. We don’t want a fire to go out of control in here, and besides, we’re underground. I think we’ve got good ventilation so far, but just in case, you know?”

“You were thinking that far ahead, huh…?”

“I wouldn’t worry so much if we were outdoors, though.”

That was the truth. This was a tight corridor, and there was no ready source of water. If something happened, we might not have an escape route. That’s why I felt it prudent to bring along box lunches from the start.

Also, bathroom breaks.

“Um, by the way, if any of you want to go to the bathroom, I’ll set up a transport gate back to the entrance, so take care of that during our lunch break, okay?”

With that, I flipped the figurative switch on a transport gate. Some of them gave me “you’re kidding me” stares, but…you know. I figured they would probably just do their business behind a rock or something otherwise, but I wanted to avoid that. This path eventually leads to a crypt, after all, and I didn’t want to profane it.

“I think you’re worrying too much. And the dead might not care anyway.”

“…No, I think we could learn from that.”

Kagali agreed with me. That was nice to see.

So while everyone’s taking a bathroom break:

“Hey, is it all right if I try out something real quick?” I said to Kagali.

“What’s that? Coming from you, I’d really like to know.”

“Well, in the labyrinth I run, one popular strategy right now is to rely on Elemental Communication. You have to be a shaman or elementalist to access that, but it lets you immediately discover the best path to take.”

“Really? Because that sounds real convenient.”

Oh, Kagali didn’t know about that? I guess you wouldn’t, unless you’re intimately involved in that stuff.

“Hey! Um, I’m a shamaness! Can you tell me more about Elemental Communication?!”

Ooh. Lucky break there. I felt a little self-conscious about casting the spell myself, so perfect. The volunteer who spoke up was a woman versed in spirit magic, so I gave her a quick lecture on Elemental Communication.

“Oh. Okay. Yeah, I get it!”

She was geared toward the wind element, which made conversation between her and the spirits a relatively smooth process.

“Wow… Now we really won’t get lost, huh?” she said. “The path goes into a dead end up ahead, so we’ll want to go back three intersections and turn east. But this is gonna be hard to map out…”

Kind of. If you just listen to the spirits’ voices all the time, you’ll tire out the communicator. So you’ll want to get the path down on paper…but of course, I had Raphael handle that for me, creating maps I could produce on paper with so much accuracy that you’d think I used some mapmaking software package.

But hang on…?

“Isn’t there a magic spell that puts any diagram you can think of on paper…?”

There definitely was, I thought. I saw it in the book 101 Wild & Wacky Spells I found in the library.

Report. Search complete. It is the illusory magic Thoughtography.

That’s the one!

Funny how there were still a lot of useful, important magic spells I didn’t know, but this kind of nonsense stuck in my brain so easily. I got some good slime cells in me, you know, so my memory skills are even better than before—but with stuff like this, it’s like I was back to my old human mind again.

“Hey, anyone here know illusory magic?”

“Oh, I’m a mysticist! Still in training, but…”

“Okay, try learning this spell for me, then. Also…”

My friends and I all used Thought Communication to share ideas with one another. That would’ve made things easier, but if you wanted to teach something like this to a regular person, magic was still your best bet.

I had just the thing for a time like this:

Suggestion. The best option would be the illusory magic Channeling.

Ooh, there’s that, huh?

So I taught Thoughtography and Channeling to the young man who volunteered his mysticist skills. He gave it a quick whirl—and right away, he was drawing up maps with ease.

“Wow! We’ll never get lost now!”

“In fact, if we use this magic, we could draw out the full structure of these ruins…”

“This will make future expeditions so much easier!”

Well, I’m glad everyone likes it.

“A map’s fine and all, but it won’t show us any traps or magic-driven mechanisms! Don’t drop your guard!” Kagali’s order brought the jubilant team back to earth. Impressive of her to notice that danger without me warning her about it.

For today, we decided to go ahead and make our way to the bottom of this section first. We wound up reaching it before dinner.

Day three began in front of the door to the third and final section.

We decided to split up, one team disabling the magic on the door and the other continuing their exploration of the middle section. I had given them an on-the-field tutorial on this yesterday, so today I was just supervising. Milim, Gobta, and Ranga were on the exploration team.

“Not much to do, eh, Sir Rimuru?” Shion said.

“In that case, why don’t you go make some drinks for the workers?”

“Right away!”

Shion was right; we didn’t really have much to do. But the team was still lobbing questions at me now and again, so I was enjoying it.

Cheerfully, Shion set up a table, pouring coffee from a flask into the cups she had lined up. It was an oddly moving sight. Just a little bit ago, letting Shion touch anything that might go into your mouth was verboten.

“All set! Care for a quick break, everyone?”

We all settled down to relax a bit, the team enjoying her coffee as they had a moment of peace. We still had an eye out for potential attacks, of course, but for now, nothing seemed forthcoming. Hopefully, I wasn’t overthinking matters—but now that I was away from Veldora, Maribel and her cohorts might see this as their big chance. If they were going to act, it was now or never. I’d need to stay on my toes as I saw how things went.

That—and I needed to keep Kagali and her team guarded, too. I ran a quick Analyze and Assess, but nobody seemed suspicious among any of them. They all had the abilities they claimed to have, and there was no sign they were under anyone’s control, whether via their desires or not. If they were brainwashed, then my eyes—or Raphael’s eyes, really—must be deceiving me.

I felt safe in dismissing that possibility. But what if they weren’t brainwashed, but following orders they truly believed in? That could happen, too, so I couldn’t rest easy yet, but none of them were a threat to my life.

So I sat back and enjoyed my coffee.

After a while, Milim came back carrying a ton of stuff. “Rimuru! Look at this! I found so much booty!!”

To be accurate, she was riding on Ranga empty-handed, while Gobta and the other team members were loaded down with swag.

“Check it out! They’re all so perfectly infused with magicules. This alone ought to be a huge harvest for us, huh?”

She was right. Most of their booty was battle equipment. And while they were no doubt fine pieces in their heyday, crafted by talented artisans, the magisteel inside them had settled down and vastly upgraded their abilities.

“Ooh, you’re right. There’s not much artistic value, but you could still use a lot of this stuff today.”

“Right? And look! This one has to be a Unique!”

It was. Extremely valuable. Not the sort of thing you’d want to have lying around, I thought. It aroused my suspicions.

“Where did you find this stuff? Because I doubt Clayman left it untouched without a reason…”

“Well, there was actually a trap I set off by accident, and a bunch of these golems came lumbering up to us. They were carrying all this!” she explained.

Um, that sounded like something I shouldn’t ignore, there…

“You set off a trap?”

“Ah! Um, no, no! It went off the moment I stepped into this one corridor! I think even you would’ve had trouble avoiding it!”

“Yeah! We used magic to detect traps with every hallway we went down. We weren’t bein’ careless or anything!” Gobta added.

Milim and Gobta claimed they were being careful, and judging by testimony from the rest of the team, they weren’t lying. Something must’ve been programmed with certain biological life-form patterns, repelling any intruders who didn’t match them. If you didn’t know the acceptable wavelengths beforehand, it was impossible for anyone to deactivate. The only logical way through was by force.

“Sounds like you had no choice, then. Some of these traps are pretty complex, huh?”

“Oh yes! It sure taught me a thing or two. We should set something like that up in our own Dungeon.”

A corridor that only allowed preselected people through? Maybe this whole section of the ruins was designed to ward people away from the crypt.

“Then perhaps we should assume there are lots of other golems bearing Unique weapons. Their weapons must’ve evolved right in their hands while they were on standby over so many years. It’s boggling to think about…”

Kagali was right. Good thing we had Milim and Gobta with us. If this expedition team were by themselves, there was a decent chance the golems would’ve killed them.

“Nothing might’ve happened yesterday, but I bet there are more traps like that in this section of the ruins. But no need to panic. Let’s try to act more carefully from tomorrow forward.”

“Right. It’ll be a while before we have the door analyzed, so tomorrow—”

Just when Kagali was voicing her agreement, the earth began to shake. A gigantic burst of energy shot across the entire region, including these ruins. Fragments of rock fell from the ceiling, adding to the stress and terror.

“…?! What was that…?!”

“We gotta get outta here! It’s gonna cave in!”

Kagali raised her voice to calm her team. “Pipe down! That was just a single jolt—it’s not an earthquake. A structure this solid won’t fall that easily. Just stay calm and start evacuating.”

That was enough to restore order among the team, a testament to how well trained they were.

“So what was that?” the cool-as-a-cucumber Gobta casually asked.

“Hmm… Some kind of shock wave just ran across the surface, I think. A pretty big one, too, so it might’ve affected the palace…”

I had a transport gate handy if we needed it, so I wasn’t panicking as I answered him. Still, though… Like Kagali said, it wasn’t an earthquake, but some kind of localized energy blast, which meant it had to be man-made.

But just as I was thinking about going back up to look over things, my instincts reacted.

Report. Hostile force detected. At this point in time, the ruins’ defense system has activated. A large number of activating golems have been detected. There are also other intruders going into the ruins.

Alarms began to blare, followed by a mechanical-sounding voice.

“Intruders into Amrita detected. Eliminate at once! Intruders into Amrita detected. Eliminate at once!”

The repeating voice made the danger crystal clear. Now things were critical—the surface wasn’t guaranteed to be safe, and we had an emergency inside the ruins.

“You’re kidding! Did these ruins—did Amrita’s defense system just go off by itself?!” Kagali’s cool, unaffected demeanor was gone now.

“There are intruders coming inside,” I said. “Maybe they set off some kind of trap. Too bad the golems won’t listen if we tell ’em we’re not involved.”

And frankly, I was starting to doubt Kagali herself. She was right near the door. Maybe she could’ve set off the defenses while I wasn’t paying attention? And look at the timing. Other people entering the ruins just when the alarm goes off? That had to be deliberate.

“You notice anything, Milim?”

“No, I didn’t hear a thing.”

Milim could pick up all Thought Communications and magical conversations around her. Trying to hide anything from her was pointless, but she didn’t overhear anything unusual. I thought the intruders might’ve been connected to Kagali, but maybe I jumped to conclusions.

So she’s innocent?

Report. Cannot reach a conclusion. If there is a soul-corridor connection, it is possible to engage in a hidden Thought Communication.

So I couldn’t feel safe yet. I really hated having to protect a potential spy while dealing with enemies… If she would’ve been kind enough to reveal herself and ditch me at this point, it’d make things a lot easier. But oh well.

“We’re in a bad situation. I think the intruders must be from the organization coming after me,” I said.

“Ah, it’s really true…”

“So that earthquake, too…?!”

“But what kind of fools would take on a demon lord?”

The team seemed honestly surprised about all this. I didn’t question any of their motives. I supposed I’d have to brace myself and keep them protected as I fended off this adversary.

“Well, don’t worry. I promise I’ll step up to keep you all safe.”

They looked at me, surprised. Well, that’s mean—did they assume I’d abandon them all in here? We were getting along pretty well; I kinda hoped they trusted in me more.

“Just what you wished for, huh, Rimuru?” said Milim.

“Yeah. Though I’m not too sure whether they caught me or I caught them. We’ll have to see right now.”

Just as Raphael predicted, the enemy took the bait. I won’t ask how they managed to get in. With the kind of talent they had to choose from, it’d be a snap to sneak past the dark elves up top.

Well, let’s take this opportunity to end things here. I was anticipating this, and I debated over how to address it. There was nothing to panic about. Quickly, we all moved into our planned intercept positions.

The second tremor came along.

“What’s that? I really don’t like the sounds of that!”

Even Gobta was growing concerned about events outside. But I didn’t have the time to answer him—because now, I could see it. An ominous dragon, advancing upon us from faraway skies.

“Whoa. That’s real bad…”

It was hard, inside the ruins like this, but I used Magic Sense to follow the magicules to the outside. There I could see a dragon, as vicious as they came. It looked like Veldora on the outside but a measure larger overall. Its skin was ragged, festering, almost rotting off, and its massive aura was exploding out of control. One look told me it packed a massive amount of magicule energy, far beyond what an “awakened” demon lord possessed. This was a Catastrophe-level threat.

“That bad?”

“Yeah. Looks like a dragon, but it’s way beyond an Arch Dragon. It’s probably stronger than a Dragon Lord, even. Maybe it’s one of Veldora’s siblings…?”

“S-Sir Veldora?!”

It was outside the whole framework of what defined a dragon. My only guess was that it was a True Dragon—but it didn’t have Veldora’s grandeur or personality at all. Maybe grandeur was the wrong term to describe that doofus, actually, but this dragon just seemed different from him, fundamentally.

“That…!!” Then Milim suddenly opened her eyes wide. “Rimuru! I, um, I think I got some business to take care of. That dragon…”

She squinted into the empty space in front of her, then used Spatial Transport to vanish from the scene.

Judging by her panic, I could see where this was going. If Milim was freaking out over something, it was usually of her own doing—and that meant the enemy found one serious skeleton in her closet.

“I really can’t believe this, but I think that’s Milim’s dragon ‘friend’ she sealed away long ago. It didn’t get resurrected; someone’s unsealed it and is controlling its will now.”

“Wha?! Is that true, Sir Rimuru?”

“Yeah. I’m feeling these intense shock waves. Not even I might be able to beat it.”

I was telling the truth. Charybdis, made from the remains of Veldora’s power, was like an insect compared to this; the sheer hatred and rage was overpowering. I doubted it would ever stop until it destroyed the whole world…and the scary thing was, all of its emotions were painted over black in my mind. Maribel’s emotional takeover skills were controlling that thing.

“…A Chaos Dragon. I never thought I’d see such a tyrant in this day and age…,” Kagali murmured, and I firmly agreed.

Thank heavens Milim was here! I was sure she could beat that guy and put it back to sleep for us. Then I wouldn’t have anything to worry about. For now, we had our own things to take care of.

“Gobta, Shion, we have guests to welcome.”

“Roger that!”

“I’m on it. Those puny little dolls are no match for me!”

I thought about opening a transport gate to evacuate the expedition team to the surface, but I didn’t think I’d have the time. An organized legion of golems was now here for us, bearing down at full speed as we stood in front of the door.

Shion stepped forward, brandishing her large sword. Unfortunately, it caught on the corridor’s low ceiling.

“Dammit! Check your surroundings!”

“S-sorry! Just a little mistake.”

A “little mistake” could cost you your life. It cost her a bit, judging by the spear from one golem that was now stuck inside her. That nonsense left her wide open, and I really wish she’d get it together for a change.

“It’s too cramped to fight in here. I don’t know what’s beyond, but maybe there’s a bigger space in the third section.”

“Then maybe we can have them hurry up with deactivating it—”

“Nah, at this point, I’ll just do it myself.” Sorry, guys, but time’s up. “Ranga, help those two.”

While Gobta, Shion, and Ranga bought time for me, I quickly wrapped up the door for us. The alarms were still blaring; all the traps were activated. I wanted to avoid violence in here to keep the ruins as intact as possible, but luckily, the door opened without much of a challenge.

“Get inside!”

Heeding my words, the expedition team quickly ran down the stairway inside, none of them demonstrating a hint of panic. Kagali followed behind, and I joined her, protecting her back as we all went into the crypt area.

The dead were asleep here, but it didn’t look the part. It was an enormous, brightly lit space, large enough to house a broad, grass-covered plain. I almost forgot everything as I marveled at the landscape—but now was no time for surprises.

Soon Gobta was down the stairs, the golems not far behind, and the battle began anew. Now, however, things were turning around. Shion had full freedom of movement, and now she was pulverizing those golems.

At this point, I didn’t want to let anyone escape. When I strike, I strike hard, and my foes probably think the same way. After all, they were trying to keep me isolated in here, even if it meant risking the wrath of Milim. I didn’t think they’d go that far.

Honestly, I probably underestimated Maribel. But no more.

…Understood. Shifting into full-power battle mode.

Quietly, I finished my preparations. All restrictions I placed on myself were removed, to get myself ready for the enemy to come. Now I just had to wait for the ringleader.

There were a large number of golems, but we had the advantage. Shion was kicking up a huge ruckus, and Ranga was going berserk. In between them, Gobta was destroying each golem with the gun he had, one at a time. He even had enough time to reload at regular intervals. Seeing how in control he was, the expedition team looked pretty reassured.

“Um, I’m surprised there was actually an attack, but what kind of force would attempt to attack a demon lord? Even waking up a Chaos Dragon for it…”

Kagali must’ve been curious about that. She seemed disturbed, the concern clear in her voice. If it was an act, she was good at it, but I still didn’t know what lay in her heart.

“Sorry to drag you into this.”

“Not at all! If there’s a living Chaos Dragon out there, I wouldn’t feel safer with anybody else, Sir Rimuru.”

“Yeah! We need to report this to the Guild HQ and figure something out.”

“But if the demon lord Milim loses, there’s not much we can do, is there…?”

“We need to survive this first! I don’t know who deliberately set off the trap, but that was such an evil thing to do.”

I was seeing some optimistic opinions among the team. They sure knew how to mentally switch gears on a dime.

“I told you I was gonna protect you, right? And if I win, we’re good.”

I tried to keep it casual as I calmed them down. I had Gobta and Ranga here, not to mention Shion. And Milim, strongest among all the demon lords, wasn’t gonna let a Chaos Dragon beat her. It wasn’t a good situation, but it wasn’t a terrible one, either. We had to kill our foes, survive this onslaught, and address our anxieties. Simple.

Kagali must’ve been relieved a little, because she didn’t say anything else for a bit. I turned my eyes toward Gobta’s battle, waiting for the adversaries to come.

“…You have many foes, Sir Rimuru,” she whispered. “Is that because you’re a demon lord?”

I was unoccupied while waiting for my enemy, so I casually replied to her:

“It wasn’t voluntary on my part, but yes.”

“Why is that?”

“The Kingdom of Farmus provoked me. With Clayman, my foe was messing with me, so I had to respond. Hinata the Saint had the wrong idea about me. In every case, it was started by the other side; I just played along. In a way, it was self-defense.”

“It was? So you never start anything, Sir Rimuru?”

“Well, maybe I can’t say that. With this particular enemy, it’s kind of a conflict between motivations. Our philosophies don’t mesh. This would’ve happened sooner or later anyway, I think.”

“You can’t resolve it without fighting…?”

“Sure we can. But that resolution would probably never come until I swallowed up the other side. If they didn’t want that, they were probably right to do this.”

With the twin superpowers of Dwargon and Thalion at their side, Tempest would have no reason to lose in an economic war with the Western Nations. If the enemy did nothing, I’m certain that we would’ve annexed them all, financially speaking. Raphael’s way faster than a quantum computer; I wouldn’t stand for anyone dissing it.

“…Oh? So you think the other side’s justified in this, then?”

Hmm… Are they? Maybe we could’ve accepted the differences in our principles and agreed to some mutual concessions. If we were never gonna get involved with one another again in the future, that might’ve worked. But if they’re justified, then so am I. I had no interest in doing whatever they said, and they didn’t want me ruling over them. And if that’s how it was, confrontation was the only choice.

In a way, economic warfare is even more terrifying than the kind with guns and tanks. There’s no defined surrender in one, and as long as the other side doesn’t fall under your umbrella, it never ends. Thus, you could say that my foes turning to military warfare was a stroke of luck. This way, once they realize they can’t win, they’ll have to admit to defeat. But even if that was their only choice, the question of whether it was “just” or not is another issue entirely.

“Well, justice can mean a ton of different things, depending on your viewpoint. I’m not saying I’m absolutely correct, but if I retreat here, that’s going to worsen my position. The only choice I have is to fight…”

It’s not that I couldn’t have taken a more modest path. But if I bent, all my friends would’ve gone down with me.

“Even so, if you respected the other side’s position and tried talking to one another to search for a better relationship, don’t you think you could’ve avoided hostilities?”

That’s a tough one. How should I answer it?

…I didn’t have to worry about it. A young girl’s voice answered for me.

“It’s impossible. So impossible. People have endless desires; you can’t ask them to be patient. And if the other side bends, the demands get bigger and bigger. That’s part of being human.”

Right.

If I conceded, I’d like to believe the other side would understand. But that’s just not realistic. If I were just another citizen who could believe in fairy tales, maybe I could’ve given you an earful of all that idealistic stuff. But from a politician’s point of view, there’s just no way I can believe in that nonsense.

And I guess my adversary thought the same way.

“You know, I think the exact same thing. I’m the demon lord Rimuru. You are?”

“Good to meet you. My name is Maribel. I’m your enemy.”

Somewhere along the line, all the golems had been defeated. There, I saw a girl I caught sight of at the Founder’s Festival—the enemy I anticipated and one far bolder than I ever imagined. I figured she’d be the sly sort who didn’t venture out herself, but I wasn’t expecting to see her right here in front of me.

And it wasn’t just Maribel. Three others were next to her—Gaiye, looking completely changed; a man in knightly clothing; and Yuuki Kagurazaka.

The sight disturbed Kagali and the team.

“G-Guild Master?! Why are you here?”

“No… Were you after the demon lord’s life?”

“You’re kidding me! Then why did you order us to explore the ruins?!”

Yuuki demonstrated zero response to these questions. Just as Glenda said, he must’ve been under her complete control.

“Sir Yuuki, what is the meaning of this? Are you turning your backs on us?”

Kagali’s voice was full of anger. It sounded like that came from the heart, but that didn’t matter anymore. I really wanted to end this farce soon and go back up Milim, but before that…

“Yeah. You certainly are my enemy. But before we fight, there’s one thing I’d like to ask, if that’s okay,” I said.

I turned my eyes toward the blond-haired girl. The expedition seemed thrown by my choice, but I kept watching silently. By this point, I suppose they’ve thrown their lot in with mine…or maybe they’ve been taken in by this girl’s dark atmosphere. That shiny blond hair; those lips the color of cherry blossoms. Maribel, this girl who may or may not be just ten years old. Deep down, though, she was cold, just too different from anyone else on the planet.

“What is that?”

“Join me. Then we can avoid all this needless conflict.”

“Laughable. So laughable. You should join with me, Demon Lord Rimuru. You’re going to lose right here. If you don’t like it, submit to my rule.”

“Your approach isn’t a match for my policies. The way you do things will lead to unnecessary wars. It’ll make countless innocent people suffer, just to keep the riches of a few safe.”

“Yes. I’ll admit to that. But so what? It’s completely natural for the powerless to be exploited. It’s survival of the fittest with monsters, too, is it not?”

“Oh, it is. But I don’t like that.”

“Well, it’s stupid. It’s so stupid. Do you believe in a bunch of insipid nonsense like ‘We’re all equal’?”

“No, I’m not a total idiot. But everybody needs to be given an opportunity. Some people just can’t manage to do anything, but you can’t cast away people’s values that easily, can you?”

Some people bloom later in life; some have hidden talents. You have people who hate working but have unbelievable artistic talents. With Maribel’s approach, once a gap opens between rich and poor, it’ll be impossible to close again. And I just couldn’t accept that.

From the moment they’re born, people are unequal. That was a given. You could probably count the monetary fortune a set of parents gives to their child as a kind of talent. But a life where you’ve given no opportunity at an education—just constant exploitation—meant ignoring the potential in all of us. In a word, it was a waste.

People have an infinite potential for talent. Throwing all that away is unthinkable. But…

“Ridiculous. So ridiculous. I can’t believe a childish dreamer like you is a demon lord. Your stupidity is simply unbelievable.” My argument didn’t move Maribel.

“Is it? Well, all right. Then let’s determine which one is right. There couldn’t be an easier way.”

“Gladly. Let me teach you how reality works.”

Our arguments would never mesh. Only through a fight would we ever reach a conclusion. I did feel sad about that, but I could accept it. That’s the way it is. The human race will never see a day when everyone truly understands one another. But that just proves how diverse we all are.

Thanks to the process of evolution, we’re a living contradiction. Only the victor can proclaim how just that is. And Maribel and I—two sets of “justice,” opposed in principles—were about to clash against each other.

“Smash him down!”

At Maribel’s signal, Gaiye moved first. Perhaps it was his hatred that made him lunge at me, eyes bloodshot. He had been taken away by the magical inquisitors, but maybe he escaped or something?

“Pfft! The likes of you challenging Sir Rimuru—” Shion shouted as she attempted to get in Gaiye’s way.

But Yuuki stopped her. “I’ll take you.”

“Oh! How interesting. No one weak enough to let that girl rule over them can defeat me!” Her eyes shone red—that’s a sign Shion was dead serious. With a tremendous aura, she readied her giant sword. The battle was underway.

Leaving her to work things out, I looked at the other man in the group. He seemed stronger than a paladin, but Gobta was engaging him now. Ranga was with him, but honestly, I had my concerns.

“Gobta,” Shion shouted, “time to show us what the Big Four can do!”

Oh. I totally forgot. I did kinda put that in place, didn’t I?

“You got it! Okay, now lemme show you something really good! …Transform!!”

With that callout, Gobta and Ranga merged together, turning into a cool, werewolf-style figure that didn’t have a hint of Gobta to it. Right. That could probably work. And unlike the last time I saw it a month ago, Gobta’s apparently learned how to control himself better. Now he was conducting himself perfectly, no longer battered around by Ranga’s strength. He was facing a foe who could most likely beat the Ten Great Saints, but I figured Gobta could probably manage.

Trusting in that, I focused on my own enemy.

…Oops, but before that. Gathering my aura into my left hand, I casually hurled it at Gaiye.

That was all it took to render him into dust and erase him from this world. Stained by Maribel’s desire, he had obtained powers beyond his own, it looked like—but to me, he was just a distraction.

“You wanted to fight me, huh? Well, glad you got the chance before you died.” It was sort of a blunt way to address the dead, but hopefully he’d be satisfied with it.

“No…?! What was that? What was that? That power…?!”

“What was it? That’s me taking this seriously. And now it’s your turn. You don’t need to understand who you made your enemy. I’m going to gobble you down until you can never get resurrected again, so have fun nourishing me.” I offered that little speech out of politeness before our battle.

Now that I was serious, I didn’t want anyone to expect kindness from me. To me, Maribel was now my enemy. I was going to kill her. It couldn’t have been more obvious.

Let’s end this fast and go help out Milim, I said to myself as I took a step toward Maribel.

Maribel now realized it—just who she was up against. This was a member of the Octagram—and one of the strongest people in the world.

“Hey, is it me, or is Sir Rimuru lookin’ kinda scary now?”

“Shut up! That’s no way for part of the Big Four to talk! Listen, Gobta; that is the true form of the Demon Lord Rimuru. Ah, look how gallant and imposing he is! I, Shion, am truly happy to bear witness to this!”

“Oh, uh, really? I think his ‘true form’ is, y’know, how he usually goes around, and stuff…”

“Yes, and that is quite fetching, too, I will admit. Hee-hee! But I’m sure Diablo so regrets not being able to see this right now. Hee-hee-hee! I will be sure to tell him all about it. For an extended period of time.”

Maribel could hear that conversation, but to her, it just sounded like mockery. Her mind was on other things. She needed to focus on Rimuru.

This is no joke. Not a joke at all. The demon lord Rimuru must’ve found his experience at the Council to be incredibly humiliating, but he didn’t seem that angry about it. That’s why people called him gentle, but that’s so inaccurate.

Yes—to Maribel, a riled demon lord was not a foe to trifle with.

She had powered up Gaiye as best she could. He had taken on more power than your average magic-born, well beyond any human standard. Some of the older-guard demon lords, like Frey or Carillon, might’ve had a difficult time against him. After all, Gaiye had sacrificed the rest of his natural life span, burning up all the energy in his soul to borrow this outrageous force.

And yet Rimuru had defeated him with a single passing blow, as if burning a pile of trash. That was how outclassed Gaiye had been. Not just a child against a grown man; not just an elephant against an ant.

Maribel’s soul held a stronger force than Gaiye’s did. She had been resurrected, traveling to and surviving in another world, and presently, her mind was in a realm beyond human comprehension. But even so, she sensed that the demon lord Rimuru was now a threat.

Thus, she immediately broke out her final option—Holy Field, the most lethal of barriers and a killer move against any monster. Ever well prepared, she had already stationed her Blood Shadow troops around the outer rim of the castle grounds for this.

“You can threaten me all you want, but now it’s time. Time to see just how much more intelligent we are than monsters!”

As she bragged to Rimuru, she used her magical communication skills to send an order.

“Whoa! I feel all heavy…”

“I remember this. And it’s even stronger than it was then. This must be its true force.”

The Big Four werewolf stopped, confused, as his compatriot the ogre grinned defiantly.

How annoying, Maribel thought, gritting her teeth. As the name Big Four suggested, they both possessed unusual strength. Gobta, the werewolf, was the kind of champion to earn second place in battle tournaments—and the ogre he was with was just as formidable. They were joined by other magic-born, people Rimuru brought with him to the Council.

Their sheer power is ridiculous. If I tried a frontal attack, I’d have no chance, even if Veldora never showed up. But…

But now things were different. The demon lord overestimated his skills, and now he exposed his defenseless underbelly. Maribel chuckled to herself. That mistake will be their doom.

But her conviction was wishful thinking.

“Ah, I thought so. I anticipated you making this move. Did you think I wouldn’t prepare for it?” The demon lord Rimuru grinned at her—and the next moment, the Holy Field disappeared as quickly as it deployed.

“Wha?! What did you do?”

“Well, I’m walking around here all but asking to be attacked, so of course I had my people keep watch around the castle for me, right? Maybe you thought you had me in a trap, but I was just using myself as bait to trap you. I figured, after all, that if you wanted to enslave me with greed, you needed to be on-site.”

That was his response to Maribel—and at that point, Maribel understood everything. The missing Glenda hadn’t been rubbed out at all. She’d betrayed her.

Yes… Yes. The only one overestimating their skills is me…

And with her last resort exhausted, she was at a major disadvantage.

Gaiye was dead. Yuuki had the advantage but still wasn’t overpowering the ogre. The other one—Rama, the Battlesage burning to avenge Glenda—was struggling against Gobta the werewolf. Both of them had been powered up by Maribel’s greed, but the reality of it—the fact that neither could emerge victorious—showed just how strong the enemy was.

Maribel would have to step up herself to change matters. The petite, doll-like girl was about to expose her true nature.

Combusting her own soul, Maribel went beyond her limits. All she hoped for was victory. She couldn’t make up for falling in that trap, but this was exactly what she wanted the whole time.

A chance like this wouldn’t come again. She knew that. And thus, she had no regrets. “Time to get serious. I’m going to wager it all to kill you!”

“Right. And I’ll reply with my full force.”

Following that signal, Maribel started running.

With a bound, she unleashed a kick on Rimuru, her physical skill far from childlike. The attack was fiercer and heavier than a tank round, forceful enough to bend an iron beam—but it gave Rimuru no distress. He lightly parried it, then used his momentum to throw her body down.

Maribel reached out to the ground, leveraging her rebound to spin out of harm’s way. Dodging Rimuru’s follow-up attack, she launched Avarice as a sort of return gift.

“Die! …You will thirst for death!!”

Waves of darkness attacked Rimuru. This was Maribel’s finishing move, a strike that took the living’s instinctual lust for life and flipped it on its head. That was Maribel Rozzo—a girl who used her own will to perfect her unique skills. This one, too, was a sinful one, harnessing the most primordial emotions in the human body. No one could resist the enhanced siren song of greed it played, and there was no longer any doubting Maribel’s victory.

Yes… This couldn’t happen any other way. I am reluctant to kill him, but it’s not the worst outcome. It’d be far more foolish of me to leave such a dangerous man unchecked…

If she had her way, she’d rule over Rimuru instead. But he wasn’t the kind of foe who’d ever accept that. So Maribel opted to grasp complete victory for herself instead.

Surrounded by the black surge, the demon lord Rimuru stood there, seemingly not attempting to resist.

“It just wasn’t enough. No one, no matter how strong, can do away with their thirst for life. And that’s what makes me invincible.”

It was true. She was all-powerful. Against Frey, Carillon, or an awakened Clayman, she probably would have won. Even Hinata the Saint would have faltered in the face of her skills. That’s how strong the unique skill Avarice was.

But…

“Sorry, but my Analysis just finished up. Now it won’t work on me.”

Rimuru had triggered his ultimate skill—and at that moment, Maribel’s chances of victory were zero…

…for while she was all-powerful, she was all-powerful within the dimension of that ultimate skill.

Raphael was right after all. Maribel had a Holy Field prepared. Granville was the boss of the Western Nations, so I was right to assume she had adopted it.

She was such a master at it that it scared me. But it also played right into my hand.

Now, the ever-eager Gabil, as well as Hakuro, Soka, and all her fellow troops, had something to do. It had been a pain keeping them calm over the past few days of no action. I certainly was glad I didn’t disappoint them.

But…man, look at this girl Maribel. She was strong. Definitely strong. I felt that for myself when we were tussling earlier—and when she exposed me to those dark waves, that really made my spine tingle. I wasn’t worried at all about the possibility of dying, but if she fired that at one of my other officials… Well, the thought scared me. Anyone besides me would’ve died for sure. If I had to guess, maybe Diablo would be the only one to survive. Well, maybe Shion, too, but anyone else from Benimaru on down wouldn’t have a chance.

Maybe it was time to train their spirits—their souls—a little more, I thought.

Completing my Analyze and Assess like Raphael requested, I gave Maribel her final warning.

“Sorry, but my Analysis just finished up. Now it won’t work on me.”

I wasn’t going to let her control other people, but if she was willing to retire to a quiet life and not bother anyone…

Yes, even I knew I was going easy on her, but she looked like a ten-year-old girl. If I had to kill her, the guilt could’ve been gargantuan. So, you know, it’d be nice if she could surrender for me. (Of course, I guess I can coldly reason like this because I’m no longer human myself, but…)

“…Don’t give me that. More. Give me more. Even if I consume everything I have, I’m going to seize victory!”

Unfortunately, my words failed to reach her.

Our principles were never gonna mesh anyway; I was preparing for an ending like this. But now that it was really happening, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of sadness.

Maribel flew into a crazed flurry of physical strikes. Regrettably, none of them affected me. Well, if we can’t understand each other, so be it.

“All right. I’m going to make this painless for you. Feel free to stew on your loss inside of me…”

With that, I set off Belzebuth’s Soul Consume. Or tried to. But just then, with a loud boooom!! I saw Shion get sent flying from the corner of my eye. Turning toward her, I realized that Yuuki had just drilled a kick into her—and despite her Ultraspeed Regeneration, she couldn’t get back up to her feet. This was very unusual.

“Shion?!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Maniacal laughter drowned out my shouting. It came from both Maribel…and Yuuki, as if harmonizing with her.

“Well done. Well done, indeed. I underrated you, Demon Lord Rimuru. I underestimated you. I had no idea you were this kind of monster…”

“That’s true. I didn’t think you could win against Maribel. But I can’t have you forgetting that I’m right here, okay?”

Yuuki, fresh from besting Shion, stood before me. The black waves from Maribel were now crashing upon him, stronger than ever before.

Understood. The subject Yuuki Kagurazaka’s power has just skyrocketed. The subject Maribel Rozzo is apparently using the unique skill Avarice to transfer her power to him.

How many cards does she have in her hand anyway? Now I gotta deal with Yuuki, too? I knew he was only under the influence of her Avarice, so I wanted to subdue him if I could, not kill him.

“Tch! Don’t hate me if I kill you.”

“I’d say the same to you!”

With that exchange, he and I moved in sync.

There was a flurry of kicks, sending both of us hurtling through the air. Something like this had happened before to me, but this time, we were both serious—and now we had these two rivaling powers clashed against each other. Yuuki was stronger than I thought, certainly more of a physical specimen than Maribel. He fought Shion and pretty soundly beat her, so he had to be a phenom. I had no intention of going easy on him, but maybe it’d be tough to resolve this fight quickly.

I thought over my options as I faced down Yuuki…then I spotted Maribel moving around a bit, trying to catch me unawares. Uh-oh. That’s bad, but I got my hands full with Yuuki right now.

Turning her back to us, Maribel began fleeing toward the middle of the crypt. I wanted to pursue her, but Yuuki stopped me. Ah well. Not like Maribel can escape. Now that I fully grasped the wavelengths of her soul, I could find her no matter where she hid.

For now, Yuuki had to come first. I turned my eyes back toward him.

My peripheral vision told me that Kagali and the expedition team were attending to Shion. She was awake, but it didn’t look like she could stand up—something she looked pretty pained about, but there was no quick solution to that.

If Yuuki left her in such bad shape, I couldn’t afford to make light of him. But I wasn’t worried at all. As Raphael put it, a unique skill can never work against an ultimate skill. The strength of our relative souls was at the crux of it. If someone awakens to a power that surpasses unique skills in all dimensions, you needed a strong enough heart to go with that. Faced with that kind of spiritual strength, there was no way a unique skill could have any influence.

The only thing that could beat an ultimate skill user was another ultimate skill user. No matter how much power Maribel gave him, Yuuki couldn’t beat me. My victory was as good as assured…but the next moment, my confidence was thoroughly crushed.

“All right. Time to get real.”

With that, Yuuki unleashed a right roundhouse kick. It was just the same as before, and I easily blocked it with my left arm. But the next instant, my entire upper arm shattered, as if it burst open.

“…Huh?”

I backstepped to safety, honestly surprised as I blankly stared at my arm.

Concern. The Universal Barrier of Uriel, Lord of Vows, has been broken. This is believed to be due to the subject Yuuki Kagurazaka’s extra-singular Anti-Skill constitution.

Um, wait a minute. So my Absolute Defense doesn’t work on him?! In fact, is he pretty much nullifying all my attacks right now?

Affirmative. Anti-Skill is a spiritual-body constitution that suppresses magic and skills. It is likely that only holy-blade skills and certain other Arts will be effective against him.

So something like Meltslash could work?

This wasn’t a joke any longer. He seriously managed to break down my ultimate skill. I’d never be able to comprehend all the details behind that, but his “constitution” was terrifying news to me.

“I thought you couldn’t obtain unique skills or special stuff like that!”

“That wasn’t a lie. I did say that my physical abilities have developed beyond normal, didn’t I?”

I wanted to yell at him about that, but he was right. Besides, if his mind was being controlled, there wasn’t much point complaining at him anyway.

But what’ll I do now? Yuuki’s attacks work on me, but mine don’t work on him. I’d just be wasting time as it is, and if this is what it’s come to, I can’t get hung up with trying to keep him alive. I really wanted to, since we shared a homeland and everything. If he was deliberately my rival, that’s one thing, but mind controlled like this? I felt real bad for him.

Facts were facts, though. Yuuki wasn’t someone I could beat while going easy. Steeling my resolve, I drew my sword, sending my aura up and down its jet-black blade.

“Ooh… Nice katana there.”

He took out the knife hanging from his side with his right hand. Then he took out another with his left, a small, single-edged sword. With these two blades, he held his hips down in an unusual stance—nothing I had seen before; maybe it was self-invented.

Seeing him square up, it finally dawned on me. Losing my skills and magic worried me, but Yuuki wasn’t impervious to physical attack. Anti-Skill constitution or not, if I cut him, he’d bleed.

That’s why some Arts will work, huh? And in my case, my skills even affected my punching, which is why that didn’t do much. Would it be more effective if I didn’t enhance them with my aura?

Negative. A correct answer cannot be determined due to lack of information.

Roger that. Let’s just try it, then.

Planting my feet on the ground, I slashed at Yuuki. He blocked it with the sword in his left hand, his physical skill letting him easily match my speed. But I had experience trading blows with Hinata, which helped both my sword skills and my confidence.

Staying calm, I looked ahead two or three strikes. Even if skills didn’t work on Yuuki, Predict Future Attack still worked just fine, since it used Raphael’s computations to discern his behavior.

Yuuki preferred to defend with his left-hand sword and attack with his right-hand knife. It usually went the opposite way, I thought, but everyone has their own preferences. Both of his weapons were made from purified magisteel, metallurgically evolving for vast power gains. Even among Unique weapons, they were in a class of their own—maybe even Legend-class, in fact.

Those were a threat, but then I made an unexpected discovery.

Report. Anti-Skill is not applied to weapons.

Whoa. So using weapons actually weakens Yuuki. That little tidbit doesn’t mean much for anyone besides me, but to Yuuki, that’s a real blind spot. If these were just regular old attacks, Absolute Defense gave me nothing to fear.

I decided to risk Yuuki getting a hit on me.

“Ha-ha! Dropping your guard, Rimuru?”

Pretending to lose my balance after a parried katana strike, I left myself open to him. Yuuki thrust with his knife, as if it was attracted by a magnet; there was some special feature to it that let it expand and contract, which messed with my sense of distance. To Yuuki, it probably felt like a surprise attack, expertly tossed into my single moment of vulnerability—but I planned the whole thing.

The knife was aimed squarely at my heart—but then I stopped it. I touched it to make sure; turned out it contained a special poison that would affect my nervous system. If he really stabbed me with it, even I would’ve taken damage, but that was just pointless theorizing now.

“Well, too bad for you! It hurts more when you punch me, y’know.”

“No way. This is insane…!” Yuuki’s eyes widened. But I had no obligation to listen to his complaints.

Instead, I mercilessly unleashed a new sword strike, one I had just finished developing. It was called Stormbreak, a combination magic-and-Art move inspired by Hinata’s Meltslash. The magic in question was Storm magic, as provided by the skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm. Veldora’s magic was scarier for its secondary damage than its primary—once it opened up a wound, the destruction would begin from there, eventually breaking down your entire body. Stormbreak was the same way, a sure-kill Art that ate into its target’s life force.

Thanks to his unique constitution, however, the strike I landed on him didn’t trigger that effect. There was now a large gash across his chest, but it still wasn’t a lethal blow.

“Ngh…”

With a groan, Yuuki glared at me. I tried to look into his inner thoughts, but a black mist blocked me from seeing anything. Maribel’s desires had fully infected him. If I could clear all that away, I wouldn’t need to finish him off, but…

Understood. Interference is blocked by Anti-Skill.

…but no dice.

Then there was just one thing to do.

“I’ve won this. I wanted to release you from Maribel’s rule, but I guess I can’t do that. I’m gonna go a little strong on you, but no hard feelings, all right?”

I would damage him almost to the point of death, knocking him unconscious. Then, while he was knocked out, I’d go take care of Maribel. If that eliminated her effect on him, then great.

I readied my sword against Yuuki. Sadly, punching him with my bare hands didn’t deal him any damage. The energy that Anti-Skill cancels even included the kinetic energy from my fist. It’s crazy, I know, but Yuuki was a very special case.

Waiting until the best possible moment, I applied power to my sword. I wanted to strike him with the blunt side of my blade—good thing it’s sturdy enough not to break, but if I applied too much, I was liable to cut Yuuki in half. Striking the right balance of power was tough.

But just as I readied my sword, preparing to smash it down on him:

“P-please, wait a minute! I beg you, please reconsider killing Sir Yuuki!!” Kagali started shouting. I turned her way. She was on her feet, attempting to run up to Yuuki.

“Whoa, look out! Yuuki’s under Maribel’s control!”

“No, it’s fine! There’s no way someone as strong-willed as Sir Yuuki could have his heart taken by a little girl like that!” She clung to Yuuki, ignoring my warning. The expedition team was following her lead.

“Yeah! She’s right! The Grand Master’s not that much of a wimp!”

“That’s true! He’s always going by the beat of his own drum! There’s no way anyone could exploit his weaknesses!”

“He’s the kinda guy who’d beat a dragon just to show off to us!”

He was certainly well loved. If they were defending him that much, I was starting to look like a villain. Look, if there was a way to keep from killing him, I’d use it, all right? But I can’t go easy like that right now. I’m just taking the option that’s best for the situation. Can’t you see I’m carrying my katana backward?!

I mentally begged them to take a closer look as I watched Kagali and the rest. They were coming up from behind him, trying to get his attention. If that was all it took to break Maribel’s influence, we wouldn’t be having this problem.

But:

“I’m not trying to kill him, either, okay? So—”

So get out of my way, I tried to say. And at that moment:

“Guys…” Yuuki whispered the word, his face twisted in pain.

Report. Change detected in the subject Yuuki Kagurazaka. The desire-driven spiritual interference appears to have been canceled…

…What?!

Seriously? We’re going with that “happily ever after” ending? I could barely believe it, but my sense told me Yuuki wasn’t after my life any longer.

You gotta be kidding me! I thought, but I had to accept it.

With Yuuki back to normal, the only foes left were Maribel and the Chaos Dragon.

“Looks like I caused you some trouble there, so forgive me for that. But you saved me, Rimuru!”

“Y-yeah. Glad you’re okay,” I replied, trying my best not to look like I was okay with him dying a moment ago.

“Hey! Gobta! Get this done with already!!”

I needed to change the subject, and yelling at Gobta did the job. Soon after, his battle was over.

Shion was safe. Yuuki’s Anti-Skill effect wasn’t permanent, so her Ultraspeed Regeneration sprang back to life after a bit. She glared at Yuuki, still in a rage, as I tried my best to calm her down.

“This is a humiliation. I still haven’t trained enough…”

When the anger left her, the sadness came rushing in. I tried to calm her once more, telling here there’d be another time.

Gobta, meanwhile, looked pretty exhausted. “I told that guy Glenda was alive, but he just wouldn’t listen to me…”

Now that he was used to handling the power of Ranga, Rama wasn’t much of a threat to him. Between Gobta’s sense for battle and Ranga’s hyper-instincts, that wolfman form was a huge upgrade. Ranga stayed conscious for it, too, apparently, keeping a honed eye out for external threats. The way they divvied up responsibilities during battle kinda reminded me of Raphael and me. No wonder they’re such a force.

So why did Gobta have so much trouble in battle? Because he learned that Rama, his opponent, was burning to avenge Glenda’s apparent death. Being a kindhearted goblin, he couldn’t find it in himself to kill him.

I had asked Raphael to undo the spiritual interference in Rama’s mind. He had used the power in his soul a little too much, but it looked like he’d survive. He was perfectly awake as well, and he was believing our description of how Glenda managed to survive.

That should have wrapped things up…but sadly, it didn’t.

Well, we can’t sit around for long. Judging by the intense shaking we’re feeling, Milim still hasn’t managed to seal away the Chaos Dragon. I really wanna go help her.

“Rimuru, I’ll go chase after Maribel.”

Yeah, but Yuuki, you’re… Wait, you’re not wounded? It healed up? “Your wounds are okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Kagali can use healing magic, so…”

Huh? Why is he stating that like it’s an obvious fact? “I thought magic didn’t work on you…”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I can turn these properties of my body on and off.”

“……”

I was too exasperated to reply. Yuuki was giving me a breezy smile, which was so unfair. Hinata’s body could purify magicules, or something like that, but she didn’t have a flip switch or anything. And Anti-Skill was way more powerful than that. He could control it with that much precision…?

It just seemed so unfair. But ah well. I needed to address his offer.

“You can beat her?”

“It’ll be easy, if I don’t let my guard down. I mean, being controlled like that; I can’t let her go. It’s a matter of pride to me.”

“Sir Rimuru, please,” said Kagali. “I think Maribel is bent on destroying these ruins. In the ruins of Soma that I explored, there was a magical generator that I think was used to run the city. This area looks similar to me, and if the generator goes out of control, it could blow up the entire area around us. And I think I’m the only one who can stop that!”

“…You think Maribel’s gonna blow it up?”

“Supplying too much magical force to one can destabilize it. And if it hasn’t been used for so long, there’s no telling how it’d react…”

We weren’t even sure if there was a generator like that in here, but if she was right, we had trouble on our hands.

“You know how those things work?”

“I thoroughly analyzed the one in Soma. If need be, I know how to stop one!”

A woman with her beauty sure had a lot of impact when she gave you a serious look like that. It wasn’t just because of it that I nodded at her, but I sure did feel overpowered, yeah.

“Okay. You take care of that. Yuuki, get going!”

He was back to his usual breezy, aloof self, brimming with confidence. The two of them were now on Maribel’s trail.

“Shion, Gobta, guide the expedition team up and regroup with the dark elves. Keep them guarded!”

“Yes, sir!”

“What about you, Sir Rimuru?”

“I’m gonna go back up Milim. If I don’t hurry, the Chaos Dragon might start striking all of us soon.”

Milim was doing her best to fight back, but even a stray shot of energy would devastate us. We didn’t have time to waste here, so once we decided on something, we had to move.

“Let me join you!”

“No. Your wound’s healed on the surface, but I’m sure you’re still damaged inside. Just bodyguard the team for me!”

“Hmph. All right…”

Reluctantly, Shion agreed.

Yuuki and Kagali were already on their way into the crypt. Shion and Gobta had their orders. It was time to head out.

Maribel was running. But she hadn’t given up on winning.

She had unleashed the sealed Chaos Dragon, one of the best cards in her deck. Under no circumstances could she let this operation fail.

But there was still one more card to play. Deep inside the crypt—the heart of the ancient elven city—the pinnacle of the old world’s magical technology was still sleeping. She had heard about it, and so she wanted to overload it with magic and bury Rimuru with it.

That’s the only way I’ll ever defeat that monster. My strongest pawn right now is Yuuki, and I’m sure he’ll buy me a little time. In the meantime, I’ll set that magical control reactor on the path to destruction…

Yuuki’s reports to her included information on the ancient ruins of Soma. She knew that Amrita was a city built by a similar ancient culture. If they worked the same way, it’d be easy for Maribel to control them.

Setting off a magical control reactor would cause vast amounts of magic-power destruction. If she triggered it right when Rimuru and Yuuki were locked in battle, she could catch them in the explosion, and they’d be caught powerless. An attack the demon lord Rimuru wasn’t conscious of could absolutely defeat him—Maribel was certain of it.

Now she was in the central part of the crypt…but she couldn’t find the reactor discussed in her report. In fact, there was nothing at all. The sarcophagi were empty, bereft of any accompanying decor or treasure. Yes, there were gold and silver baubles lying around, but no magic weapons—nothing of real value.

“That’s strange,” she reflexively whispered to herself. “So strange. What’s going on…?”

Nobody was there to answer her…or so she thought.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! There’s no magical control reactor in these ruins, you know.”

“…!!”

“And by the way, there wasn’t one in Soma, either.”

“…Is that you, Yuuki?”

“It sure is.”

It was definitely Yuuki who answered her, standing tall where she could see him. Kagali was also there, nestled close to her.

“Aren’t you fighting the demon lord Rimuru…?”

“It’s over. I gave my all against him, but it was pointless. Rimuru had enough strength to go easy on me, but I didn’t stand a chance. If I could have won, I figured I would’ve beaten him right there, but…”

“I was so scared watching you! And I really thought you betrayed us, too.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, sorry. I figured it’d be more believable if I didn’t let you in on it. Besides, I always believed you’d understand my intentions.”

“Well, all right. Everything worked out fine, at least. If this is what you wanted, I’ve got nothing to complain about.”

Yuuki and Kagali were thoroughly enjoying themselves. Seeing them carry on, Maribel finally realized. Yuuki tricked her.

“That’s a lie. It must be a lie. But… Yuuki, did you break my force?!”

It seemed impossible to her, but it was a reality Maribel had to accept. But when, and how, did Yuuki manage to overcome the desires of her Avarice?

“…How did you do it?”

“Curious?”

“Just tell me!!”

“Heh-heh! All right. I will.”

Yuuki gave Maribel a look of pity, then showed her. As she watched, his brisk, cloudless demeanor suddenly appeared to have a dark pall over it.

“No… That’s a lie! A lie…”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don’t believe me? But it’s the truth. I was pretending to be under your thrall from the beginning. What do you think? Pretty good performance, huh?”

Yuuki laughed, having a blast down in the crypt.

Maribel, on the other hand, looked ill. “No! My desires… They harness your emotions, to give you power…” Whispering to herself, she tried desperately to understand her situation.

“Yeah, your greed was something else. Sadly, though, my own desires are stronger than yours. This world, you know… It’s like my sandbox. And it’s my dream to become king of it someday. I didn’t even need Anti-Skill to keep your Avarice from working on me.”

The smile stayed on Yuuki’s face. To Maribel, it was like having her death sentence read out.

“Don’t count me out! I’m Maribel! Maribel the Greedy! Someone like you isn’t even a threat to me!”

She drummed up all the energy in her soul, hurling it straight at Yuuki as she screamed. This was Greed Flare, a skill that transformed the power of her iron will into waves of physical destruction. It didn’t work.



“Forget it already. You can’t beat me.”

Yuuki took her attack unguarded. The black waves dissipated like clouds around him. And at the next moment:

“Grrhh!”

The edge of Yuuki’s hand shot straight into her heart—and that wasn’t even the worst of it. Her force flowed out of her body as Yuuki’s own absorbed it all.

“Nghh…ah… My power… You’re…”

“You got that right.”

“No… You—you can’t…do that…”

The light faded from Maribel’s eyes, the power draining from the arms clutching at Yuuki.

“If you were born into this world even ten years earlier, you might have taken the whole thing over. You just weren’t lucky this time. Your body was too young to fully control your skills, wasn’t it?”

“……”

Maribel didn’t respond. She glared at Yuuki, frustration clouding her face…and then her soul flickered once, twice, before fading away. The one golden rule of this world had been upheld once more—the powerless always lose.

“You said it yourself, didn’t you? You said I had too much ambition. Well, good night, Maribel. I’ll take on that desire of yours…”

His words no longer reached her—and thus, Maribel, who lived in an era of near-constant upheaval, breathed her last.

Leaving everyone else to Shion and my friends, I rushed over to help Milim.

Right this minute, I was looking down on the Chaos Dragon. It was huge. Super-huge. A good three hundred feet or so in length, maybe. It made Charybdis look like a shrimp, and just beholding it drove the viewer to despair. The Chaos Dragon was now consuming the magicules around itself, growing bigger and bigger. I could see it razing entire mountains with a single spout of breath. It was violence personified.

Even I had no chance against a monster like this. But Milim was different. Thanks to her super-dreadnought-level magicule stores, she had stopped the Chaos Dragon’s advance.

“Sorry I’m late, Milim!”

“Rimuru? It’s about time! I’ve got a little problem here. This guy’s actually my friend. I wanted to seal it away, but it’s just not working. I think it’s gonna cause some damage soon…but I can’t bump off my own friend!” She looked ready to cry.

Unlike Charybdis, the Chaos Dragon was bosom buddies with Milim. She must’ve wanted to give it the benefit of the doubt…but it was so huge that not even Milim had enough force to banish it away. Simply beating it would be doable enough, but she couldn’t kill a friend like that.

I could understand that. It reflected well on Milim, in my eyes. So I smiled, trying to reassure her.

“It’s all right now. I’ve got an idea!”

Milim’s eyes sparkled as she watched me. I could tell she trusted me, but man, talk about pressure. I couldn’t let it get to my head, though. Trying to look as confident as possible, I explained my strategy. “Listen. No matter how big this guy is, there has to be a core in it. You can attack him accurately enough to leave that intact, right?”

I figured Milim could preserve the Chaos Dragon’s soul while striking the rest of it—much as I did with Charybdis to save Phobio, its vessel. This soul would be protected by the dragon’s astral and spiritual bodies, but those bodies were already corrupted and breaking apart—or actually, they were broken to start with, hence this hate-driven corruption. It was also smeared head to toe with Maribel’s desire, and I couldn’t extract it out of the guy.

But its soul, though—the “heart” of Milim’s best friend—still seemed to be working hard to me, shining as strong as always.

“B-but… If it’s this big, it’ll take a lot power to stab into it. If I mess it up, I could blow away the whole thing…”

“I taught you how to go easy, didn’t I? Your friend’s trying its very best for you right now. You have to be strong for it!”

I couldn’t let her make excuses. Momentum was key. If she starts thinking What if I mess this up? she’ll fail at something she ought to succeed in.

“And I’ll help you out, okay? Just follow my instructions and release all the magic force you’ve got!”

Yes, I told her I had a plan. I really didn’t. I was just gonna rely on power here—Milim’s power. But this wasn’t the first time for me. I already saw it happen once, and it succeeded then. This was operating on an even huger scale, but the task before us was identical.

“All right. I believe in you, Rimuru!”

“Okay! We got this!”

I faked as much confidence as I could. Really, it was breaking my heart, acting so bold like this. If it failed, I was deathly scared of the consequences…but I had no other bright ideas, and I was the only one who could pull this off.

You’re on, Raphael!

Understood. Yes, my lord!

I might be a pro at palming responsibility off…but for this moment, at least, I needed to perform. No mistakes would be allowed. I repeatedly told myself that this would go fine.

“This’ll be easy, okay? It’s the same thing over again! Do it, Milim!”

“Right! Yeah, you’re right. Here goes, my friend. May the shining of the stars burn into your eyes! Drago Buster!!”

There was a flash, so bright that closing your eyes did nothing.

The enormous swirl of power Milim released reached the Chaos Dragon, smashing against its ominous wall of force. Power struggled against power—and as I watched it, I searched for the source of the Chaos Dragon’s strength, relying on Raphael’s calculations to control Milim’s torrential might.

It was heavy. Incredibly heavy. I could tell it was draining my own magicule stores. But despite all the energy we poured into it, the Chaos Dragon was unscathed. This guy really was crazy.

It was about to break my heart, but if I gave up now, this would all be for nothing. All my previous experience was for this exact moment—I truly believed that as I threw everything I had at it.

Trying desperately to retain my peace of mind, I slowly brushed away the evil force that loomed around the Chaos Dragon’s soul. In terms of time, it was less than a second, but the pressure made it seem like forever.

I saw it! The Chaos Dragon’s spotless heart, blinking there amid it all. But I couldn’t let up yet. Even without the black mist of desire, even without the hateful evil, I still had the dragon’s broken, polluted spiritual force waiting for me.

Carefully, with pinpoint precision, I kept up my work. Then, out of nowhere, the black mist disappeared. Yuuki defeated Maribel!

“Yes! We can do this!” Hoping to seize victory, I set off Belzebuth. “Milim, we’re finishing this now. Can you boost your output?”

“You got it! Raaahhhhh—Drago-Nova!!”

Heeding my instructions, Milim finally got serious.

Feeling it all over again made me realize just how amazing she was. How could she turn the spigot any farther than that? The way she engineered incredible feats of strength like that—I could really tell she was on another level from the rest of us.

But watch out. Now’s no time to stare at her, all amazed.

“Okay, Chaos Dragon. I’m gonna stop the pain for you.”

Now for the final touch.

Timing was going to be key here. Milim’s magic had to pulverize the Chaos Dragon’s exposed spiritual body, breaking down its astral body as well. Not missing my beat for a moment, I waited until just before Milim’s power shattered its heart, then triggered Soul Consume.

Ignoring all rules of time and space, Belzebuth did its work. Within my perception, it was done quicker than Milim’s magic—and just as I planned it out, I had the Chaos Dragon’s shattered heart in hand.

Without the core governing that massive cloud of magicules, the Chaos Dragon was already starting to disintegrate. But that was a problem of its own.

“R-Rimuru! This is bad news! It’s gonna explode!”

Milim had already stopped infusing her magic at my signal. But now there was a massive energy field in the sky, twisting and warping the air inside. Force clashed against force, compressing the energy at eye-popping pressures. The reaction would come soon enough, a huge explosion that not even Milim could neutralize.

She gave me a panicked look. But I was calm. According to Raphael, I could apparently do something about this.

“It’s all right. I’ll figure it out!”

“You can do that?!”

She looked surprised. I appreciated her admiring eyes, but if I messed this up, I was gonna look like such a dumbass—ah, but now’s no time for that.

Are you sure this’ll be okay, Professor?

I couldn’t help but ask.

Affirmative. It is not a problem.

Just as businesslike as ever. That seemed so reckless but kind of reassuring in a way.

With a smile, I looked at what used to be the Chaos Dragon. It was already just a shell at this point. No need to hold back.

“Gobble it up, Belzebuth!!”

Could it really consume such a vast blob of energy? My worries were instantly quelled by the fury of Belzebuth’s appetite, astounding me beyond imagination as it swallowed every bit up like a midnight snack.

“Is…? Is it over?” Milim asked.

“No, not yet. We gotta do something about your friend here.”

“Huh? You will?”

“Sure. I brought this along for times like these!” Not really! But let’s roll with it!

I took out a pseudo-soul.

“…?”

No time to spell it out for the confused Milim. I focused on myself. Theoretically, this was possible. In fact, Raphael guaranteed it. I just had to believe in it.

Boldly, I did my work, trusting it was guaranteed to succeed. I picked up all the pieces of the shattered heart, then absorbed them into the pseudo-soul; Soul Consume patched all the pieces into a single unit for me, so it went easier than I expected.

The issue was what came after that. Can a core like this be housed in a pseudo-soul?

There was no reaction.

I began to sweat. Staying calm on the surface, I frantically tried to brainstorm a solution. What should I do at a time like this?

My brain finally settled on something I saw on TV dramas a lot.

“M-Milim… Did this Chaos Dragon have a name or anything?”

“A name? Nothing like that, no…”

No? Crap. But calm down. There has to be another way…

“…Gaia! I wanted to call it that someday. This creature’s name is Gaia!!”

Oh, it does have one.

I breathed a sigh of relief and softly called Gaia’s name.

What a nice name that is!

So your name’s Gaia, huh?

Hey, shouldn’t you open your eyes before your friend starts crying?

The pseudo-soul began to softly glow. We did it. The heart was in the soul.

Now I wrapped the master core in Gaia’s pseudo-soul. That completed its avatar core, and now my job was done. Time would take care of the rest—and once Gaia’s heart was healed up, it would be revived in the shape of its choice. In Gaia’s case, that shape would be its actual body, not some other vessel. It’d be a new monster, coming to life right before Milim’s eyes.

“It worked, Milim. This is the new Gaia. It hasn’t been born yet, so it’s kind of like an egg right now.” I presented the avatar core to her.

“Right… Right! I just knew leaving everything to you would work out. I trusted you, Rimuru. Thank you. Thank you!”

Glad to be of service. That, and I’m glad I didn’t screw that up. But more than anything, seeing Milim smile really did make me happy.

“Wanna head back? Everyone’s probably worried for us.”

“Mm-hmm! I need to tell ’em all what I did!”

Sure, sure.

Good thing Milim came along, though. I couldn’t have done a thing against that guy alone.

From far away, we saw the palace, along with our friends nervously watching us. They all looked okay, which was reassuring.

That wrapped things up, then. I just wanted to go home and relax. A nice bath, followed by a cold beer. Basking in the joy welling out from me, I joined Milim as we went back down to regroup with our friends.