

Chapter 3

Visitors from the Empire

In a luxurious room, three men stood close to one another, faces plastered with nervous expressions. They straightened their backs, waiting for the master of this room to return. That was the man who had become one of the corps commanders of the Empire in the blink of an eye—Yuuki.

But in the eyes of these three, that was nothing surprising. After all, Yuuki was their overlord, as well as the grandmaster of the secret organization they were all a part of—Cerberus.

“Hey, sorry for the holdup, you guys! You could have sat down while you waited,” Yuuki greeted, entering the room.

Kagali followed closely behind him like a true secretary.



“No no, Yuuki-sama, we are your loyal subordinates, there is no need for you to be concerned about us,” one of the three replied for everyone. He was one of the leaders of Cerberus, Damrada the Gold—a suspicious and seemingly unpredictable man.

As for the other two, one of them was Misha the Lover. A beauty who simultaneously possessed both the appearance of a young girl and a mature woman, although with an unusual allure which one might even call eerie.

The last person symbolized raw strength, Vega the Power. His body was muscular and tenacious, like that of a ferocious beast, while the aura he exuded was oppressive enough to kill a person with just a glance.

These three were the leaders of Cerberus.

They bowed to Yuuki before taking their seats.

“Congratulations for taking the office of corps commander, sir.”

“Since Yuuki-sama has even managed to escape from the hands of Demon Lord Guy, this was only to be expected.”

“Hmph, if you had handed over the matter to me, running the corps would have been a piece of cake.”

While Damrada and Misha both congratulated Yuuki, Vega seemed extremely displeased. But Yuuki didn’t mind.

Indeed. A meathead like you would have no trouble fighting his way to the top, but they’d never elect a corps commander that hopelessly inept at leading—Yuuki smirked to himself.

“Either way, this was all thanks to Damrada’s recommendation to seek Master Gadra,” Yuuki said, trying to change the topic.

“You are too kind,” Damrada replied with a smile. “Our progress to this day has all been thanks to the prior arrangements made after we predicted how things would develop. I merely introduced the otherworlders prepared by Yuuki-sama to Gadra-dono. It’s nothing worthy of praise.”

“Hahaha, you’re as stubborn as a mule. You could’ve just acted happy at my compliments.”

“I deliberately chose not to. It would be a burden if someone were to set their expectations of me too high.”

“Haha, you sure are a funny man.”

Yuuki and Damrada exchanged looks as they both smiled. This alone was able to communicate each other’s thoughts, since both of them had confidence in each other’s abilities.

After they continued chatting for a bit, Yuuki cut to the main issue. “Now then, Kagali, please give the report on the movement of Demon Lord Rimuru.”

“Understood, Yuuki-sama. Currently, Demon Lord Rimuru is—”

Hearing Yuuki’s order, Kagali began to speak. Her source of information came from the members of the Freedom Association in the West. Most of Yuuki’s subordinates had already fled, so by using this distraction, they had managed to leave behind a few spies.

Kagali spoke in a very clear voice and gave a concise explanation. She revealed that the Western Nations were now completely under Rimuru’s control. Furthermore, they had organized a massive, fearsome army as a countermeasure against any invasion initiated by the Empire. In addition, at the capital Rimuru, there were often sightings of incredible phenomena, and so on.

“I see. There is a small town near the bank of the Great Ameld River, meant exclusively for hosting taverns; did he turn that into a military outpost?” Yuuki murmured to himself. “Now that I think about it, if he intends to expand his defensive perimeter to our nation, he would have to do that.”

“Indeed, nearly 20,000 soldiers have already been deployed there. It looks like they utilized something called a ‘magitrain’ to transport the supplies. I heard that there were enough rations for a protracted war,” Kagali explained.

“Impressive. If that is the case, it will be difficult for the Empire to win.”

“That’s true. That nation has imported rations, enough to feed over a million people, directly from the Kingdom of Farmenas. While Farmenas could hardly compare to its strength a year ago, the nation right now could probably fight a war with the Empire all by itself. Moreover, if the Western States Council, controlled by Demon Lord Rimuru, were to gather all their might, they would certainly become a force to be reckoned with.”

“That would be hard to say. Rimuru-san has already decided to embrace cruelty and ruthlessness; however, considering his personality, he’s still as soft as ever. If we were to fight seriously with our numbers, the casualties would only increase. That’s why he would probably want to push back the Empire with only the elite forces of his own nation.”

“How would that be possible…”

“He managed to become a demon lord, after all. Surely he wouldn’t do something that foolish…”

While both Kagali and Damrada rejected the idea, Yuuki remained steadfast in his view.

That person is incredibly naive and abnormally powerful at the same time, there’s no telling what he can and cannot do…

That’s what Yuuki believed deep down, but he decided not to voice that opinion and asked Kagali to continue.

“Excuse me,” Kagali apologized, “I shall resume with the report. There are over fifty thousand soldiers waiting for orders at the capital city Rimuru. Reinforcements sent by the former Beast Kingdom Eurazania are gradually arriving as well. The estimated number of soldiers would amount to over a hundred thousand.”

“That does sound very surprising, but the Empire still has the numerical advantage.”

Kagali voiced her genuine thoughts. “Indeed, the difference in numbers is huge. The Imperial Army has more than a million troops. Even the least competent soldiers have undergone those suspicious physical modifications and their average strength is at least rank C or above. Plus, they are armed with many strange pieces of equipment. Honestly, Demon Lord Rimuru will not stand a chance against the Empire.”

It was astonishing to have an army of 100,000 men. Every single one of those soldiers were highly trained and had high morale to boot. Normally speaking, this was a size to be praised. However, it would quickly seem trivial when compared to the scale of the Empire’s army.

Centuries ago, when Kagali was still Demon Lord Kazalim, even her castle’s defense mechanism—which she was quite proud of—faced defeat against the Empire’s military might. This great difference in numbers couldn’t help but make her think that an army of merely 100,000 soldiers was pointless.

However, Yuuki had a dissenting view.

“I’ll keep your opinion in mind, please proceed with the report.”

“Then,” Kagali calmly continued, “next I shall report regarding his nation’s technological strength—”

She mentioned that Tempest had suddenly begun to sell some extremely rare, new products. There were items that could make life more convenient, as well as high-quality equipment. It was a strange assortment of items, yet all of them were very useful.

Naturally, many people wanted to get an exclusive contract with the producer of these items; yet, no matter how hard these traders tried to locate the source of these products, they could never find it. The whole ordeal remained a mystery.

“…The aforementioned ‘magitrain’ is also one of these items. That nation seems to be experiencing a wave of technological innovation, just like the Empire. Unfortunately, they seem to have completely prevented any leaks of their confidential information. Despite the best efforts of the Freedom Association, we were not able to find the source of these items.”

It was certain that the development was being carried out somewhere in that nation, but they had no clue as to where that exactly was. This seemed to have frustrated Kagali as well. They couldn’t even send their subordinates to try and find the source; if they were to draw any suspicion, it would all be over. Besides, their opponent was Demon Lord Rimuru and even she could not face off against him.

It was then that Kagali suddenly recalled something. “Now that I think about it, they are also developing some new forms of weaponry. Considering this, we should be more cautious. We must not be blinded by the number of soldiers alone.”

Hearing this, Yuuki suddenly laughed. “Clever as always, you noticed. That’s it. While the tanks developed by the Empire were shocking enough, Rimuru-san has also managed to develop the magitrain. Now, scientific weapons are not exclusive to the Empire, so we cannot treat them as our ace in the hole.”

The Empire was not the only one who possessed technology from another world. Rimuru also possessed the memory of an otherworlder—there was no telling what type of weapons he was developing.

Any other nation would surely descend into panic when faced with the unknown strength of the Empire. Even if they had otherworlders who understood its weaponry on their side, knowing what they were up against would only make them fall further into despair… The difference in strength between the two would be very clear to them, and they would realize they have no chance of winning.

But what if the Empire’s enemy possessed sophisticated technology and the ability to develop the same type of things as the Empire? They could quickly come up with a solution and crush this supposed superiority the Empire enjoyed. On the other hand, if they let their current advantage get to their head, the dynamic nature of the situation might prevent them from responding quickly and leave them behind.

Yuuki had the foresight to notice this, and that was why he thought that the chances of Rimuru emerging victorious were, in fact, quite high.

“How boring!” Vega snapped. “We’ll just beat the shit out of them, or better, kill every last one of them! That way, we’d be able to solve all our problems!”

Whether it was weapons or armies, they should just eliminate any hindrance in their way—Vega declared so confidently. Yuuki was quite frustrated having realized that nothing they said till now had gotten through to him.

This guy sure has strength, but not the brains to match—or rather, he doesn’t have a brain to begin with… If only he were smarter, I could have given him some more useful roles to play—Yuuki sighed internally.

“When that time comes, I’ll leave the matter to you, but don’t underestimate the enemy.”

With this vague statement, Yuuki otherwise told Vega to shut up. However, what Vega said was not entirely unreasonable. Yuuki began to ponder, thinking: “After all—” In this world, quality was more important than quantity. No matter how large an army you managed to organize, it would not stand a chance against Demon Lord Guy. It was easy to tell from this example that the individual strength of a combatant was something that could not be ignored.

In order to achieve strategic goals, judging your enemy’s strength was crucial—essentially, information warfare was vital. And in order to achieve this, it was imperative to send someone who was actually capable, as it was remarkably common to surrender when faced with an insurmountable foe.

Regardless of how strong the opponent was, the more people joined in on the attack, the greater the chances of achieving their strategic goals. Merely looking at only the combined strength of the troops was meaningless; to consider what type of troops you had and how to use them effectively was more important.

From this perspective, the Tempest Federation was one tough enemy. The demon lord, Rimuru, was not the sole threat from this nation. Within Tempest, there were several powerful majins. For instance, the famed Four Heavenly Kings—Benimaru, Diablo, Shion, and Gobta. Simply having these four deployed would be equivalent to four tactical units, and defeating them alone would be a highly challenging task.

It’s not just their technological prowess, there are plenty of tough warriors too. It doesn’t matter how many people we gather; they won’t stand a chance against these guys. In hindsight, it makes me feel like surrendering to Demon Lord Guy really was the right thing to do.

As far as Yuuki knew, he could name several people in that nation who were even stronger than Gobta. In other words, there were definitely monsters who could rival the strength of the Four Heavenly Kings.

“The problem is those majins, who seem to rival saints and demon lords in strength,” Damrada muttered, agreeing with Yuuki.

“Exactly. His country not only has the Four Heavenly Kings, but also majins like Geld and Gabil. It is a bit hard to understand how he was able to gather a number of demon lord-class individuals like them.”

The more Yuuki thought about it, the more dubious it became. A number of people with strength that could rival Clayman’s were under one demon lord—Rimuru. And to those who knew this, it wasn’t a joke but a real headache.

“I guess it’s fortunate that we aren’t antagonizing Demon Lord Rimuru right now.”

Everyone but Vega nodded silently at Yuuki’s comment.

Because of their agreement, it could be said that Yuuki and his comrades had come under the umbrella of Demon Lord Guy. In other words, making a move on Tempest was an affront to Guy himself. As long as they did not intend to meddle in Rimuru’s affairs, one could say that they were in a temporary ceasefire with Rimuru, which was rather convenient for Yuuki, who intended to make the most of this situation.

And if they ever did become hostile, it would only be after they had regained all that they lost in the West.

Yuuki returned to the main subject.

“So, was that everything you had to report?” he questioned Kagali.

“It seems that detailed military information could not be investigated,” Kagali added, “and thus concludes all the highly accurate information I obtained. But there’s one topic that is quite interesting.”

“And that is?”

“In the capital city Rimuru, they have a kind of event called ‘emergency drills,’ and now they have supplemented an ‘evacuation drill’ to this event.”

Up until now, their disaster prevention drills had been very specific, such as taking shelter in a sturdy building or training to put out a fire. However, the purpose of this latest disaster drill was unclear, which involved getting into the town as quickly as possible through any of the gates.

“Just getting into the town?”

“Yes. The spies were puzzled by it too, so they decided to split up and act in two groups.”

“From the inside and outside, I reckon?”

“That’s right. As a result, they reported seeing a strange sight, like something straight out of a dream.”

“A strange sight?” Misha suddenly inquired.

“Yes, Misha,” Kagali answered. “Unbelievable as it may seem, the whole town suddenly disappeared ten minutes after the announcement was over. And they claimed that the only thing left remaining was one big gate.”

According to the reports of the investigators who were outside, other than the gate, there were several guards left to guide the people who failed to enter the town in time.

After confirming that nobody was there, the investigators decided to enter the gate. What welcomed them was a stone-built labyrinth. The investigators were able to flee outside as they panicked, which suggested that it was possible to go in and out freely.

“Hmm… That might be the Dungeon…”

“Is there something you’d like to share with us, Yuuki-sama?”

“Yeah, I think Kagali knows about this as well; that town has a tourist attraction called the Dungeon, right?”

“Ah yeah, the place that’s crawling with monsters just waiting to be slaughtered by adventurers, was it?”

“That might be it. After all, there was a rumor that there is a city in that Dungeon…”

“A city inside the Dungeon?” Damrada repeated, unable to believe what he had just heard.

It was hard to explain all this to someone wholly unfamiliar with it. All they could do was attempt to convince him of the truth. “Yeah, you have every right to think it’s absurd, but considering this is Rimuru-san we’re talking about, it may very well be possible. I mean, that labyrinth is a hundred floors deep, with Veldora guarding the very bottom.”

“…Is that true?”

“Of course. I heard it from Veldora himself.”

Damrada was rendered speechless by Yuuki’s words.

“Well, it makes sense if you think about it,” Kagali conceded with pity in her eyes. “There might be an important facility in that city, such as a site for developing new technology.”

“Ah, I see. It’s possible—no, it’s reasonable to think so.”

Yuuki was getting more and more excited, beyond stunned, at the idea of doing something so outrageous. His vapid speculation didn’t seem far off anymore. He was convinced that it was possible for Rimuru.

“But if that’s the case, what will happen with the war?”

“I don’t know either. Although I’ve always thought that he wasn’t the kind of opponent to launch a frontal attack, protecting the city with that method is just unbelievable. I’m sure the Imperial Army will also be shocked.”

Yuuki was convinced that Rimuru would never bring a ruinous battle to his doorstep, because there was no way he would allow the residents of his town to get in harm’s way.

But what if the town is fully protected… We have to reassess all the tactics we had anticipated.

“We’ll just wait and see what happens in the inn town, and besides, the real battle will take place in the capital, right? I surmise that if the Imperial Army ignores the gate, they will be attacked from the rear by Rimuru-san’s forces.”

“In that case, it would be possible to launch a pincer attack together with the allied western forces.”

“Their vanguard will explore and analyze the war potential of the Imperial Army. And while the allied western forces and the Imperial Army are engaged in a war of attrition, the remaining Tempest forces can deal with the enemy slowly but surely.”

“What a scary plan to think of. As expected of a demon lord.”

Understanding Yuuki’s words, Kagali, Damrada, and Misha looked astonished. He knew that Demon Lord Rimuru wasn’t someone that could be dealt with using conventional forces alone, but he hadn’t thought that it would go this far.

The difficulty of even envisioning future hostilities towards him seemed to bother Yuuki. Hence, he and the others were even more excited to see how the battle between the Imperial Army and Demon Lord Rimuru would turn out.

“So, Yuuki-sama. How should we proceed going forward?” asked Misha, looking for the right moment. She and the others followed Yuuki even after knowing he had lost to Demon Lord Guy. But even now they were not able to read what he was thinking.

It was in their favor if the Empire was made to suffer by Demon Lord Rimuru and his subordinates. But if that failed to occur, they didn’t want to be the ones to make it happen. With his agreement with Guy, they didn’t think that Yuuki would seriously back the Empire. However, they feared that now that he had become a corps commander, he would fall into his own trap.

To Cerberus, the fact that a top-ranking officer of the military was on their side was very appealing, but on the contrary, it implied the risk of being taken in by the military. To eat or to be eaten—it would take only a single wrong turn to meet their doom.

It was this worry which prompted Misha’s question, and Yuuki was well aware of it.

“There’s no need to worry,” Yuuki reassured. “If Rimuru-san does hold out against the Empire, that’s good for us, too. The Empire will be in the way of achieving our goals. So, it’s not just because Demon Lord Guy told me to do so; I will have to eat away at their strength, one way or the other. Now that I’ve become a corps commander, I can control when it happens. Think of the situation this way.”

Now that Yuuki had become one of the three generals of the Empire, it was safe to say that he had the inner workings of the Imperial Army in his hands. If he knew the military strategy of the Empire, he could even predict its faults, too. This meant he’d be able to accurately predict when the Empire would take military action, what the size of their army would be, and even when the Imperial mainland would be at its most vulnerable.

If resistance in the West was strong, the Empire would have to exert more military force. And if that were to happen, Yuuki thought that no matter how tight of a defense the Empire had, an opportunity would surely show itself, sooner or later.

“We will seize that opportunity!” Yuuki declared, slamming his fist on the table.

Kagali smiled while standing up straight, and Damrada and the other two, still sitting, got excited at the meaning of those words.

“Do you mean a coup d’état…”

“Aah, I can’t wait for that to happen. Just what you’d expect from Yuuki-sama.”

“Hehe, ain’t that interesting. Whether it be the Empire or a demon lord, I’ll destroy them all!”

Yuuki ignored Vega, who was evidently excited, and got back on track.

“Well, that’s our ultimate goal. At the end of the day, my promise with Guy was to throw the Empire into chaos. I need to keep my promise. Incidentally, we will also stir up the West, so I don’t think that’s something we have the right to complain about,” Yuuki said with a grin.

Guy hadn’t forbidden him from interfering with the West, so Yuuki was free to do whatever he wanted.

“So, you want the Empire and the West to fight each other, and then crush the Empire’s head in the meantime…” Damrada trailed off.

Misha revealed a brilliant smile. “You always come up with the most devious of plans.”

“Not really. I think anyone could have come up with such a thing.”

Some may have been able to come up with such a plan, but fewer were willing to carry it out. No, there might’ve been people who wanted to do it, but lacked the strength required to see it through. Yuuki was different—he could both come up with such a plan and bring it to fruition.

“I’ve also leaked some information to Master Gadra. That old man is a trailblazing, flexible thinker, and for some reason, he holds a sharp grudge against the Western Nations. Developing various weapons—one of his contributions to the Empire—is a product of this animus.”

“Indeed, his reputation has spread far and wide.”

“I know, right? Once he investigates those tidbits, he will surely recognize Demon Lord Rimuru as a threat to the Empire’s ambitions and see how dangerous he really is.”

“…And what do you think will happen then?”

“Master Gadra has a lot of influence over the Imperial Army. However, he doesn’t actually have any authority. That’s because that old man’s interests revolve around getting revenge. So, in my opinion, if I steer him properly, I can pit him against Demon Lord Rimuru.”

At the same time, Yuuki wanted Gadra to look for more information about the Dungeon.

“If that happens,” Damrada speculated, “then it will be possible to weaken both Demon Lord Rimuru and the Imperial Army, wouldn’t it?”

“Exactly!” Yuuki nodded with satisfaction.

Yuuki didn’t intend to make a move on Rimuru himself, but he was more than welcome to have someone else challenge him of their own accord. That was why he had devised many cowardly measures.

“In my opinion,” he continued, going further into detail, “there are three people that we need to be wary of in the Empire, and one of them is Master Gadra.”

Gadra was an archmage who had lived for a long time. He was a majin who knew all about the inner workings of the capital and was also a champion who had survived the last “battle to subjugate” the Storm Dragon Veldora. Those who knew all this feared him.

“So, who are the other two?” Kagali wondered, showing genuine interest, much to Yuuki’s chagrin.

“Actually, I haven’t been able to figure out their identities. That’s why I can say that they are definitely a troublesome bunch.”

Yuuki wasn’t able to nail down their real identities even after making full use of his information network. So, from this fact alone, it was obvious how vexatious these people were.

“Could it be that they are top-ranking members of the Imperial Guardians?” suggested Misha, as if she suddenly remembered something.

Yuuki vaguely affirmed the question. It was rumored within the army that the Single Digit Imperial Knights were stronger than the corps commanders. Yuuki personally felt that it wasn’t a mere rumor. Although he rose to the position of corps commander, his rank was only at Double Digit.

There was no point in trying to contest a ‘rank battle’ unless you knew who your opponent was. And, in order to become a Single Digit, one was required to appeal directly to the Emperor and win the battle in his presence. This fact was only known to those who were privileged enough to consider the position.

“I think I might be able to beat a Single Digit. However, I didn’t want to show my trump card in front of our enemies, so I didn’t apply for a rank battle before the Emperor.”

Nevertheless, Yuuki was chosen as a corps commander, but that was because of the connections he had with Gadra.

“But if that’s the case, then you must fight them first, so that we can know for sure if you’re stronger than them or not. Anyway, who are these troublesome folks you’re talking about? D’ya mean there are more than nine people behind the Single Digits?”

Vega raised an excellent point. Yuuki nodded, a bit shocked at that.

“Well, you’re right. There is a possibility that a nasty guy is hiding among those nine people. But hey, you can’t be wary of someone you’ve never seen before, can you? Guys, I’m talking about the people who have already shown themselves in broad daylight.”

“And who’s that?” Damrada inquired.

“The Head of the Imperial Intelligence Agency, Tatsuya Kondou.”

“You’re right, I can’t get a handle on the man’s identity.”

“It’s creepy that we know his name and appearance, but we don’t know what he’s really like.”

Tatsuya Kondou, as his name suggested, was an otherworlder. But as far as personal details went, that was all anyone knew about him. There was even a rumor that he was “the specter that fed on information.” He was just a first lieutenant in rank, but none of the corps commanders had the authority to command him. It meant that the Imperial Intelligence Bureau stood above the military complex in the power hierarchy.

“Weird, right? It’s only an assumption, but I think he’s also a Single Digit.”

“…I see.”

“Now that you mention it, that does add up.” Damrada and Kagali nodded firmly. Misha was also contemplating the possibility but appeared to have no objections.

“Then, who is the last person?” Vega, apparently the only one disinterested in the matter, asked Yuuki, urging him to cut to the chase.

“Hahaha, how impatient. About Tatsuya Kondou, it’s best to meet him first. I’ll find an opportunity to arrange just that with him. As for the last person, I’m not sure about this either.”

“What? What does that mean?” Vega demanded in a slightly rougher tone. The excitement must’ve gotten to his head.

“Calm down, Vega,” Yuuki lightly warned him.

“Y-yeah. Sorry.”

Vega, who was reprimanded, broke out in a cold sweat. The difference in class between him and Yuuki was apparent.

“The last person is the one who sits next to the Emperor. She had such a tremendous presence that you could feel it from the other side of the blinds.”

“ “ “…?” ” ”

No one but Yuuki was aware of her true identity—or even the fact that she existed. From this alone, one could tell how dangerous that person was.

“…That kind of big shot, huh? I never heard anything of the sort…” Damrada replied on everyone’s behalf.

“As I thought,” Yuuki muttered. “Despite such a presence, no one seems to have noticed her existence. I can only imagine how dangerous she is.”

The room fell silent.

“Does that person really exist? I haven’t heard any rumors suggesting that sort of thing.”

“On the other hand, none of us would have believed it if we hadn’t heard it from you.”

“…”

Yuuki smiled at his subordinates who still eyed him skeptically.

“Don’t worry about it. Just remember that these three will be the major obstacles when we stage a coup in the Empire. I’m going to get rid of Master Gadra first; so, Damrada, start digging about Kondou Tatsuya.”

“Very well.”

“Misha, just continue your mission.”

“Understood. I’ll continue to focus on wrapping the commander of the Armored Corps around my little finger.”

“What about me?” Vega pointed out.

“You’re going to infiltrate the Magic Beast Corps. With your strength, you’ll become an Imperial Guardian in no time. However, you’re not allowed to kill the corps commander, got it?”

“Got it. I’ll do my best,” Vega laughed ferociously, happy with the fact that he had finally received his order.

Is it going to be all right? Yuuki was a little bit worried but decided to trust Vega, nevertheless. If, by any chance, he did kill a corps commander, the military actions of the Empire would be delayed. Yuuki was anxious about that, but he decided to dismiss it and planned to cross that bridge when he got to it.

The three heads of Cerberus left, making Yuuki and Kagali the only people in the room.

“Say, Yuuki-sama, will they be able to perform their missions successfully?”

“Beats me. Even in all my efforts to be careful, I stepped on a tiger’s tail named Guy. So, I don’t mean to be hypocritical, but I want them to carry out their missions as best as they can.”

Damrada would investigate Tatsuya Kondou. Misha would ensnare the commander of the Armored Corps. Vega was ordered to rise up in the Magic Beast Corps. Each of them embarked on a perilous mission under Yuuki’s command. As their leader, he could only wish for the success of his subordinates.

“But we’ve finally come this far. The war is going to start soon.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Now then, it will be interesting seeing which side wins.”

“Please don’t get ahead of yourself. Even if the coup succeeds, what happens after that is way more crucial.”

“Yeah. That’s why we have Laplace and the crew working on it. Our plan is flawless.” The two smiled at each other.

Their goal wasn’t to let the Empire win. The more the war became bogged down, the more the national power of the Empire declined. That was what they were aiming for, and then, they would carry out a coup d’état. The success or failure of that was the linchpin to Yuuki and Kagali’s plans.

“We will turn the emperor into a puppet and establish a new empire. And then…”

“We will reconcile peacefully with the Western Nations.”

“And when that happens…”

“We will assassinate the emperor!”

If defeating Demon Lord Rimuru proved difficult, then they didn’t need to push their luck. After losing to Guy, Yuuki had given up and settled on medium-to-short-term world domination. He realized that until he gained absolute power, going ahead with violence was the height of folly. Instead, focusing on increasing his own trump cards for now, was far wiser. If the devastation from the war spiraled into rivers of blood…

“I will awaken as a True Demon Lord.”

“Looking forward to that, Kagali. By then, I will have mastered my new power as well.”

Yuuki had awakened an Ultimate Skill. And with it, he had felt that his life span was extended several times over. Not only that, but he had also learned the fact that there was a superior existence in this world, the absolute being—Demon Lord Guy. Disregard such an existence, and world domination would be nothing more than a pipe dream.

He had slipped under Guy’s radar and was now accumulating strength. They would incite the Empire and prolong the war to exhaust both East and West. If the emperor’s assassination happened at a time when the masses grew weary and turned their backs on the war, the world would face a more chaotic and horrific period. By taking advantage of this confusion, they would aim for further awakening—that was the gist of the plan Yuuki and Kagali had drawn up.

“In any case, we should be exceedingly careful.”

“Indeed. Really careful, I suppose.”

Then they looked at each other again and smirked.

…Despite their massive intellect, these two big brains didn’t attribute much importance to the Dungeon. They only saw its value in hiding important facilities—and even a whole city—and to pique the interest of Master Gadra, just to make him a nuisance for Rimuru.

They might also go into the labyrinth someday, so they had a fleeting thought about the necessity to, at the very least, have it investigated in order to find clues on how to conquer it. As a result, the dungeon attack team would return with unexpected findings, which Yuuki hadn’t foreseen.

Master Gadra was grim-faced, deep in thought, upon receiving information from Yuuki.

Hmmm. Why now, when the Empire finally has the opportunity to destroy the god Luminas…

With the revival of Storm Dragon Veldora, drastic revisions were made to the plan. That couldn’t be helped. Since, in the last expedition, the Storm Dragon had completely ruined the project.

And now…opinions in the Empire were greatly divided. The first faction proposed waiting for the Storm Dragon to disappear to ensure the success of their plan. The second faction sought to subjugate the Storm Dragon with the power of their newly developed weapons. Lastly, the third faction urged to avoid the Great Jura Forest in its entirety so as not to stir trouble with the Storm Dragon.

The schism between these three factions threw a wrench in the Empire’s ability to move forward. As a consequence, they had allowed the revival of the Storm Dragon. The faction seeking the Storm Dragon’s subjugation was infuriated at this turn of events, but the other two factions held the majority, and thus, their opinion was ignored. After all, if the new weapons didn’t work, they would’ve been setting themselves up for another abysmal failure.

As for Gadra, he didn’t care about the Storm Dragon. His goal in life was to destroy Luminism in the West and take revenge on the Seven Luminary Clerics who had killed his close friend.

A newspaper he got from the West described the Seven Luminary Clerics’ evil deeds under the headline “The Downfall of Champions.” At the same time, he had heard news that the Seven Luminaries had perished. In spite of this, Gadra didn’t want to believe this to be true. He was firmly convinced that at least Gran would have survived and was lying low in the shadows.

In the past few months, a lot of disinformation had come from the West and it made it incredibly difficult to corroborate information. Because of this, he did not know whether or not it was true, but there was a rumor that the Rosso family had fallen, too.

Well, it’s still unconfirmed. The Sun Priest, Gran, is probably that wreck of a Hero. Even though he is old, he’s not someone you should ever underestimate.

Besides, the rule of the Western States Council seemed to be rock-solid on the surface, but behind the scenes, various developments had been confirmed. There was no indication among these rumors that the Western Holy Church had been weakened, which seemed to prove to Gadra that the Sun Priest Gran had managed to survive.

We should just ignore that Storm Dragon and attack the West…

But he knew exactly how hard that was.

The Storm Dragon and a demon lord are joining forces, huh. It is the height of folly to send an army against such a monstrous creature that lives beyond the laws of magic. I helped to develop the new weapons, so I’m sure they can be used to halt it in its tracks. But to destroy it is another matter. Let alone control it…

Gadra had survived the previous great expedition, so he had experienced first-hand how big of a threat Veldora was. Due to this experience, he also thought that the belligerents were reckless.

Those fools don’t know how hard it is to perform ‘Mental Control’ on spiritual life forms in the first place!

Achieving ‘Mental Control’ over spiritual life forms wasn’t entirely impossible. The varying degrees of success from the experiments conducted on demons had proven this. Gadra knew this very well given that he was the one who had come up with this theory. Based on the results from these various investigations, he had arrived at the conclusion that the Storm Dragon Veldora should not be messed with.

He had submitted this report to the emperor, but, unfortunately, it was rejected—“There are people who want to do this, so I won’t stop them.” Gadra’s advice fell on deaf ears. There was nothing more he could do.

This time, a new problem had appeared—Demon Lord Rimuru. He was the demon lord who had unified the Great Jura Forest, established it as a country, and ruled over it. And he had done all this at a terrifying pace… If that demon lord had partnered up with the Storm Dragon, attacking the Great Jura Forest would be a fool’s gambit.

It would be a different story if the Empire mobilized its whole army. Still, it would be necessary to lure the enemy out into favorable terrain in order to deploy the entire army effectively. And normally, that was impossible. Then, how about fighting in the opponent’s own ring?

“Dungeon, eh?” Gadra mumbled to himself. “They may also be developing weapons from the otherworld. I have no choice but to look into it. It would be advantageous if we could defeat Veldora and Rimuru without sustaining more than thirty percent in casualties. Otherwise, our following chances for a decisive victory over the Western Nations would look bleak.” He was giving himself his very own pep talk.

Gadra failed to notice that he’d made a grave error. He believed that Luminism, the religion that dominated the Western Nations, was the one they should be more cautious of, not Tempest. Whether Gadra would realize this mistake or not was the key that would decide his fate.

At the behest of Yuuki, three people were selected. They were chosen because they were members of the Mixed Corps and, perhaps most importantly, acquainted with Master Gadra. In preparation for the upcoming introduction, Yuuki had invited Master Gadra to his room so he could meet the men that were to become his entourage. They were:

Shinji Tanimura: A university student from Japan who had spent most of his days in the lab doing research. Even in this world, he loved wearing a white coat, which had now become his trademark look.

Mark Lauren: He was a brown-haired, muscular man in his mid-twenties, making him the oldest of the three. As a guy in peak physical condition, he was the type to wear a tank top and jeans all year round, even in the winter.

Xin Liuxing: This was a young man of few words. While you could never quite tell what he was thinking, he would carry out his orders to a T. He wore a loose Chinese-style outfit with his braided, black hair running down his back. It seemed like he always had various weapons tucked away underneath his loose clothes.



Both Mark and Xin followed Shinji’s words obediently. And before he knew it, Shinji had established himself as their leader.

The three of them lined up straight in front of Yuuki and Gadra.

“Long time no see, Teacher!” The black-haired young man, Shinji, greeted Gadra on behalf of the group.

“Indeed Shinji, long time no see. And you too, Mark and Xin, have you been well?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m glad that you seem to be doing well, too.”

“…Master, I’m not well.”

Gadra grinned widely upon hearing Mark and Xin’s replies.

“You haven’t changed one bit. I am relieved to see that the corps is thriving.”

These three were otherworlders protected by Yuuki. He gathered otherworlders from all over the world under his protection and sent them to the Empire, whether they had any affinity for combat or not. They were received by the secret society Cerberus and brought to Master Gadra, the archmage of the Empire. Although his goal was to elicit otherworld knowledge from them, Gadra trained those who had the will, as well as talent, for combat. And those he instructed belonged to an exceptional group, a place for individuals with unique and special talents—the Mixed Corps.

The Empire wasn’t quite so naive as to bestow high military ranks upon people simply because they were otherworlders. It was due to the fact that these people were able to masterfully wield their power, making them excellent warriors in their own right. That power was the Unique Skill that manifested in each of them. The three, having achieved full command of their Unique Skills, had earned themselves unshakeable positions in the army.

“Yeah, Shinji and the gang are top-notch even among my Mixed Corps. I believe that they are the perfect candidates for this investigative mission.”

“If Yuuki-dono says so, then I have no qualms about it. You guys can take a seat, too.”

The trio sat down in their chairs as suggested by the stern wizard, feeling a slight sense of dread. Gadra chuckled as he watched them. Even though they had become competent soldiers, he still got a kick out of seeing them so nervous around him.

“So, Yuuki-dono, you will lend these three to me for the investigation?” Gadra broke the ice, not dwelling on the little fun he had.

“Yeah. I wanted to do the investigation myself, but, unfortunately, I really can’t go to that country. Sending only these three does worry me, so as their supervisor, I wonder if I could ask for your help too, Master.”

“Hmm. The report I read was quite intriguing. If what’s written in it is true, then it’s imperative that we investigate it before the great expedition.”

Gadra looked at Yuuki inquisitively, waiting for his response. Yuuki nodded as if he’d seen it coming.

“They are all true. I will explain it to you three as well—this mission is a little bit special: I want you to investigate a certain labyrinth.”

“Whoa whoa, please wait a second! We’ve been summoned here to do some kind of obstacle course? Are we that unreliable to you? Even if it’s a request from Master Gadra, that kind of thing should have to wait until after the great military invasion!” Mark, the hot-head among the three, flared up at Yuuki. This was business as usual with Mark. Yuuki would let him blurt out as many questions as he wanted if he wasn’t convinced.

“Calm down, Mark,” Shinji chided him. “This is a serious matter, okay?”

“But!”

“Just be patient, Mark. Yuuki-san has something in mind, right? First let’s listen to what he has to say.” Having placated Mark, Shinji turned to Yuuki. “Well then, please explain.”

“Of course. If you hear me out, I’m most certain you won’t have any complaints.”

And so, Yuuki began his thorough explanation of their mission.

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Gadra had heard it all beforehand, so he just sat there listening to Yuuki, checking if there were any inconsistencies in his statements. The trio, meanwhile, was astonished.

Yuuki’s protégés—warriors possessing Unique Skills—had infiltrated every corps as sleeper agents. Once awoken, they were to simultaneously create an uprising and seize control over their corps.

The trio wasn’t given any specific details, but they had reason to believe that day was near. These three were part of it, too. They believed it was only a matter of time before they got their orders, now that Yuuki had taken control of the Mixed Corps.

World domination.

When they heard Yuuki’s dream, it seemed so childish that none of them thought for a second that they could pull it off. But as time went on, they began honing their abilities and started becoming aware of the state of the world at large—cracks started forming in their doubts, and soon enough, a belief that this was possible started to take root in their minds.

Shinji and the others had come to admire Yuuki and eagerly awaited that moment. But when they were called out of the blue, they instead received an order to conquer the Dungeon. The three of them were understandably puzzled. Still, as they listened to the explanation, they began to come around to the idea.

According to Yuuki, of all the preparations and investigations done for the war, only the labyrinth remained a mystery. And they thought it was highly likely to house a number of secrets within its walls. After hearing that a whole city was hidden inside it, they knew they had something significant on their hands.

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“I understand… The Imperial Army can’t ignore the Dungeon before making its move.”

“A whole city? I won’t believe it until I see it with my own eyes.”

“…So that’s why we are going, right?” The three of them muttered as it finally clicked.

“That’s all I have to say. You guys get it now, right? If the Empire invades the Great Jura Forest in this expedition, then we will stage the coup d’état once the front lines become entrenched. To have the advantage when that time comes, we will need as much of the Imperial Army as possible lured away. Demon Lord Rimuru’s forces and the Storm Dragon Veldora alone are not a reason enough to set the whole force of the Imperial Army into motion. We need a stronger, more compelling reason to make them move.”

Yuuki indicated that such a reason may or may not be found in the labyrinth—and if there really wasn’t one, then they should just make one up. And while that “reason” kept the Imperial Army occupied, Yuuki would seize control of the Empire’s capital.

Shinji and his crew were shocked when they heard this. They had expected the coup, but this was the first time they had heard the details of it. Moreover, Gadra was right there with them. They never expected the conversation would wind up on that topic when they walked in, given that one careless word was all it took to leak their conspiracy.

“Wai—Yuuki-san?!”

Shinji hurried to cut him off, but Yuuki answered him with a smirk.

“Aah, don’t worry. Master Gadra is aware of my plan.”

“What!”

“Kukukuku, what else did you expect? While I do feel indebted to His Imperial Majesty, I don’t really care what becomes of the Empire. My objective is to destroy Luminism. I was blind to the fact that the god Luminas is, in reality, Demon Lord Luminas. What becomes of her believers is of no concern to me. However, I must bury those who killed my friend with my own hands, or else, I won’t ever find peace. First, I want to dispose of this Rimuru, who is rumored to be on good terms with Demon Lord Luminas. I also plan to join you in the conquest of this labyrinth.”

I don’t care what happens after that, Gadra said internally, a mad smile on his face.

Of course, Gadra had heard rumors about Demon Lord Rimuru. A year ago, the Kingdom of Farmus had incurred the wrath of the Storm Dragon Veldora and brought upon themselves their own destruction. And once that violent act exhausted the Storm Dragon’s strength, it allowed Demon Lord Rimuru to subjugate it. It was unclear whether he really subjugated it or if they were simply allies. Nevertheless, since then, the Storm Dragon had not shown any signs of an outburst, or even released a colossal amount of youki. This led Gadra to believe that there was some truth to these rumors after all…

In addition, there was some disturbance among the demon lords. It was said that several demon lords had withdrawn from the Ten Great Demon Lords, consequently turning it into the Octagram. The human society was notified of this change, and Demon Lord Rimuru was undeniably the root cause behind all this.

The fact that Clayman, one of the Ten Great Demon Lords, had disappeared, and the newcomer Rimuru had earned a spot, clearly meant that Rimuru was stronger than Clayman. Clayman was a cunning and formidable demon lord, but Rimuru was an even greater threat. Moreover, Rimuru had established diplomatic relations with mankind and had buried his roots deep into the Western States Council. He had no idea what the Western Nations were thinking, but Gadra was certain that it was dangerous to anger the demon lord named Rimuru.

Besides, there was something else that bothered him: Only three people survived the military campaign of Farmus, in which 20,000 were thought to have participated. Out of these three, one had been murdered, leaving only the former king and Gadra’s own former apprentice, Razen.

I guess I’ll have to ask Razen about this. There are so many things that I don’t know about Demon Lord Rimuru, Gadra thought to himself, reminding himself to be cautious.

It was disconcerting that there was no proof of the Storm Dragon destroying the army of Farmus. In a normal war, losing 30 percent of your forces as casualties spelled the failure of a campaign, and usually led to a definite surrender. Yet, there was no record of any such action taken by the Farmus army. And, of course, some believed that the Storm Dragon didn’t accept any would-be prisoners of war.

But Gadra remained skeptical. After all, he was a survivor of the previous great expedition and had an idea of how Veldora would have reacted. The Storm Dragon wasn’t the type to chase down people who were trying to escape; it would cause unimaginable damage, but only to those who were caught in its opening attack. Knowing this, it was hard for Gadra to assume that all 20,000 soldiers were annihilated at the hands of Veldora.

Then, Demon Lord Rimuru must’ve had a hand in this… Given his reputation, that didn’t seem to be the case. It was likely that he wouldn’t have taken their lives if they had surrendered. Yet, the reports stated otherwise—complete annihilation.

I suppose I ought to assume that Veldora turned them to ashes before they ever got the chance to surrender.

Gadra was honestly horrified. For that reason, a head-on battle with Veldora should be avoided at all cost, and thankfully, measures for that had already been prepared.

The bad news was Demon Lord Rimuru, but once their investigation took place, they would be able to develop countermeasures to put their minds at ease.

On that note, Gadra took a step back to reflect on his position. He didn’t hold any personal grudge against Demon Lord Rimuru, but if he was in league with Demon Lord Luminas, that made him an enemy. While yes, Gadra would’ve liked to defeat his enemies, he couldn’t afford to throw caution to the wind. He had spent many years planning the downfall of the Western Nations at the hands of the Empire. Now that his goal was within arm’s reach, he couldn’t get ahead of himself.

Yuuki’s and Gadra’s interests aligned, and as a result of their discussion, they had decided to share information and help each other as brothers in arms to form a united front.

Shinji and the others were taken aback by this striking revelation. You couldn’t blame them for needing a moment to digest it.

Th-this mission… One slip up and we’re done for…

Shinji wasn’t stupid, he knew they didn’t trust his team, but he didn’t get the impression that they viewed them as mere sacrificial pawns. Instead, he believed that they were testing them. Mark and Xin felt the same.

“Understood! We won’t leave a single stone unturned.”

“Well, we sure won’t be slowing down the old man, so look forward to it!”

“…I will do my best.”

The importance of their mission couldn’t be overstated. If they were successful, then… No, it dawned on them that they had to pull it off if they wanted to make it through alive.

“Then let me ask you. Do you guys know how many demon lords there are?”

“Yes, eight, right?” Shinji replied.

“—What?” Mark gasped. “Weren’t there ten? Wait, didn’t it increase to eleven?”

“…Mark. It just changed last year…” Gadra sighed, then began ranting. “Shinji, feed that idiot the right information. Any soldier who can’t be bothered to inform himself will be dead before he knows it!” After taking a moment to calm down, he began to explain. “There are eight demon lords. They call themselves the Octagram. It may mean that they liken themselves to stars, and it’s not entirely wrong for some of them. I’m bringing up this topic because our enemy this time is Rimuru, the Newbie in the Octagram. We can never be too careful around him, but let’s set that aside for now. Let me tell you the main reason: One of the other demon lords is called the Fairy of the Labyrinth. Well, what do you think this means?”

The trio was stunned by his words. Even Yuuki couldn’t hide his surprise as he glanced at Gadra.

“It’s the labyrinth, isn’t it?” Shinji answered with a tinge of fear in his words.

Gadra nodded deeply and pulled out a book and showed it to them. There was a labyrinth called the Dwelling of the Spirits, located in the Republic of Ur-Gracia in the West. It was believed to be an underground or aerial labyrinth, but the truth of the matter was something else entirely. Those descriptions were, in a sense, both right and wrong. In the book, it was written that the Dwelling of the Spirits was not only inhabited by spirits, but also by their queen who had transformed herself from a spirit into a fairy.

“That queen is this ‘Fairy of the Labyrinth,’ Ramiris—one of the ancient demon lords.”

Gadra’s words weighed heavily on the trio. And then, he hit them with the bombshell: “The door to the labyrinth that once existed in the Urgr Nature Park has vanished. Believe me, I’ve checked it out myself. Judging from the information that I heard, it disappeared around the same time that Rimuru declared himself a demon lord, followed by opening the Dungeon in his country to the public.”

“So, this has already been confirmed then? I was wondering how he was able to create such a huge labyrinth, but now, I’m certain that it’s the work of Demon Lord Ramiris. In other words, the demon lords Rimuru and Ramiris have joined forces,” Yuuki concluded with confidence, grinning from ear to ear.

Shinji and his crew found no faults in that logic. On the contrary, they were downtrodden as their investigation was looking more and more difficult.

“I’m counting on you.”

“Please, be vigilant.”

Then, the trio departed after Yuuki clued them in on Rimuru’s cunning reign of terror as a demon lord.

Following their meeting with Yuuki and Gadra, the three men were brought to the outskirts of Tempest by Kagali the very next day. Ten days after sending them off, Gadra went somewhere else on his own. Given how Yuuki frightened the three, Gadra decided to leave the initial investigation to them.

Yuuki probably didn’t see them as disposable pawns. He did threaten them a little, to make sure that the trio took their mission seriously. Hm, I guess Yuuki-dono is not particularly honest, either. He’s too competent and hence he expects the same of others as well, huh?—Gadra perceived it like that. But the same could be said of him. He had no intention of leaving his disciples to their deaths and intended to help them in times of need. Others thought he was scary since he never expressed these thoughts verbally and silently intimidated the people around him.

While being oblivious of this fact, Gadra headed towards the former Kingdom of Farmus. He remembered his former disciple was still there and decided to collect information about Demon Lord Rimuru from him.

Gadra rushed over to the former royal capital of Farmus, Malis, and then headed straight to the royal palace.

Razen was busy working in his office when he suddenly jumped up from his chair. He felt the presence of his great mentor, Gadra, who he thought was dead.

“I can’t believe it… He’s still alive…” he murmured, as if it was a bad thing.

He didn’t know what Gadra’s intentions were, but he had probably come to look for him. He didn’t hold out hope for anything casual like rekindling an old friendship.

The problem was that the soldiers of Farmenas didn’t know who Gadra was. At this rate, they might begin arguing with Gadra at the castle gates and get on his wrong side, which certainly wouldn’t be good for their lifespan. If by any chance they did end up fighting him… Heaven forbid. If that really happened, I certainly wouldn’t be able to calm down Gadra-sama.

Razen rushed to action. He called someone who recently became his disciple through ‘Magic Communication.’

‹Can you hear me?›

‹Tsk, don’t call me out of the blue…›

‹I believe you are aware of the situation.›

‹Yeah. Grigori doesn’t seem to have noticed, but an abnormal presence just appeared. That guy will arrive at the gate soon.›

‹If you know that much, we don’t have to waste any time. You guys should come to the gate as well.›

‹…Very well. I’m indebted to you.›

Then he cut off the ‘Magic Communication.’

He had two new disciples. Sare and Grigori. They were the former members of the Three Martial Sages—Imperial Guards affiliated with the Church of the Holy Empire of Lubelius.

Razen became their acquaintance when they had come to the country for a survey mission. They had committed a grave mistake and couldn’t return to the Church, so Razen made them his disciples. It was not out of kindness, but simply because he sympathized with them. He had heard about their total defeat, particularly that of Sare and his companions in front of international journalists. After coming to know that their opponent was Diablo, Razen was able to relate with them.

Although Sare was impudent, he recognized Razen as his teacher. And Grigori, who had developed a particular animal phobia, was regaining the fearless attitude that he once possessed.

These two were impeccable in terms of strength, so Razen planned to train them and eventually let them work behind the scenes for the Kingdom of Farmenas. That included crisis responses such as this one.

So it’s going to be me, Sare, and Grigori. And if Grucius-dono can make it in time, we can hold off Gadra-sama.

Soldiers were useless in the face of an individual with overwhelming strength. The current Kingdom of Farmenas suffered from a lack of champion-class talents. The former Farmus Knight Corps, with the late Folgen—a departed associate of Razen’s—as its commander, was now a thing of the past. The same went for its many brave, similarly highly-classed warriors. Finding talents to replace them was currently a major issue for Farmenas.

His sluggish response to the problem had come back to bite Razen.

By the time he reached the castle gates, the other two had already arrived and were confronting Gadra.

“Hey, man, I’m not sure what sort of business you have here, but we are the ones who guard this castle. You understand that we can’t just let an unidentified person enter it, right?”

“Ya heard him, old man. I don’t wanna say anything bad, so you’d better go home for today, will ya? If you wanna meet someone, apply for a visit at the reception, you’ll get a reply in a few days.”

The two thought they were quietly blocking the way so as not to let Gadra pass through. However, from Razen’s point of view, they were bringing doom upon themselves.

“Stop! Let him through!”

“Huh? Aren’t we supposed to stop him?”

“Then what did you call us for?”

They seemed miffed about the order, but Razen had bigger fish to fry.

“It’s been a long time, Gadra-sama. I’m very sorry for the delay in greeting you, for I had not known that you were still alive,” said Razen, kneeling down in front of Gadra.



Razen wanted to avoid antagonizing Gadra. In the worst case, he was prepared to go all out just to stop him, but it appeared he was wound up over nothing.

“Long time no see, Razen. You look completely different from what I remember, but it seems that it really is you.”

“Yes, unlike you, Master, I preserve my life through transference of flesh.”

“I don’t blame you,” Gadra replied, “so don’t humble yourself too much. I came here today because I have something to ask you. Also, that beastman hiding there doesn’t have to be so alarmed. Had I come to stir trouble, I would not have come here alone.”

The tension finally lifted. Nevertheless, they did not let down their guard, and left the scene after arranging a meeting with Gadra.

The following day, a conference was set up in one of the rooms of the castle. The participants were Youm, Grucius, and Razen. Sare and Grigori were on standby in the room as escorts of Youm. Myuran had also wished to join the meeting, but her request was declined. Youm insisted that she get her rest after giving birth to their child. It was a baby girl whom they named Meme. She was adorable like Myuran and now affectionately being cared for by Edgar.

“Now then, Master, what did you want to ask?”

“Hmm, before we get into that, there are some things I have to point out. Sare, young lad, you seem somewhat strong, but you are horrible at magic, aren’t you? You see, that isn’t something you can learn to use. You need to have proper control over your mana. That beastman there, you’re Grucius, right? You—”

Gadra started picking at everyone’s flaws one by one.

According to him, Grucius needed to develop an eye for judging an opponent’s strength. “Transforming right in front of your enemy is like begging to be attacked first,” Gadra sternly explained, as if he were scolding him.

As for Youm, Gadra started off: “You do seem stronger than the average guy, but…” then followed up by instructing him to figure out ways of defending himself, since an overreliance on the power of his gear rendered his own strength moot.

Turning to Grigori, he gave him a bitter pill to swallow: He simply had to work on his skills and get good.

Lastly, Gadra looked at Razen and said, “Razen, I can see that you’ve been working hard on your magic. Is that magic possession-type?”

“Yes, it is the great secret art Possession that I devised based on your theory of the mystic art Reincarnation.”

“Hmm, that’s an interesting experiment. Unlike my magic, you don’t place yourself in a temporary weakened state, turning yourself into a baby, when using it.”

“Thank you for the compl—”

“However, it’s useless if you can’t master it. I’m sure you can’t draw out the full potential of that body you’ve stolen.”

“Yes, sir!”

Razen broke out in a cold sweat after hearing Gadra’s words. He was well aware of this fact, and now that Gadra had pointed it out, he had to believe that everything he’d just heard was spot on. How scary. He was able to see through our abilities even though we met just yesterday…Razen didn’t say another word and kept silent.

Sare and Grigori, on the other hand, weren’t amused.

“Oioi, don’t get a big head now that he’s all silent. What did you see in me to make you spout such bullshit, anyway?”

“That’s right. I am indebted to Razen-dono, but we have no reason to stand in awe of his teacher. If you’re that confident, would you care to enlighten us?!”

At once, their argument became heated. Razen tried to shut them up, but the glint in Gadra’s eyes told him to stay back. The old man had expected this turn of events and intended to give the rowdy upstarts a little taste of his abilities.

Well, if that’s the road he wants to take this down, it would definitely shut them up good. Let me play along as you do your thing, Master, Razen thought quietly.

And so, as a light exercise before the meeting, a fight between Gadra and the team of Sare and Grigori was held. They faced off on the training ground, their battle ending in a one-sided thrashing at the hands of Gadra.

“I-impossible…”

“This old man… He was going at both of us at the same time without breaking a sweat. He got us good.”

Gadra’s strength was so overwhelming that he crushed their pride as two of the former Three Martial Sages. It turned out just as he had hoped; his little display of strength would be enough to speed up the following negotiations. Yet, their next words shocked him.

“But he’s not as powerful as that demon, right?” Sare asked Grigori in a daze.

“You’re comparing him to that guy? Though, I do feel like this old man’s around the strength of that dog I fought.”

“—Hmm?”

Sare and Grigori easily came to terms with their recent defeat. What’s more, despite witnessing Gadra’s strength, they were remarkably unperturbed.

—As powerful as I am? In fact, a demon more powerful than me…? Gadra was puzzled by their unexpected reaction, but it didn’t sound like they were being sore losers. He felt their words were genuine.

And just as he was about to ask—

“Gadra-sama, we shall discuss that later. First, I will answer your questions,” Razen announced as they walked off the training ground.

They went back to the reception room and resumed their meeting.

“I expected nothing less of Razen’s teacher,” Youm commented casually. “You’re a true monster. There’s no way I can win against you.”

“While Majin Razen’s name was known far and wide, there were only a few anecdotes about the teacher that taught him,” Grucius added with a nod, visibly excited. “Myuran said that you were a great man who had built a new system of magic theory, and after seeing your fight, I believe it now…”

It came as no surprise; Gadra was a highly esteemed mage, after all. He could interfere with the mana of his opponent, obstruct the activation of their magic, and activate multiple spells simultaneously to achieve extraordinary effects and power.

He pulled out all the stops during their fight, turning the spectacle into a breathtaking demonstration. Grucius, even at full strength, was no match for Sare and Grigori. Watching Gadra effortlessly toy with them proved his strength beyond a shadow of a doubt.

While Youm and Grucius were in high spirits, on the flip side, the two recent losers sat there dejected. Nevertheless, they remained calm and focused on their duty as guardians.

“Well then, to what do we owe this occasion?” questioned Razen.

“The reason I showed my strength was to prevent unnecessary resistance. As Razen might know, I have a bone to pick with Luminism. I’m not interested in anything else, so I cannot bear to see this country suffer any unnecessary casualties when the Empire’s invasion washes over it.”

Gadra tossed that bombshell out like it was nothing.

“The Empire—”

“Are you for real?” Youm moaned. “Why does it have to be now, when I am the reigning king?!”

“Exactly,” Grucius added. “I can’t imagine us winning, and I don’t want to endanger Myuran and my daughter.”

“She’s not your daughter. She is my treasure!” Youm shouted.

“Shut up!” Grucius yelled. “We aren’t blood-related, but she is my daughter. I’ve decided to live as her father from now on!”

“That isn’t your decision to make!”

The two of them broke out into an ugly spat.

Razen cleared his throat and silenced the two idiots.

“I see, I understand why you came here, Gadra-sama. In return for saving us from the ravages of war, you want us to change sides and support the Empire?”

“Correct. Do you understand how powerful the Empire is? In addition to that, I’ll be there too, so if you join us, we should be able to bring down Dwargon with ease. That country is vulnerable to a siege. If you stop the supply of grains to Dwargon, they will be forced to surrender immediately.”

That, of course, required them to do something about Tempest.

“That’s impossible, Gadra-sama,” Razen pointed out. “There is now a railroad between the Dwarven Kingdom and Tempest, which enables high-speed transportation. Even if we cut off food exports from our own country, they’ll get supplies from that one.”

“That’s why I’m telling you to betray them. Tempest’s self-sufficiency in regard to food is not that high. From this country—”

“Gadra-sama.”

Razen knew full well how rude it was but interrupted him anyway. He could tell that Gadra was behind the times and hadn’t grasped the current state of the world.

The world of today moved at a rapid pace, much faster than ever before. If they betrayed the Western Nations, it would lead to their ejection from the economic zone. In other words, the destruction of their nation would be inevitable. Even if this placed them under the patronage of the Empire, who promised them generous support, they could not expect to have the same prosperity they were experiencing now. That was how influential the West, or rather, Tempest was to the Kingdom of Farmenas. Razen clarified everything for him.

“…I see. The truth is, I already knew that, but I wanted to hear the precise story from you. But does Demon Lord Rimuru not fear the heavenly army? Of course, if he had the power, he could beat the angels; but even so, the damage to his creations would be enormous. The Empire had also considered introducing trains, but because of that, the plan had to be postponed…”

This was what Gadra said when he heard about the idea of connecting large cities with railways.

“His Majesty Rimuru isn’t afraid of any damages.”

“Indeed. Boss hates it when people die or get wounded, but other than that, I think he would accept the cost of material damages.”

“Rather, he might even consider the need for reconstruction work a boon.”

Razen, Grucius and Youm freely expressed their own opinions.

Youm’s words in particular held a lot of weight. Humans by nature desired providing for others, giving them a drive to make the most of their skills. Anyone losing their job would become demoralized and labeled a waste of space. Some might even turn to crime. To prevent this from happening, it was the duty of leaders—employers—to prepare new job opportunities.

“Once the projects are completed in every country, the only work remaining will be maintenance and repair,” Youm remarked. “Boss was nervous about what to do when that happens. He wants to do this and that, but the technology can’t keep up. He grumbled all about it when we drank together.”

“If the angels attacked at such a time,” Grucius added, coming around to Youm’s point, “it would undoubtedly call for plenty of disaster reconstruction. That might spark joy in Boss, though he’d likely feign anger over the destruction.”

Sare and Grigori sat there with their eyes glazed over, apparently just nodding along.

“However, despite him being a demon lord, if he so brazenly stuck his nose into the affairs of the West, which is the domain of humans, the Rosso family would have a thing or two to say, don’t you think?”

Razen’s story matched the information Gadra had gathered. However, some key details were still missing. Seizing the opportunity, Gadra decided to squeeze out as much information as he could out of Razen.

The Rosso family would move to protect their own interests without waiting for the heavenly army. If the matter was economic, wouldn’t they simply concoct non-violent machinations to sabotage his budding country?—is what Gadra was really asking. Of course, the question was really intended to get more information about the current situation surrounding the Rosso family.

Razen read his intention and gave Gadra the answer he wanted.

“The Rosso family has already fallen. The Kingdom of Dolan is alive and well, and it is where all the survivors have gathered. With that being said, they have lost all means to exert any influence in the Council. Still, the surrounding countries continue to trade with them only because His Majesty Rimuru has permitted them to do so. Plus, King Dolan himself conceded to His Majesty Rimuru.”

Razen described the state of affairs, and, incidentally, he even told the truth behind the fall of the now Kingdom of Farmenas.

That revelation finally threw Gadra off balance, as that was news to him.

“…Demon Lord Rimuru destroyed the Farmus army all by himself? And the Rosso family got crushed as well…? No, wait! If that wasn’t a rumor, then what happened to Gran…Granbell?!”

Hero Granbell was the strongest man Gadra had ever known. This, and the fact that he was the leader of the Seven Luminaries, were taken into account while they carefully planned their expedition to the West.

Yet, Razen was claiming that the Rosso family was gone.

“So the rumor that the Seven Celestial were vanquished is…”

“Master, that is also true. The Seven Luminaries were hostile to His Majesty Rimuru and intended for him to fight the captain of the Holy Knight Order, Hinata; but alas, their plan failed, and they all died.”

Gadra was bereft of words after what he had just heard. Razen unmistakably declared that all of the Seven Luminaries had perished. Even Gran was reduced to atoms at the hands of Cardinal Nicolaus. Upon learning of this, Gadra bemoaned the sheer inadequacy of his own intelligence efforts. If Granbell was dead, the fall of the Rosso family naturally followed. Gadra wished he had gotten that information much sooner, since it threw a massive wrench in the current expedition plan. And also…

“That kid… He knew and yet he didn’t tell me a thing…” Yuuki’s face flashed before his eyes as he muttered in anguish over the fact. Yuuki must’ve surmised that revealing it would quench Gadra’s lust for revenge. Nevertheless, it was by no means pleasant news for Gadra.

“Could you be referring to Yuuki Kagurazaka? We understand how you feel, Gadra-sama, for we have also been used by that man.”

After an attempt at consolation by his apprentice, Gadra was left frustrated, ashamed, and ultimately speechless.

According to Razen, Yuuki had been a thorn in Rimuru’s side as well. Still, both parties were currently lying low, which meant that their relationship had yet to reach a state of open hostility.

Yuuki, you bastard, you’re still hiding several things from me, if I had to guess. Besides…you knew that I had it out for Luminism, so you fed me nebulous information about the Western Holy Church. Were there some ugly truths you sought to keep hidden…? It dawned on Gadra that he’d been used, as he sat in front of the others with a perplexed look on his face, contemplating his next steps.

“This is troubling. Now I have to reconsider my approach to Demon Lord Rimuru.”

Rimuru was a greater threat than Gadra had imagined. How would he tackle the problem now? His grudge over the betrayal and murder of his best friend still burned within him, so he had no intention of cooling his vendetta against Luminism. However, the ones he had an ax to grind with in particular, the Seven Luminary Clerics, were already dead.

Given the situation, it took the wind out of his sails in terms of destroying the West. It had been this common interest that Gadra and the Empire shared, which formed the foundation of their cooperative relationship. And once that crumbled, Gadra had no reason to stick with the Empire.

…No, there’s still one more reason—the god who is the ultimate target of my vengeance, and very much still exists—Demon Lord Luminas. Gadra remembered his friend who died because of his faith in that god—a demon lord who masqueraded as a god. He couldn’t tolerate the existence of that demon lord any longer.

Stewing in his enmity, Gadra decided to continue his plan with renewed determination.

—Or, he was about to.

“Gadra-sama, I may be asking for too much, but I beg of you to halt your plan.”

“Hmm?”

Razen had been eyeing Gadra, before throwing this curveball.

“To this day, I hold pride as your loyal disciple. However, my loyalty is even greater to my lord. If you stir up trouble in that country, I will have to consider you an enemy.”

“Could you be talking about Demon Lord Rimuru?”

“No, my master is one of his subordinates, Diablo-sama.”

Gadra was taken aback by what he heard. Razen was a proud disciple of his. It was hard to believe that such a man would meekly submit to a mere subordinate of a demon lord.

“I know it’s not my place to interrupt you,” Sare interjected out of the blue, “but since you’re on the topic, allow me to mention that this Diablo he’s talking about was the demon that defeated me.”

A demon stronger than me. It’s hard to believe, but if it was able to bring Razen to heel, I can’t count that out. Even then, he didn’t think that he would lose against this demon; still, he engraved the name Diablo in his mind.

“Gadra-sama, please let me tell you one more thing. Diablo-sama is an ancient demon.”

“Just as I thought. Since he was able to defeat you, he’s probably of the ancient species. Or worse, he could even be a prehistoric demon, which are exceptionally rare.”

It wouldn’t be strange for the demon to exhibit power exceeding that of a demon lord, especially if it were named.

“No, he was far stronger than the demons of those levels—”

“He claimed to be a demon peer,” Sare murmured.

“That’s—!”

That’s absurd! Gadra nearly shouted.

There was a limit on evolutions for demons. That was the absolute rule, and as far as Gadra knew, there was only one demon who had defied this law. The archdemon who evolved further and became a demon peer. That demon was the strongest and most terrible of demon lords—the “Lord of Darkness” Guy Crimson.

“Gadra-sama, my master, Diablo-sama, has no need to discuss how long he has lived… You know what that means, right?”

Razen asked, but his voice was drowned out by Gadra’s thoughts swirling in his head. I can’t believe this. No, I don’t want to believe this.

“…Is he a primordial?” Gadra murmured with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Razen answered with ruthless certainty. “Yes.”

I see. Gadra tried to piece together the truth while calming his mind.

If that was really the case, then it was only natural for Razen to serve him. It also wouldn’t take much to believe that a primordial evolved into a demon peer if it had received a body. Taking their story at face value, it would call for drastic revisions to the Empire’s great expedition plan. Considering how Blanc haunted the Empire, it went without saying how troublesome the primordials were.

—No, wait a minute. When a primordial receives a body, a tragedy is bound to follow. So why haven’t I heard anything till now? This thought struck him as he began to regain his composure. Wait. Whether Diablo is primordial or not is beside the point. Taking his triumph over Razen to be true, it would follow that he’s, at the very least, a demon peer…

But what he overheard from the conversation between Youm and the others chilled him to the bone.

“Diablo-dono is Boss’s butler. Some time ago, I rushed over to celebrate the maiden journey of the train, and there, I heard that he had scouted some acquaintances to work for him, since he’d grown tired of doing the chores on his own.”

“Oh, if you mean that woman, then I’m sure I’ve seen her. I ran into her at the Council meeting because Boss had appointed her as his military attaché. The one with pure white hair and beautiful crimson eyes. She was drop dead gorgeous.”

Gadra slumped back helplessly in his chair. I-is this a joke?! That description matches that of Blanc one-to-one… That bombshell put it over the line, proving the story authentic, as well as a terrible nightmare for Gadra.

He glanced at Razen, who returned a confident nod.

“Is this true?”

“I would not lie to you, Master.”

Suddenly it struck him. Gadra realized that they were telling the truth and earnestly trying to steer him away from sailing towards his own demise by starting this war.

“Is it really that dangerous?”

The answer was a silent nod from all who were there.

Seeing that, Gadra paled as he remembered the trio who had gone to Tempest.

Oh, I dearly hope the boys haven’t screwed this up already!

The capital of Tempest, Rimuru, was bustling with life. It was a thriving city that could very well be called a metropolis. Even from the perspective of Shinji’s crew, who were all otherworlders themselves, they found it to be highly developed and devoid of medieval drawbacks.

Aside from the Empire’s capital of Nasca, its surrounding cities were filled with the stench of animals. Here, however, there was nothing of the sort, much to their surprise.

“I thought we were going to be welcomed by an empty plot of land aside from a gate, or are we at the wrong place?”

“I doubt it. Either they can change this place however they want, or the spies we sent were hallucinating.”

“…If so, then we can’t let our guard down.”

They shared a quick look and braced themselves.

Kagali had dropped them off here through the elemental magic ‘Warp Portal,’ since she had visited Tempest before. Although she didn’t stay long and swiftly went back to the Empire, there was nothing to worry about since they had already arranged a return trip. Once they were finished, they were to meet up with Gadra, who would bring them back home using magic.

Until then, they were ordered not to pull any reckless stunts and investigate every nook and cranny. The three of them were no fools. It went without saying that they were going to do just as they were ordered.

“Lady Kagali is really hot.”

“Hey hey, Shinji, your girlfriend will dump you if you keep talking like that, you know.”

“Girlfriend? I don’t have one. If I did, my life would have been way better…”

“Eh?”

“…Don’t bother, Mark. He’s just too slow on the uptake.”

Mark and Xin both shrugged as Shinji bemoaned his loss.

They carried on with their banter while passing through the entry check at the city’s gate.

Thanks to the Freedom Association IDs which Yuuki had prepared for them, they were allowed to enter the country more smoothly than they had expected, requiring only a brief explanation about their purpose for entering.

After that, they secured a room at an inn and went sightseeing, under the pretext of collecting information.

The three of them were astonished by what they saw. As otherworlders, the three of them possessed considerable power that afforded them several privileges in this world. But they were limited in their ability, unable to act as freely as Demon Lord Rimuru, even if they wanted to.

Yuuki went to great lengths to make improvements in the food situation and living conditions, which also spread throughout the vast Empire, but even those mammoth efforts paled in comparison to the strides this country had made. Shinji, who was quite familiar with the situation, was less surprised and more amazed by it.

Takoyaki, okonomiyaki, and yakisoba were just the beginning. There were also a wide variety of pastries to be had, such as crepes and cakes. A handful of extremely pricey treats also lined the shelves, leading one to wonder where the ingredients even came from.

From food stalls and coffee shops to fine dining restaurants. The lineup exuded a passion for food and the tastes from the original world. Residents of this world, who might have been confused at first, appeared to have gotten accustomed to the wide variety of cuisines.

Shinji, for one, cried tears of joy when he laid eyes on a curry rice restaurant.

Plumbing and toilets were set up perfectly. The inns also couldn’t have been more comfortable.

There was also a public bath, which had become a popular pastime.

“I think I’ll stay here. Hey, can we, like, not return to the Empire?” Mark asked.

“Hey!”

“No, sorry I was…just kidding, just kidding. Don’t take it the wrong way, Shinji.”

“I’m not mad, I’m just wondering if I could seriously consider it.”

“…I want to live here as well.”

The three of them looked at each other and sighed.

Long had they lived under the impression that the Empire was the forerunner in civilization and modern comforts in the whole world. But now, after seeing this country, they had become disillusioned.

The town was lively, and the food was tasty. Not only did it feel comfortable to live here, but there was also no shortage of entertainment and a rich culture, providing plenty of opportunities to enjoy themselves.

These pleasures were all based on the ones from their previous worlds, and in contrast to the harsh lives they had led till now, these guys were overcome with nostalgia.

The Empire also had cultural centers and various forms of entertainment to speak of, but those were made for the nobility and they weren’t free like in this city, meaning they were prohibitively expensive for a commoner. Compared to that, this city was…

“No, no, no, we absolutely can’t.”

“Yeah. Yuuki-san won’t be cool with it and Master Gadra is, frankly, too scary to deal with. Besides, the war is on the horizon…”

“…The firing squad is all that awaits defectors.”

Yes. The war would soon break out. This city would obviously be a target, there was no way it could escape undamaged. The trio was well aware how powerful the military of the Empire was and believed that this country wouldn’t stand a chance against it.

With heavy hearts they swallowed their doubts and, true to their mission, set out to challenge the labyrinth.

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“So, Hero Masayuki finally managed to break through the 50th floor, but I must say, this is too easy.”

“Haha, that makes sense. After all, Yuuki-san said that Masayuki wasn’t particularly strong.”

“…But his Skill shouldn’t be underestimated.”

“I mean, that’s probably why he was able to conquer it. He slowly but surely challenged it, taking him more than half a year to break through.”

They tittle-tattled as they passed through the 40th floor.

Initially, they were constantly on guard inside the Dungeon, but now their tension had eased. They gathered information in advance to avoid taking risks but now Shinji and crew felt that the Dungeon was heavily based on game mechanics.

Xin seemed to have had no connection with games, but Shinji and Mark were avid gamers. Shinji, in particular, was an RPG enthusiast, who loved adventure titles and had managed to enjoy them in between his studies at the university.

In light of this knowledge, they could best describe this Dungeon as nothing but a plaything, its challengers certainly being the targets of someone’s devious schemes. Nevertheless, this was all familiar to those in the know.

Xin Liuxing was good at detecting traps, and with Shinji’s assistance, he managed to pick them all out. As long as the traps were taken care of, the strength of the monsters wasn’t much of a threat.

“I guess the challengers had a hard time conquering it due to their lack of knowledge.”

“That’s right. I did mock this as an obstacle course, but that’s exactly what this is. If you can decipher the malicious intentions of the creator, you can just sneak past that stuff.”

“…And it doesn’t even kill you.”

While they were collecting information, they had heard about the Resurrection Bracelet. You could get one for free like a one-time deal from the reception desk. With the bracelet equipped, you would revive back at the entrance upon dying in the labyrinth, so they were told. That immediately had them intrigued. It was somewhat hard to digest, like they had stumbled upon a comedy show inside this serious world.

The problem was that they didn’t know how deep this dungeon was. Even though they wanted to conquer it in one go, the rations they brought were limited. The trio were at a loss about how much food they had to pack for the exploration, and an unexpected solution to this problem came from the reception desk.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,” the receptionist assured them, then explained at great length: “When you see the stairs, you will find an entrance to the inn, where you can stay for a fee. So you guys don’t have to rack your brains over rations. Rimuru-sama said ‘only snacks up to 300 yen’ 10 . I have no idea what that means, but it must be important. Oh yeah, there are merchants waiting in the inn, so they can buy the stuff you don’t need, you know?”

Shinji repressed his urge to shout, “Hurry it up, we don’t need to hear about the snacks!” The last thing he needed was getting charged with insolence for shouting profanity.

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Now back to the present. It had been a week since they started their conquest of the labyrinth.

Shinji and the other two were examining their loot while resting in the labyrinth’s inn.

“By the way,” Mark began, apparently in a good mood, “we’ve earned a lot in these few days, haven’t we? They claimed that this place would be spartan, but it’s quite comfortable. Despite that, the accommodation fee is cheap, and we’ve saved a lot of money by selling unnecessary equipment, right?”

Xin looked up showing a bit of interest.

Shinji responded by taking gold coins out of their purse. They stared longingly at the golden sheen. This wasn’t just the money from treasure chests, monsters, and selling loot. They also received dozens of gold coins and even a stellar gold coin as rewards. This was a huge prize.

“I suppose. We’ve earned quite the pretty penny. From what I’ve heard, the challengers on the frontline haven’t managed to make it past the 50th floor. Only Masayuki’s party has managed to conquer it, so that will make us the second group to do so.”

Masayuki’s group was evidently stuck on the 60th floor. And the other challengers, they guessed, were being held up by the Boss Monster of the 40th floor. Thanks to this, Shinji’s crew was in the spotlight as this month’s MVPs.

“Yeah, that tempest serpent, right? It was certainly strong, but it was no match for us.”

The tempest serpent was ranked A-minus, so even high-level adventurers struggled against it. Its breath attack, covering a wide-area, was devastating in small rooms. The challengers had no place to escape, leaving them no choice but to face the enemy head on. If the snake managed to wrap itself around you though, its tough scales meant you were a definite goner.

This monster was supposed to be a tricky opponent, but Shinji’s crew beat it without breaking much of a sweat. They weren’t interested in how strong the monsters were, but what they got after defeating them.

“I wonder what’s up with the hole in this weapon. It’s listed for a crazy price…”

The ridiculous number threw them for a loop, enough to make them drop the idea of selling it. Weapons with holes began to appear in loot starting around the 40th floor. No one had ever seen anything like it in the Empire, so naturally the three of them had no idea how much they were worth. They could’ve sold them for a fortune, but they remained on the fence about whether they should.

“What’s the deal with this hole? Even my appraisal magic tells me nothing, maybe we should hold onto them until Master comes.”

“These kinds of weapons didn’t appear before the 40th floor.”

“…Yeah. They dropped from the boss room or powerful monsters around the 50th floor.”

“Yeah, you’re right. However, these actually seem to be in circulation in town, albeit quite rare. They say that they’re an exceptional find in treasure chests on the 30th floor and below.”

“I guess so, since its build-quality is impeccable. But that alone can’t be the reason they’re this expensive though, right?”

“…Maybe there’s a secret behind it.”

“Seems like it. When I asked the merchants, they just gave me this smile and didn’t tell me anything.”

“Hey, it sure is weird. Let’s keep them until the old man gets here. But more importantly, this is the deal. I mean, look at this!” Mark shouted, taking out Minos’s Bardiche, the gozu’s battle ax, and presented it to them.

It glimmered with a bewitching silver glow. A high-class masterpiece made of mithril. It was a unique-grade weapon, obtained from the treasure chest protected by the guardian of the 50th floor.

“It’s a Unique weapon, you know? Even in the Empire it’s impossible to get a unique-grade, right?”

Mark was so enthralled by it that he was practically rubbing his cheek against the bardiche.

It was undeniably a powerful weapon.

If you became an Imperial Guardian of the Empire, you would be lent legendary-grade weapons. While soldiers of lower ranks were given equipment that had good quality and strength, they lacked any magical properties. It was understandable why Mark would be so excited given how even the senior officers would struggle to get their hands on unique-grade equipment.

“I guess so. Yuuki-san told us that the Empire’s weapons are mass produced. We rarely see them, but it seems that all the legendary-grade weapons have the same shape.”

“…Is that even possible?” asked Xin, wondering if legendary-grade weapons could really be mass produced. Logically, at least, that shouldn’t be possible.

“Shinji, isn’t that an outlandish assumption?” Mark scoffed. “You think they can be mass produced just because they have the same shape?”

He didn’t like the idea, since it meant that his newly-acquired unique-grade weapon wasn’t worth nearly that much.

“Of course, doing it with normal means would be impossible. Master Gadra himself noted that even the mass-production of magisteel is too difficult. But it’s not impossible if you can maintain a special environment.”

“…A special environment?”

“Yeah.” Shinji continued, “An environment so densely packed with magicules, it’d kill a man just by standing in it. Someone at rank B wouldn’t make it long either, and even someone ranked A probably wouldn’t make it out without getting sick. If a piece of armor were kept in a place with such an environment for a long period of time—maybe a hundred to a thousand years—it would then be ready to evolve. After that, if a capable owner were recognized by the armor, it would start its own evolution from there.”

“Surely such conditions don’t exist?”

“…Yeah, I think it’s impossible as well.”

“Right? But Yuuki-san and Master Gadra said otherwise,” Shinji insisted.

“—So, even if it was possible, what’s your point?” Mark shot back.

“Well, look. I was just wondering if this bardiche was produced in such a way.”

“No way…”

“You don’t think so, huh? But listen, there’s also a hole in this bardiche. You wouldn’t see this on your run-of-the-mill bardiche, right?”

“True. I wonder what this is…”

“…It’s a beautiful weapon, nonetheless. Although it has an eerie shape.”

It wasn’t as though Shinji really wanted to complain. He wasn’t jealous seeing how happy Mark was, either. After all, neither Shinji nor Xin could handle weapons as large as this bardiche.

“It’s just that, you know,” Shinji fumbled for the right words, “if a country can casually give away weapons of this caliber, it’s quite likely that this country is also more dangerous than we imagined…”

Mark and Xin fell silent. In fact, the two of them felt the same way. Mark was worried that the receptionist would take away his bardiche shortly after he got it. The rules stated that all items obtained in the labyrinth belonged to the challengers. Despite this, he figured a country would normally confiscate such a weapon, especially since it was this powerful.

If that happened, Mark and the others would have no choice but to comply. As long as they were dependent on the country, they were forced to follow its directives and decisions. That was a rule common to every country. They were spies first and foremost, so stirring any kind of trouble would come to bite them twice as hard.

But what ended up happening was a complete 180 from what they expected. They were met with cheers and applause from the staff, who even handed them extra prize money.

By now they’d seen enough to believe that Tempest was unlike any other country.

“The weapons are one thing,” Shinji muttered, “but the whole country really is bizarre, isn’t it?”

“It’s quite unexpected,” Mark echoed. “I think we’d make more money and have more fun if we took conquering the labyrinth more seriously. I mean, we’ve nothing to lose, right? If you’re weak, you’ll barely make ends meet, but if you’re strong, like we are—”

“Mark, stop. You remember what turncoats get, right?”

“…A death sentence.”

“—Yeah, I know that,” Mark replied, exasperated. “But for what it’s worth, life here seems more enjoyable.”

That was one thing they could all agree on.

However, reality was harsh. Mark’s words were tempting, but this wasn’t the time nor place to be daydreaming.

“If the war starts, this country will probably suffer a lot.”

“—Yeah. If this country wins, we could happily defect, but if we desert the Empire now, none of the countries will accept us.”

“…We can’t afford living without a country.”

They sighed and abandoned their naive thoughts.

Changing gears, they started contemplating their strategy for the following day’s conquest.

“Tomorrow,” Shinji started, “we will head to the 51st floor. The area from that point onward seems to be called ‘The Paradise of the Dead.’ Mark’s Minos’s Bardiche is made of holy-attribute mithril, so we can expect it to be highly effective against dead spirits and undead beings.”

“Exactly. Also, this is kind of weird, but this really is like a game…the boss protecting the key to the next stage,” Mark pointed out.

“…And the monsters are also getting stronger and stronger after each floor,” Xin thought aloud.

Shinji was already on the same page. He was the resident RPG specialist, so it went without saying that he had already picked up on it. But it was so creepy that he didn’t want to think about it.

Too many things came to his mind. The boss monsters, one on every 10th floor, were becoming stronger the lower they went. First, it was the B-ranked black spider, and then it was a B-plus-ranked evil centipede. And on the 30th floor, the B-plus-ranked crazed ogre king showed up with multiple subordinates. The fact that those monsters knew how to coordinate made it impossible to beat them with strength alone.

There was the previously mentioned A-minus ranked tempest serpent on the 40th floor, and the monster that appeared on the 50th floor was the majin named Gozer, a gyuki 11 that could talk like a human. Something of that caliber was so rare, you wouldn’t find one in a hundred years. It was a Hazard-class—or, if you preferred to use the rank classification Yuuki had created, an A-ranked monster. An opponent that dangerous was typically a majin serving a demon lord.

Still, the trio had made quick work of it, though not without substantial effort. Despite this, they could’ve taken it on solo, if they really wanted to. But it was worth remembering that they couldn’t die in the labyrinth, so aggressive and reckless strategies paid off.

Mark began with, “Seriously, since a monster as strong as that was protecting Floor 50, the ones following it will be even tougher nuts to crack.”

“…It might be our last fight,” Xin nodded with a thoughtful expression.

Things had gone smoothly for now, but from this point on they would face a rough ride—that they all agreed on.

“I guess our tactics centered on Mark will stay the same as before. Now that we have special weapons, let’s push it as far as we can.”

“…Yeah.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll find monsters much stronger than that. In fact, I’d say the 60th floor is the final one, but if it isn’t, don’t freak out,” reassured Mark.

“Don’t worry, that’s not happening.” Shinji denied it, but really, he had heard unpleasant rumors. He didn’t want to be the one to rain on their parade though. As rumor had it, the Dungeon sprawled underground for a total of a hundred floors. That’s ridiculous—he couldn’t help but think this way. Despite his concerns about the next boss, he knew there was no use fretting.

The trio believed they would win in the end, since death wasn’t a factor for them. However, it was going to be a long, arduous battle ahead.

“Well, if worse comes to worst, we’ll still come out alive. So, let’s stay sharp and go hard,” Shinji announced with vigor.

They were all on board; their sights were set on the final floor. They wanted to confirm whether it held research facilities or not. The three men went over their plans once more and then got a good night’s rest.

Three days later…

After conquering the poison swamps and corrosive lands, the trio finally found the stairs on the 59th floor, leading to the 60th floor where the boss monster’s room was. It had taken them seven days to reach the 50th floor, but it took them three days to reach the 60th floor from there. The area was smaller than the previous floor, but the difficulty rose exponentially.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah.”

“…Mhm.”

They had rested up the night before and were full of energy, ready to go.

“The one ahead is called a guardian, just like the one from Floor 50. There’s no doubt that it’ll be an intelligent monster.”

“I know. It’s likely that it’s more troublesome than the death lord we fought yesterday.”

“…Let’s go all out from the start.”

As long as they kept their cool, the boss would go down easily. They gave a final nod to each other, and then… They carefully placed their hands on the door and pushed it open with a single thrust.

Stepping back a bit in time…

I was in my room, working on building a surveillance system. Currently, intelligence agents dispatched by Souei and Moss were waiting at key locations in the Great Jura Forest. Not only that, they were stationed all along the coast from the Kingdom of Farmenas to the northern part of Ingracia, and even at the tops of the mountains.

Despite this, I was still uneasy about our intelligence gathering. Latency was my biggest fear here.

Although the agents were stationed in pairs, there was a chance that both of them could be killed at the same time. If that happened, then the intel from that zone would be completely cut off.

The death of the agents was one thing, but the inherent delay caused by that could threaten the survival of a nation. In order to prevent such circumstances, I had strongly warned Souei to exercise extreme caution.

In the event that one of these agents were uncovered, while they might not get killed, it would still lead to confrontation and combat. That would naturally mean a delay in the transmission of intel. And that was what I was trying to eliminate, along with making this network robust and secure.

In order to achieve this, I thought of using magic as a surveillance tool. There was this long-range observation magic that existed in the sorcery system, but it wasn’t nearly as useful as I’d hoped. All it could do, at best, was confirm the shape of the object, which meant that the information it could provide was trivial. It could only monitor a particular place and required re-casting it to change to another place. It was terribly cumbersome magic, since switching locations took time, and if your target already left the area by the time you switched, it was a complete waste.

Plus, if the target had put up a magic barrier, your magic would bounce off of it. This made it impossible to monitor powerful beings, and I concluded that it would be useless in an actual battle.

But then I had a bright idea. The physical magic ‘Megiddo’ was a spell that converged sunlight into high-intensity beams using lenses formed by collecting water droplets in the air. I thought that the same theory could be applied to create a surveillance spell.

For instance, suspending water drops in various locations to project a live image feed of those places. If that information could be transcribed, then it would allow us to monitor locations from far away. And if that wasn’t possible, then I would use the lenses I made on high-altitudes to magnify the feed and project it onto a monitor.

Take telephoto lenses, images, and a mechanism to transcribe information. To put it simply, I would create magical surveillance satellites by combining these three.

Although it seemed difficult to construct each concept with magic at first, Raphael-san answered that it was possible using ‘physical magic,’ ‘spirit magic,’ and ‘Spatial Domination.’

Now all I had to do was to send detailed requests to Raphael-san. Just like that, my improved magic concept had been created.

Once this surveillance system was in place, it would be easier to safely gather reliable information. The potential amount of information that would be obtained was enormous, and no matter how the enemies moved, it’d be a piece of cake to find out what they were up to.

You might be thinking I was just playing around during these hectic days, but this was super important.

He who controls the information controls the world, and thus, wars as well.

During the Battle of Tsushima during the Russo-Japanese War, the Imperial Japanese Navy destroyed the Russian Baltic Fleet under the command of Togo Heihachiro, the Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet.

It was said that the most important issue faced by the Japanese Navy in this battle was whether or not they could actually encounter the enemy fleets. Predicting the place you would capture or intercept the opponent was crucial. If their predictions were off, this battle would not have occurred, and as a result, Japan would’ve been defeated.

And this was applicable to our current situation as well. If our forces were deployed in various locations, there would be a high possibility that we, who were disadvantaged in terms of numbers, would lose. The deciding factor for victory would be whether or not we could read the movements of the Empire and make them concentrate their strength at the right spot.

On the other hand, if the Empire dispersed its forces, it would be possible to defeat them individually after devising a more detailed strategy. This magic was essential for us to execute our strategy, and above all, for us to obtain certain victory.

—While I’d just spent my time talking it up, I had, in fact, already finished the prototype stage of the project.

I also made sure to ask Raphael-san to make it nice and user-friendly.

What? I couldn’t have done this myself?

Don’t be stupid. Raphael-san was my Skill, so if it was working hard, I was working hard. Thinking about it that way, I might have been working too much lately. I should take a short break to unwind.

For the first time in what felt like ages, I enjoyed the black tea that Shuna brewed. As I was relaxing, I was musing over the uses of the completed surveillance magic when suddenly—

“Rimuru-sama, I have something urgent to report!”

I received a message from Beretta through the ‘Telepathy Net.’

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My jaw dropped as soon as I heard the report.

A second group had conquered the 50th floor of the Dungeon.

By the way, the first team was, needless to say, Masayuki’s party. They were taking a break right now due to this pre-war situation, but they had already reached the 59th floor.

Thanks to Masayuki and his team, the Dungeon was booming. More and more challengers were arriving every day, and we were raking in the dough.

Of course, the challengers also got something out of this; over the past year, the average skill level had grown considerably. There were already a number of groups that had conquered the 30th floor, and they developed strategies that took advantage of the resurrection mechanic, namely the Zombie Attack and the Sacrifice-and-Abandon plan.

Upon passing the 30th floor, the cheap death traps and monsters that fought in groups were becoming quite the nuisance for challengers. In spite of their wicked strategies, they were struggling.

As always, the strong challengers persevered. Fighters with simplistic attack habits were initially left in the dust, but as time went on, they honed their skills and obtained better equipment. Eventually, they could hold their own, too. The ability to adapt was a frightening thing, as some people became experienced enough to avoid even the most vicious traps by intuition alone.

Like that, the groups fighting on the frontlines recently began approaching the boss monster on the 40th floor, where they all ran into a roadblock.

Floor 40’s boss monster was a tempest serpent, ranked A-minus. It was that black snake I encountered way back when, which took pride in its breath attacks that were devastating against groups. Many people’s weapons were corroded by it and they would often come crying to our stores. We would give them a hand by lending some of our Tempest trademarked equipment and they would eventually become regular customers. Our store policy “You break it, you buy it” was another way to make good money—all thanks to the tempest serpent!

The serpent roughed up the challengers and stripped them of their hard-earned gear. It was such a dependable guardian who netted us a wonderful stream of income…what a pity it got defeated.

Also, they had even beaten the guardian of the 50th floor.

Masayuki’s group was kinda cheating when they did it, so this time around, we had a party that meant serious business. They also claimed the cash reward, but the hype it generated was a worthwhile tradeoff.

New heroes were emerging on the daily within the labyrinth, and it was flourishing like never before.

Intelligent majins were responsible for guarding the 50th floor. In this case, I had ordered the gyuki Gozer and the baki 12 Mezer to take turns on duty, guarding this floor. These two definitely were nothing to scoff at, so it would be really surprising if someone beat them.

After all, these two challenged each other in their free time, and devised fighting tactics of their own ingenuity. They weren’t the same berserk meatheads they once were, which probably had to do with their new strategic approach to battle. They had buried the hatchet and grown to be good friends.

I remembered that I had set up a pretty sweet reward for clearing Floor 50. The treasure chest was guaranteed to drop gear only on the first clear—not just any kind of gear, but unique-grade gear from the Minos series. It was named after the Minotaur 13 , the Lord of the Labyrinth. The gear itself was insanely good and bound to be a prized piece in any collection.

If the chest had a weapon, you’d be looking at either the gozu’s battle ax, Minos’s Bardiche, or the mezu’s spear, Minos’s Trident. There was no shield; the rest would be various pieces of armor.

I hadn’t anticipated that people would reach this point so early, so I’d only stocked up on maybe a dozen sets. Be that as it may, they were all top notch in quality. Indeed, they were masterpieces created by Kurobee’s best students using their finest techniques.

One of the pieces getting snatched up was an issue, but the dominant performance of these challengers was more concerning.

To begin with, Gozer and Mezer had become stronger as a result of receiving their names. If those two could be defeated, I wanted to recruit whoever they were for my country. And if those candidates turned down our invitation, they could become dangerous enemies down the line. That was something I liked to avoid, so I had already planned to put those kinds of people on a watch list.

To that end, I requested for there to be an emergency call whenever Gozer or Mezer were defeated.

That brought us to the reason why Beretta called me.

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“So, how’s the situation?”

“Yes sir. There were three people who broke through, and all of them are Unique Skill-holders.”

I wondered if they might be acquaintances, but my guess was quickly proven wrong. It only took three to defeat Gozer and they all possessed Unique Skills… Moreover, they weren’t even active Dungeon challengers, but rather newbies that recently made an appearance.

I wouldn’t have questioned it during peacetimes, but given the current situation on the eve of war, there was a strong possibility that they were spies who had taken the bait.

It was necessary to investigate this thoroughly. Thus, I stopped the plan to test the surveillance magic and headed to the Control Room of the labyrinth.

I walked in and saw Ramiris and Veldora. It seemed like Dino and Vesta were taking a break today. Never mind Dino, Vesta had been looking tired these days, so I wanted him to get some rest.

Ramiris and Veldora were always full of energy. The concept of fatigue likely didn’t apply to them; they had that unlimited “child energy.” As long as they were doing something they were interested in, they could keep going all day.

“Ah! Commander, you’re here!” Ramiris exclaimed. “The situation remains unchanged for now!”

I didn’t know what was going on to begin with. She was probably just saying whatever fit the mood.

I then turned my eyes towards the video shown on the huge screen. It displayed three youngsters. It appeared as though they were conquering one floor after another at break-neck speed, and their fighting style was quite distinctive.

One man moved his arms through the air as if he were throwing something, and it apparently had some significant power behind it. Was this like a compressed air bullet? It sure wasn’t possible with mere “human strength.” He was a tall man of stout build, with brown hair. He had a chiseled face and stood out among them wearing his jeans and tank top. Yep, jeans and a tank top. That alone convinced me we had an otherworlder on our hands.

Let me take a look at the other two.

There was a short and skinny man clad in a black robe and another was a young man wearing a white coat over chain mail.

White coat. Yeah, a white coat. The conventional type you’d see in labs and hospitals. However, in this world it wasn’t exactly “conventional.” That guy’s face looked distinctly East Asian, and undoubtedly Japanese.

Apart from the black-robed man, I thought the tank top guy and lab coat guy were both otherworlders.

Anyway, looking at the huge screen, I could see that they were still fighting. This time they were up against a big group—six death wolves had joined the fray and were assaulting the trio. The death wolves quickly closed the distance at a speed that ordinary humans couldn’t react to. They were obviously smart enough to realize that they had to get in close if they wanted to stand a chance. Beyond the 50th floor, even the riff raff had moderately high intelligence.

By the way, a single death wolf was ranked B-plus, so if six of them were in a pack, things could get ugly fast. Moreover, since it was a dead spirit, it had the characteristic of being immune to physical attacks, unless they were from a holy weapon or a magic weapon.

Because their bodies were constructed of magicules, they could regenerate them immediately, even if they were splattered to bits. These were some wicked monsters that wouldn’t go down without you taking the right steps to counter them.

One mistake and they’d eat you alive, but…

“Don’t underestimate me, you damn mutts! Hiyaaa!” roared the brown-haired guy who had previously been throwing air.

This time, he was charging with the terrifying bardiche held high, and brought it down in a wide arc. With a deafening thud, three death wolves turned into light particles and disappeared.

Oh, that’s it! No wonder the terrifying ax looked familiar—it was Minos’s Bardiche.

When it came to unique-grade weapons, they, needless to say, had magical powers. In other words, it was a kind of magic weapon, and even the dead spirits could be damaged. The weapon’s magical power alone was enough to wound a monster.

More to the point, Minos’s Bardiche was forged out of a very special alloy. As I recall, it was made from mithril, which was a custom alloy combining silver with magisteel. It was a holy-type weapon, which inflicted extra damage to dead spirits and the undead.

“Aah,” I muttered, “with Minos’s Bardiche, the death wolves are dead meat.”

“Yeah, that weapon was the one dropped by Gozer,” Veldora pointed out. “This guy here seems to be a pretty sharp fighter, swinging that ax like he’s practiced for years with it.”

As we stood there watching their fight, they filled me in on what happened until today.

I had a sudden craving for potato chips right about now.

By the sound of things, the brown-haired guy had been the one taking out all of the monsters. And from what I saw, I could definitely believe it. That guy was a beast.

But then, what happened to all the traps?

Regarding that, the black-robed guy discovered them immediately and informed his friends of their positions. Floor 51 was where the most insidious, meanest traps started coming into play, which could kill you on the spot. As I watched, the black-robed guy pointed at the exact places where the traps were hidden.

That was his Unique Skill. His role was vital for conquering the labyrinth.

The lab coat guy himself had only engaged once so far; it was in their fight against Gozer.

Veldora’s explanation didn’t make sense, so I asked Raphael-san to read the past records from the Dungeon. Whatever had happened, it must’ve been strange indeed:

He took out a syringe from his inside pocket and injected his friends with two shots. Immediately afterwards, Gozer’s movements became sluggish.

Did he give them some kind of state changing stuff?

«Answer. It is poison. According to the analysis result, the attack that individual Gozer received contained a neurotoxin. The room was filled with poisonous gas, inhibiting movements of individuals who were not resistant to it. Currently, there is no such effect in place.»

Aah, poisonous gas. He could supposedly mix it up on the spot to suit their opponent.

The lame Gozer was a great target for the brown-haired dude. But it was the lab coat guy who delivered the final blow. He took out a shiny silver scalpel from his pouch and slit Gozer’s jugular vein with expert precision.

This guy was the leader of the three. Not because he hung back most of the time, but because he was playing the role of their commander. And he was also skilled; it seemed that the spearheading, brown-haired man could focus on his attacks since he knew that the lab coat guy could defend himself if push came to shove.

They appeared to be a good, well balanced party.

Just then, I heard a knock on my door.

The door opened quietly and Shuna entered. She brought the papers which had the registration information of these three people.

“This is the registration form of those three collected at the time of their entry to Tempest.” With a bow, Shuna handed me the papers.

Shinjee: twenty-three years old, magician.

Mark: twenty-six years old, warrior.

Xin: seventeen years old, hunter.

Their names and occupation were briefly recorded on this piece of paper. Their hometown was a little country within the Empire. It said that they had come to this country to challenge the Dungeon, about which they had heard a lot of rumors from the merchants.

Well, that was clearly a load of bullshit.

Raphael-san showed me the results of the trio’s analysis. And just like Beretta had said, they all possessed Unique Skills. Those three had formed a party and came here together. So, it was simply absurd to take anything written on this paper at face value.

The jobs that they had written here were also very fishy.

Being a magician was a high-class career that entailed mastery over two or more types of magic. In Shinjee’s case in particular, he had apparently learned both spirit magic and elemental magic. The guy did have noteworthy talent.

The same applied to warriors, who must master weaponry and hand-to-hand combat skills. In this case, proficiency in at least one basic martial art and weapon class was to be expected.

There were several weapon categories to choose from, ranging from sword fighting, archery, and in some cases, throwing arts, which included knife throwing and stone throwing. You just had to pick the one that suited you best. The essence of the art of weaponry was the path towards mastering that weapon of choice.

In the case of Mark, he was evidently good at hand-to-hand combat, throwing, and fighting with a spear—a jack-of-all-trades.

Lastly, hunters were said to be the cream of the crop among those who dispatched monsters. You had to master the type of archery that specialized in using the traditional bow and ‘Formhide,’ an Art that was very difficult to handle. Furthermore, you had to master the ‘Danger Detection’ Skill, and thus talent alone was not enough to get a job as a hunter. It was the most reliable occupation among the members of subjugation guilds.

In this world, hardly anyone had the abilities to discover traps and monsters, which were skills essential for exploration. As such, people who could be hunters were very few, to the point that they were only born from tribes that specialized in hunting. So that made the career harder to achieve.

Those three with rather rare jobs had arrived as a party. They were practically begging me to suspect them.

“Those three must be spies who took the bait,” I proposed.

“Yes. However, would they really blow their cover this blatantly?” Diablo commented, showing up out of nowhere.

He had been consulting with me on the development of my magic and was looking forward to experimenting with the new surveillance system, but was distraught about the current interruption. He looked like he was about to take out his resentment on the three people on the screen, but I guess he figured out the right call.

“Yeah,” I said, “that’s what I was wondering, too. I thought it might be a diversion, but the town’s security is pretty calm.”

This party was indeed highly suspicious, but their registration information was, quite frankly, too honest. But it may just be a red herring.

“Rimuru, you’re overthinking it,” Veldora interrupted. “Didn’t you say honesty is the best policy?”

Ramiris jumped in next. “That’s right! Putting that aside, it’s more important to figure out how to deal with these people!”

Oh, that’s good, you guys. Always happy-go-lucky. I envied Veldora and Ramiris for not having a care in the world. Ah, whatever. No matter what the truth was, there was no doubt that we needed to be careful.

About that black-haired man wearing a lab coat, Shinjee…that’s obviously a fake name. It has to be Shinji.

The brown-haired Mark. Not only was he throwing air bullets, he seemed to be able to throw anything that he grabbed, be it a monster corpse or a fallen stone. I nearly spat out my tea when I saw him throwing a living monster and smashing two skeleton warriors at the same time.

He really was a warrior. He used the Minos’s Bardiche skillfully and steamrolled dead spirits one after another.

The black-robed guy, Xin, definitely had an eye for detecting traps. At first, I thought that he had the Skill ‘Danger Detection,’ but seeing him avoid all the dangerous places in advance, it made me think that it was thanks to his Unique Skill.

Essentially, beyond the 50th floor, traps were more threatening than the monsters.

Undead monsters did not need to breathe, so we adjusted the air composition of this floor inside the Dungeon in an unnoticeable way. I had also prepared an oxygen-free room and such, so that even an unintentional step into the room would lead to immediate asphyxiation.

Besides this, there were poisonous waters, acid swamps, corrosive gas rooms, and so on.

A number of really nasty traps awaited the challengers, damaging not only their bodies but also their equipment. These traps, insidious like the character of their creators, were there to hinder the conquest of the challengers on the 50th floor and below. Yet, the traps were completely useless if the challengers could figure all of them out.

In addition, Xin had an excellent sense of direction, and it was easy for him to take the shortest paths without being fooled by the rotating floors. Obviously, the twists and turns of the labyrinth did little to slow him down.

Whenever they were seriously injured, Shinjee, the young man in a lab coat, would treat them. He could also break down poison, so I guess we couldn’t expect much from these traps.

Despite there only being three of them, it was as though they were specialized for conquering a dungeon.

And so, three days passed.

Veldora, Ramiris, and I were happily observing the progress Shinjee and his party were making. No, we weren’t thinking of them as a reference for the next time we would conquer it, okay? I mean, look at them; I was merely admiring their fights.

Diablo was reading in the corner of the room, while Shion was taking lessons from Shuna on how to make desserts. Shuna poured the three of us another cup of tea. Today, we were having black tea with a pleasant apple scent to it.

“By the way, Rimuru, you said that those three were people who took the bait. What did you mean by that?” Veldora suddenly asked.

Mmm, what was that… Oh, the conversation from three days ago. I didn’t want to turn a deaf ear, but this was Veldora we were talking about.

“Don’t worry about that.”

“Don’t give me the cold shoulder, tell me.”

These kinds of things normally went in one ear and out the other with him, but today, he was being remarkably persistent. Ah, fine then.

“Okay, I’ll tell you. Actually…”

I explained the situation to Veldora.

“Taking the bait” was both literal and figurative.

We had introduced disaster drills. The idea behind it was to do the impossible and isolate the entire city within the Dungeon. Ramiris’s Intrinsic Skill ‘Labyrinth Creation’ really was amazing. I knew that the floors could be swapped, but even the city aboveground could be swapped with one of the floors.

Once separated, it would be anchored there for twenty-four hours, but you didn’t need to worry about water or air. In fact, even the sun was visible. It seemed that there wouldn’t be much mental stress for the residents.

Of course, it needed a lot of power, and that’s where Veldora-san came into the picture.

That was why I had been planning to isolate the town when the war came.

We had practiced it a few times, and unexpectedly, it turned out to be excellent bait for spies. Since the gate, which was the entrance to the labyrinth, would be the only thing left above the ground, it was bound to raise a few eyebrows. Investigations would surely be carried out—this was the conclusion we reached in a meeting with Benimaru and others.

“I see. Thanks to Mentor, I’ve also gotten a power-up! I’m glad to be of help.”

“Kukuku, I see. Thanks to me, huh,” Veldora grinned, giving me those puppy eyes he does when fishing for compliments. It was a pain in the ass, but I had to hand it to him, we couldn’t have done it without him.

“Well, you really helped, Veldora-san.”

“Gaaa-hahaha! Ain’t that right! You all heard it! So, could you give me the cake?”

Of course I can’t! That was the piece I had saved for later.

“Then, have mine.”

Ooh, thanks Diablo!

“Sorry about that,” I apologized.

“No, no, it’s the least I can do for you, Rimuru-sama,” Diablo assured me.

How reliable. I may as well indulge in his kindness.

I glanced at the screen as I enjoyed my cake. The challengers were trying to take on the 60th floor.

“Knowing they are spies, wouldn’t it be better if we captured them?”

“No, I want to see how strong they are—how far they can go. Giving them the prize money does sting, but it’s pretty exciting and I don’t see any problems with it.”

At worst, there was always the option of capturing them and confiscating the money. I was going to let them think I generously paid them, while taking full advantage of them.

“You’re amazing as always, Rimuru!”

“That’s dirty! But really smart!”

Although Veldora and Ramiris complimented me, for some reason, it didn’t make me happy.

Shuna rolled her eyes at us.

“But it seems we failed. Who would’ve thought that Minos’s Bardiche would appear on the first drop. It’s a holy weapon, so undead creatures will have to watch out.”

“We were getting a little carried away with the first-time guaranteed drop thing…”

The guardian of the 60th floor was Adalmann.

I decided to give him the title “Immortal King” for him to welcome the challengers like he did when he was still a wight king…

Adalmann’s powers shined when he led an army. On his own, he was weaker than Gozer and Mezer, so I had a feeling that this time would be another disappointment. Moreover, since Adalmann was a wight, he was extremely weak against holy and light elements.

As long as Mark was using Minos’s Bardiche, it seemed like Adalmann’s chances of winning were fleetingly low. Although I had given him a lot of advice, this floor’s main gimmick was the traps.

Since I was not expecting much of the boss’s strength, I had decided that it would be okay to give the challengers some weapons he was weak against. I did kinda screw Adalmann over. Sadly, even he couldn’t stop these three, right? Well, it might’ve been my fault, but I hope you’ll forgive me.

At that point, I curbed my expectations and instead looked forward to their battle against the guardians of Floor 70.

“Immortal King” Adalmann curled his fleshless lips when he noticed the presence of intruders in his domain. His jaws clenched, teeth grinding against each other—you could hear a slight creaking sound. It was hard to tell, but apparently, he had a broad grin on his skull.

“You seem happy, Adalmann-sama.”

The voice addressing him belonged to the man who had been his trusted friend for many centuries, a former paladin named Albert. He had been at Adalmann’s side the longest, even after the day they fell into a trap and died.

When Adalmann joined the lowest ranks of Rimuru’s subordinates, Albert devolved into a skeleton swordsman, a low-class monster. He was reduced to such a weak existence that he was lucky not to have disappeared.

Naturally, he became unable to speak. And yet, the Albert of today was speaking fluently. How? The reason was very simple. Right now, Albert wasn’t a skeleton swordsman; he wasn’t a death knight, which was a few evolutionary stages above. He was a death paladin, an even higher existence.

He remained a dead spirit and had no physical body. However, he appeared no different than when he was alive. The blue will-o’-wisps floating around him and his deathly pale complexion were the only indication that he was no longer among the living.

Adalmann had no lingering attachments to the body he had in his previous life; rather, he loved the bony body he had right now. Albert, on the other hand, didn’t share the same opinion, so he used his newfound magic power—being far stronger than any death knight—to construct a body by manipulating magicules. He still had a lingering pride and an emotional attachment to his human appearance of the past. Therefore, he currently had the appearance of a fresh-faced young man—although calling a dead spirit “fresh-faced” was rather strange in itself.

He was decked out with terrifying equipment, and just from a single glimpse, one could understand that Albert was no ordinary individual.



“Indeed, I am in high spirits. Albert, the guests have arrived.”

Hearing these words, Albert, too, nodded happily.

“I see, they’ve finally come.”

A handful of words were enough for them to understand each other; these two truly were on the same wavelength.

“Yes. The time has finally come to be useful to him,” Adalmann cheered. “After all, it was Rimuru-sama who let us live peacefully. Now that we have been given this much power, you know that we can’t afford to make the same mistakes as last time.”

“I am well aware of that, of course.”

“Fufufu, I suppose it was an unnecessary warning. Perhaps the excitement has made me a bit talkative.”

The two looked at each other and laughed. And there was one more creature with them.

“Graaaaaah!!”

A brutal and vicious roar reverberated through the city of the dead.

“I see, you’re looking forward to it, too. Very well. You should use that power to your heart’s content today. We shall give a testimony of loyalty to God!!”

Quietly, and then profoundly, their eagerness filled the entire area.

Adalmann had once completely lost his faith. But now, the demon lord Rimuru was the subject of his renewed faith—he had become Adalmann’s new god.

A few months after his painful defeat…

In order to be useful to Rimuru, Adalmann devoted all of his time into regaining his strength as a wight king as quickly as possible. Thus, he rapidly possessed power which surpassed his own when he was in his prime. That was the degree of Adalmann’s devotion.

Meanwhile, Rimuru found faithfulness to this degree rather overbearing. On the contrary, he was thinking, “Sorry guys, it doesn’t look like you’ll win this one,” and was already placing his expectations on the next guardian. But since Adalmann and Albert were blissfully unaware of this, they remained full of energy and enthusiasm.

Especially this time—no, always from this point forward—losing was absolutely not allowed; they must continually offer up victories. In high spirits, Adalmann and his companions began to take careful measures against the foolish intruders who would arrive shortly.

The ferocious battle ended as soon as it began.

…Is what I wanted to say, but it all ended so quickly that it left me speechless. I had even gotten out a set of playing cards just in case I got bored, but I didn’t get the chance to use them.

It ended with Adalmann steamrolling the invaders. It was a stunningly vivid victory. It wasn’t that the opponents were weak—they weren’t sick or hurt, either. In fact, they looked to be in great physical condition and were well motivated. But Adalmann and his troops outperformed them in all respects.

The challengers this time were quite strong. When I finished analyzing their Skills, I thought that they were stronger than Adalmann. They were all above rank A and had their own Unique Skills.

Shinjee had a Unique Skill called ‘Healer,’ which was a very unusual Skill that allowed him to manipulate viruses. When fighting against a living creature, he seemed to be able to destroy them from the inside. He was also evidently capable of manipulating the composition of the air to disseminate microscopic attack agents called viral poison.

Honestly, it was a ridiculously powerful ability. Wouldn’t that make him invincible against living creatures? Since it was impossible to see the viral poison with the naked eye, you wouldn’t be able to beat Shinjee, if you had nothing to rely on other than your eyesight.

Of course, those microbes could be used for healing, too. Given how it was superior to medical nanomachines, it was an extremely versatile and handy Skill.

Next was Mark and his Unique Skill ‘Thrower.’ It evidently allowed him to throw anything he could grab, and given how he was able to toss even monsters, it looked like the Skill also applied to anything he could lift.

If combined with gravity manipulation magic, it could potentially be more troublesome than your average kinetic weapon. It would be really effective if used against an army rather than individuals.

Finally, regarding Xin’s Skill, it was an assortment of convenient powers. Unique Skill ‘Observer’ contained ‘Instinctual Avoidance,’ ‘Danger Detection,’ ‘Trap Detection,’ ‘Monster Detection,’ and ‘Presence Detection.’ Apparently, he could even spot Shinjee’s viral poison. When combined with his battle prowess, he was unparalleled in escaping danger. He was fast and didn’t fall into any traps, which made him a natural enemy of the labyrinth.

That was the gist of things. I planned to use those yummy-looking Skills as a reference.

While those three were brilliant on their own, their perfect compatibility with each other made them even stronger as a team. I thought it’d be understandable if they were able to defeat Adalmann.

On the other hand… Adalmann had gotten way stronger than ever before, and just within the past few months. I mean, you wouldn’t see much of an improvement in the battle prowess from monsters lacking self-consciousness. Though maybe you would, if they survived for several decades, but it was not something that would change after a few years.

But in the case of Adalmann and Albert—

“Uhm, what’s going on? Why are those two so strong right now?!”

And what’s with that dragon?

Adalmann, Albert, and an evil dragon that I’d never seen before were all standing in the boss room. It was nearly ten meters long and exuded a noxious miasma. Where the heck did they dig that thing up from… I wondered what else had happened while I was away from town on my business trip.

“Hehehe, you must’ve been surprised! Actually, I kept it a secret, but you gave them equipment, right? They looked overjoyed and were training really hard. Oh, oh, and you remember how the magicule density in the labyrinth is so high? By absorbing those magicules, Adalmann and Albert regained their former power!” Ramiris proudly chirped like she was bragging about pulling off a successful prank.

What she said was true, however—when I examined him more closely, I saw that Adalmann had evolved from a wight to a wight king. He still came across as a bony guy dressed in regal clothes, so I didn’t realize that his magic power had increased to such an outrageous level.

Meanwhile, Albert completely skipped over the death knight evolution and turned straight into a higher-level monster called a death paladin.

“Wight kings and death paladins have the same amount of magicules as archdemons…”

“Ga-hahaha! The little guys are trying their best to be useful to us in their own little way!”

They’d supposedly evolved rather easily, but they became much stronger than I’d expected.

“Well then, what is that dragon?”

“What! You didn’t know? That’s Adalmann’s pet.”

His pet…? Hmm. Now that you mention it…I feel like Adalmann did say something about wanting to keep a pet. I never would’ve expected such a fiendish dragon.

The dragon was a death dragon, the pinnacle of dead monsters. Since Shuna and the others were familiar with it, they thought I knew about it as well. This was partially my fault. It made me realize once again that ReCoCo (report, communicate, and consult) truly was important.

So, moving onto the main point, the events of the battle.

There wasn’t much to say. Adalmann sat still on his throne while the death dragon laid calmly to his left. Albert went ahead on his own and defeated everyone just like that.

Mark didn’t even get any time to display the true abilities of his Minos’s Bardiche. Albert blocked him with a weapon of equal class—the unique-grade Cursed Sword—and flawlessly cut him down.

Xin, witnessing this for himself, became dumbfounded, lowering his defenses for a split-second. Albert didn’t let an opportunity like that go to waste and attacked Xin with lightning speed, turning into a blur. Xin was defeated just as easily as Mark.

“Huh?!” Shinjee couldn’t help but scream in shock and rushed to shoot Albert with the holy magic ‘Holy Cannon.’ Holy Knights were good at this kind of magic, but barely anyone else could use it. He didn’t mention his proficiency with it when he registered, so this might’ve been one of his trump cards.

This spell was suited for rapid-fire, so he managed to land a direct hit on Albert. Since it looked avoidable to me, I thought Albert must’ve been careless—but my worries had been misplaced. The only reason Albert didn’t move was because he didn’t need to.

“No way!” Shinjee cried out as Albert’s sword sliced through him.

The battle ended there.

Hold on, Albert is undead, so shouldn’t he be weak to the holy element?

To the people who thought the same way, I’m one of you. See, you aren’t wrong, so why was Albert completely fine? The answer lay with Adalmann’s trump card, Extra Skill ‘Holy-Demonic Reversal.’

«Report. ‘Holy-Demonic Reversal’ is a secret technique created by the individual Adalmann. With the effects of this Skill, attributes of holy and demonic elements can be exchanged.»

With that Skill, Albert had his attribute changed from demonic element to holy element. It didn’t affect his equipment in the slightest, and the fact that Albert was undead did not change, either. This meant there was still no life force for his equipment to suck up. Swapping his element seemed to be all fine and dandy.

When targeting allies, Adalmann didn’t have to worry about them resisting his Skill.

I thought “holy undead” was a joke, but Adalmann’s ‘Holy-Demonic Reversal’ proved otherwise.

Since Adalmann and his team were dead spirits, they were resistant to all types of attribute attacks. Physical attacks, too, were almost useless against them. Now, they had overcome their biggest weakness—the holy element. Let’s just say that this situation was beyond what an ordinary challenger could handle.

Adalmann’s team had won without having to use the magic I had taught them. That was how easy Shinjee and his friends were defeated and turned into particles of light.

“My God, did you watch us? We offer our victory to thee!!” Adalmann shouted at the top of his lungs like a true fanatic.

Wasn’t Adalmann and his gang a little too strong to guard the 60th floor? I did tell Adalmann to challenge a party with a party, didn’t I? Well, he definitely obeyed my orders and fought opponents with equal numbers.

But he was still cheating, right? Why, you ask? Because, if three Special A—Calamity-class—beings appeared at the same time, they could easily obliterate a small country. If this was happening under my nose, then there must’ve been more things they were hiding from me.

I’ll save Ramiris’s interrogation for when things settle down. Today, I’ll show my appreciation for Adalmann and his crew.

“You’ve done a great job, Adalmann! This is something that needs to be said in person, so come to the command room.”

“Oh, oooh! I thank you for those words, they bring me boundless joy! I shall forthwith come to your side!”

As usual, he was excessively formal. Well, this was simply your quintessential Adalmann.

“It appears Albert has regained his voice. Can you bring him here as well?”

“Understood. Then, what about my death dragon?”

“I’m afraid you need to leave it there.”

“Yes sir!”

The death dragon looked rather depressed, but I had to harden my heart and reject the request. It was something like ten meters long, which was way too large to even fit in this room, okay? Aside from Veldora’s private hall on the 100th floor, the command room wasn’t that big. I felt bad for the dragon, but my hands were effectively tied.

I asked Shion to make black tea for Adalmann and Albert. However, she spun around and responded with a serious face, “Can skeletons drink?”

“…”

Right, she had a point. Although Albert seemed to have regained flesh, Adalmann was still the same old skeleton. Well, maybe they could at least enjoy the smell?

“It’s more about setting the mood, you know?”

“Oh, really? Understood!”

I waited for Adalmann and Albert’s arrival as we were having this bizarre conversation.

“I sincerely apologize for keeping you waiting, Rimuru-sama!”

“I am eternally grateful to be able to have an audience with you.”

Adalmann and Albert both kneeled down in front of me.

Looking at these two up close instead of on the big screen made me doubt whether these really were the same individuals—they had grown too strong.

“Hmm, that was a splendid job. Albert, was it? You handled that sword masterfully. And Adalmann, your performance as a guardian was very impressive. Keep up the good work!”

“Mm-hmm, we’re counting on you!”

Veldora and Ramiris started encouraging them before I could even say a single word. When it came to these situations, you had to be the first one to speak, or otherwise you’d be hard-pressed to come up with something to add. Oh well, just gotta play it safe.

“Man, ain’t that the truth. I haven’t seen you guys in a while, so I was really surprised at how much you’ve grown.”

It was more of an evolution than growth.

“Those three were pretty strong, so I thought it might be a tough fight for you guys”—is what I actually wanted to say, but there were times when you had to bite your tongue, and this was one of them.

“ “Yes sir!!” ”

Adalmann and Albert were overcome with emotion.

To wash away this little sense of guilt, I told them to take a seat.

“This…this is truly a pleasant aroma. If anyone else served me tea, I might have taken it as an insult—”

Ah, she had a point after all, huh? I guess it would be a cruel joke to people who were unable to drink.

“—However, with Rimuru-sama’s invitation, this aroma alone is enough to soothe my mind and relieve my weary bones.”

That was good to hear, but Shion was the one who brewed it…

“Delicious. A sweet and lovely scent, like nectar. I, Albert, am extremely grateful to be blessed with this moment of bliss.”

You guys are really overreacting…

It appeared that Albert’s body was structured using magicules. It was a temporary incarnation only made possible inside the labyrinth.

“Adalmann, why don’t you incarnate like Albert?”

“…Eh?”

“No, I just thought it would be nice for you to enjoy the tea that way.”

“Th-that may be true, but in my case, I am placing greater importance on the mood, I would say…”

I see. I didn’t understand it, but he must’ve had his reasons. Welp, who am I to tell him how to enjoy his tea.

“In that case, I won’t force you.”

On that note, I changed the topic.

“By the way,” I began, “you’re brilliant with that Extra Skill ‘Holy-Demonic Reversal.’ Merely being able to develop such a Skill tells me how hard you’ve been working.”

“Thank you very much! This wouldn’t have been possible without Beretta-dono’s help. And…” Adalmann started to go off on another tangent.

I subtly changed the discussion and now uncovered a stunning tale in which even Luminas allegedly played a role.

“Luminas-sama said it was an ‘apology’ and taught me one of her secret techniques: ‘Reversal of Day and Night.’ This was then remodeled by Beretta-dono’s Unique Skill ‘Double-Crosser,’ and as a result, I mastered this great Skill.”

This was the whole story. The “apology,” as Luminas called it, was for overlooking the rampage of the Seven Luminaries.

Why did Granbell plan to eliminate the talented Adalmann? I had my own theory about it—other than Granbell, the members of the Seven Luminaries had desperately tried to remove any threats that challenged their positions, so they ultimately decided to eliminate Adalmann. On the contrary, Granbell thought that Adalmann would only be useful to him if he could overcome such a trap.

Adalmann and his entourage fought against the zombie dragon, ending that battle in a draw. Perhaps that wasn’t the result Granbell was looking for. He felt that if Adalmann couldn’t even beat an enemy of that caliber, then it would be impossible for him to be a guardian of humanity—this is what I believed had occurred. Perhaps this conclusion was based on what I saw in the aloof Granbell’s final moments.

It would be tactless for me to voice my theory though.

While hoping that one day Adalmann would realize it himself, I changed the subject yet again.

“That’s brilliant. I’ll have to give Luminas my regards later, but first things first, Adalmann!”

“Sir!”

“As of now, you can beat the current guardian of the 70th floor, right?”

“What do you mean by that?”

I gave a detailed explanation to the confused Adalmann.

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Right now, Floors 61 through 70 were the golem zone. They were filled with mechanical, tireless soldiers. Some of the special Area Bosses were even outfitted with prototype firearms. This zone had many types of evil traps, including land mines. Nevertheless, they weren’t strong enough to kill, which heavily implied that this whole setup was for the healers to be able to use the zone as a training ground.

Also, the Boss Monster was a remodeled Elemental Colossus. Vesta had finally completed his brainchild with the help of Kaijin. They had succeeded in miniaturizing it and reducing its weight while maintaining the high defense offered by magisteel. Its mobility was greatly improved too, and careful consideration was given to completely protect the cockpit.

Even though it wasn’t autonomous, it was designed with room for a pilot to control it from the inside. It also had a very handy remote-control feature that let you operate it “telepathically.”

Around this time, Beretta should’ve been controlling it remotely. And since nobody was technically inside, that meant it was immune to attacks from viral poison. Even Minos’s Bardiche wouldn’t have made a dent in its magisteel body since it was covered in laminar armor. Plus, it featured ‘Magic Interference’ thanks to Charybdis’s scales.

It was a wholeheartedly invincible iron guardian. That was the Demon Colossus in a nutshell, the updated version of the Elemental Colossus.

Shinjee’s team couldn’t conquer the 70th floor—I was sure of it.

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However, after watching how Adalmann’s team fought, I changed my mind.

“Veldora, who do you think is stronger: Adalmann, or the Demon Colossus?”

“Hm. Adalmann, without a doubt.”

“Exactly. It’s official, Adalmann. You’ve been promoted to guardian of the 70th floor.”

I’m not making a mistake…am I? If Veldora thinks so too, then then this must be the right call.

«Answer. The difference in combat power between the individuals ‘Adalmann’ and ‘Demon Colossus’ is…›

Ah, hmm.

This was more about the mood, so I really didn’t need all the minute details…

“Oh, oooh!! I, Adalmann, shall spare no effort to live up to your expectations, Rimuru-sama!”

“I, Albert, humbly pledge myself to my lord, Adalmann.”

The two of them declared while kneeling down in front of me.

I look away for a bit and these guys get crazy strong, huh?

The Demon Colossus wasn’t actually weak, but its presence as a boss honestly was. And above all, we couldn’t afford to let it get destroyed again. Unless it was operated with a soul properly enclosed inside, it would remain out of the scope of Ramiris’s power. It’d be a hassle to try to find out whether or not it would resurrect if it were destroyed.

It would be a different story if it had a sense of self. Or if someone actually piloted it? No, rather than that, it might no longer be considered just an item if someone possessed it…

Unfortunately, we currently didn’t have any plans for that. So, there weren’t any problems promoting Adalmann’s team.

“Great! Then, as of today, exchange Floors 51 through 60 with Floors 61 through 70!”

“Understood! Leave it to me!”

That was all it took to swap entire sections of the labyrinth.

After congratulating both Adalmann and Albert, I decided to have their floors switched. Now that business had ended, I was about to tell them to leave when suddenly—

“This seems like a good time to interrupt; there is something I wish to report,” Diablo, who had been quiet all this time, announced.

“What is it?”

“My servant Razen has sent me a message via ‘Magic Communication,’ saying that he has urgent matters to discuss with you. An old master of his has arrived and is requesting an audience, it seems. This man goes by the name of Gadra.”

Hmm, I don’t recognize him.

«Report. There is a high chance of this person being the one that is credited as the author of several grimoires.»

He sounded like a pretty famous guy. I’d heard that Razen was also quite the brilliant and revered archmage, but if this was his teacher, then he was probably even more brilliant.

This is interesting; I think it’ll be okay to see him.

“Isn’t that a trap? We’re on the eve of war with the Empire, so a meeting at this time is nothing short of dubious.”

“Exactly! There is no need for you to meet with such a suspicious person!”

Shion’s vigilance was maxed out, beyond mine, even.

Although, I did sort of understand where she was coming from. Given the current situation and time, and also how her group was supposed to be my bodyguards, it was her job to protect me from unnecessary danger.

I wasn’t a particularly cautious person, so I figured it’d be better to listen to my subordinates in this regard.

“Rightfully so,” Diablo agreed. “You do not need to heed the opinions of a man like Razen. Naturally, that extends to me, as well.”

He sounded so genuine, but most likely he just sought to avoid any hassles.

If my two secretaries were against it, then I’d refuse the offer. That’s what I was about to say, until I noticed Adalmann fidgeting out of the corner of my eye.

Poor Adalmann, I totally got how he was feeling. It was like when you were about to leave a meeting with your boss and a visitor suddenly came in, or the phone rang. Disturbing your boss was a no-go, so you just had to sit there helplessly, watching the time tick by. All you wished for was to go home—this happened way too often at the office.

Huh, it was just me? Whatever, it doesn’t matter anyway.

“Adalmann, sorry I got sidetracked. I’ve said everything I had to say, you can leave now.”

“Ah, no! You don’t need to worry about us, the thing is…”

“Hm?”

“Actually, um… I…”

“Uh-huh.”

“About this person called Gadra whom you were talking about…”

“Yes…”

“He might be a friend whom I once knew.”

“What?”

I caught myself staring at Adalmann unintentionally; he was getting anxious and fidgety. No, I don’t think you’re a traitor… He was shaking so bad that I wanted to tell him that.

I told Diablo to put the reply on hold and asked Adalmann for more details.

It turned out that Gadra and Adalmann were friends more than a thousand years ago. Adalmann presumed he had died already, but since Gadra was an archmage, he said it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility for him to have extended his lifespan using the secret art he created.

After all, the person who used the mystic art ‘Reincarnation’ and saved Adalmann’s life was apparently the same Gadra. He also happened to know the name Razen and thought that he was one of Gadra’s oldest and greatest disciples.

After listening to a couple more tidbits, it appeared as though the person in question really was the Gadra whom Adalmann had once known.

“Diablo.”

“Understood. I will arrange a date and time and prepare for the meeting.”

As expected from the useful secretary—I need but only call him and he understands my intention.

The hopeless secretary didn’t have any objections, so I decided to have a meeting with Gadra.

For the first time, Shinji and his gang experienced “resurrection” after getting killed on the 60th floor.

When they returned, they were greeted with all kinds of reactions from the many spectators, ranging from boos over their loss to words of consolation.

Battles in the labyrinth were broadcasted exclusively, and the trio’s fights garnered a lot of popularity. Of course, they could have refused to let their battles get broadcasted, since that was part of an opt-in agreement. For two reasons, however, Shinji decided to allow it.

Firstly, they would receive a cut of the profits earned by broadcasting their battles.

Secondly, he figured that if they became famous, it would guarantee their safety.

After all, they were in the heart of enemy territory, and getting assassinated was less likely if they were well known. Besides, they were told that only the boss battles would be aired, so they didn’t have to be mindful of it the entire time. They were sure to profit quite a bit from this, so Shinji had no reason to decline. The other two didn’t complain, either. Hence, they accepted the contract, and the outcome was this reaction by the people around them.

“That was unfortunate. Looks like you’ll have to train a bit more and try again.”

“No way, that was impossible. What the hell were those monstrosities? That swordsman was wicked fast, and the skeleton sitting on the throne—that was a legendary monster, right?”

“Probably a wight king. Even a high-ranking demon would be no match for it; it’s a living calamity that controls death itself.”

“That reminds me, was that dragon even alive? It didn’t look like decoration, but if it were to join the fray, then, to be honest, humans wouldn’t stand a chance of winning.”

A lot of questions were getting thrown around.

The trio just laughed in response and did their best to escape from the scene.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to place our hopes on the Hero.”

“With this, you guys have managed to reach the same record as Masayuki-sama. If you plan to win, you’ll have to find a way to deal with that boss while Masayuki-sama is busy preparing for the war.”

“Yeah. I was betting on you guys winning. You’ll get ‘em next time!”

The shouting followed them all the way as they headed back to the inn.

The three collapsed on their beds as soon as they reached their room.

“Hey, what should we do now?” Mark inquired.

“There’s nothing we can do; just let me rest for a bit,” replied Shinji, utterly exhausted.

They had enthusiastically challenged the boss, but the difficulty made the previous 59 floors look like a walk in the park. On the 60th floor, even the small fries had group coordination. A sentient monster called a death lord 14 attacked them, accompanied by its own subordinates. Even after somehow overcoming these difficult enemies and eventually reaching the boss room, in the end, they met a grisly death.

“…Are we reporting this to Yuuki-san?”

Xin’s question made Shinji sit up. He sighed as he sat on his bed.

Mark and Xin also sat up and the three of them faced one another.

“Report it or not, that thing is impossible. Who knew the secret area would be this intense?”

“Yeah, we were completely fine until the 59th floor. So, what the hell was that 60th floor? The death lord was roaming around with its own platoon of death knights. That’s a slaughterhouse for any ordinary soldier!”

“Yeah.”

“…That was bad. The power level of that floor’s guardians shot up exponentially compared to the previous floors. Not just the knight that defeated us, but also that skeleton on the throne and the death dragon beside it… I think those three are the secret bosses…”

The trio started shooting the breeze eagerly. The excitement got the better of them as they chattered away without a worry in the world. The facades they’d kept up these few days melted away.

“Also, that skeletal boss, who sat on the throne the whole time, is a wight king. Anyone with advanced appraisal magic could’ve seen just what that skeleton really is. But its presence is completely different in person, compared to on a screen!”

“Right on. If you bumped into that guy without any preparation, it wouldn’t end nicely.”

“…To be honest,” Xin concluded, “I don’t want to challenge it again.”

The wight king hadn’t even joined the battle. He hadn’t moved from his throne, as if to display the dignity of a king.

“The gozu monster, which seemed like a regular boss, was easily A rank. With that as a reference, the 60th floor is way too overpowered, isn’t it?”

“…That was just awful. Maybe everything up until the 50th floor was just intended to lower our guard.”

“But now I’m sure of it. There must be something in the labyrinth if such strong monsters are protecting it,” Shinji concluded without a shred of doubt in his voice.

“I guess so. I mean, that knight named Albert was brutally strong.”

“Even its equipment was different from the others. I tried analyzing it while Mark was fighting, and shockingly, it turned out to be a unique-grade masterpiece.”

“No wonder. And here I thought I could crush any opponent, no matter what they had, with my Minos’s Bardiche.”

“Come on, beating a boss with a weapon that you’ve picked up only works in games.”

“Yeah, true, we kinda overestimated ourselves, huh.”

“…Yeah.”

The three looked at each other again and sighed heavily. After their energetic discussion, they had finally calmed down. They brewed tea for themselves and took a breather.

“Wanna give it another shot tomorrow?” Shinji asked tentatively.

“Are you serious?”

“…It’s impossible. No matter how many times we try, we’ll always fail.”

“I thought so.”

“That Hero is that Masayuki guy Yuuki-san told us about, right? I’ve heard that he’s just a lucky teenager, but he’s challenged the 60th floor, huh?” Mark remarked.

“No,” Shinji answered, “it looks like he hasn’t. I heard he’s zipping along, without dying, not even once.”

“And what about the others?”

“There’s a rumor that the strongest ones are still challenging the 50th floor. However, they didn’t sign the broadcasting contract so the highest record, of those broadcasted, would be Masayuki’s conquest of the 50th floor. Other than that, it seems like there are several groups on the 40th floor.”

Even if you agreed to the broadcasting contract, they wouldn’t broadcast you on every floor. Only the floors that were a multiple of ten were equipped with cameras. Other than those, it seemed like news crews occasionally followed the challengers around for scoops during events and such.

Since they had challenged the 60th floor while on air, Shinji and his group had become the talk of the town. Apparently, they also became the focus of gambling, owing to the countless records they broke.

“You know,” Shinji pondered, “I think it’s likely Masayuki received some behind-the-scenes info. That being the existence of the secret bosses on the 60th floor.”

“Then it’s no wonder we lost. Two brokenly strong guys and a dragon to top it off; can you believe it? That labyrinth is horribly unbalanced.”

“…It was reasonably balanced till the 50th floor, so those really must be the secret bosses. I’m sure the town is beyond that floor.”

The three consoled themselves as they chatted and began planning their next steps.

“Now that we’re in the limelight, we can’t continue spying.”

“That’s not a problem. As I said earlier, we’re safer this way.”

“…We’ve also only been exploring the labyrinth.”

“Then, why don’t we wait for Gadra-sama to come? We can’t keep challenging the Dungeon by ourselves, can we? Or should we do some training?” Mark wondered aloud.

“First,” Shinji replied with a grim smile, “let’s report to Yuuki-san that there’s definitely something beyond that floor and that the guardians were abnormally strong.”

“Next, let’s tell him how huge the labyrinth really is. No matter what magic is used to make such large spaces, it extends so far down it can’t possibly be man-made, right?” Mark added.

“…Also, don’t forget to mention that the monsters on that floor were far and away the toughest ones yet,” Xin reminded everyone.

Shinji nodded. “I know. Then, let’s go sightseeing after contacting him.”

Now that the matter was settled, it was time to act. The trio stepped out onto the busy streets of the night.

Shinji and his colleagues went to the outskirts of town and started reporting as instructed. They forwarded a brief message to Yuuki, and after about ten minutes, they were contacted by him through ‘Magic Communication.’

‹Hey, it’s good to know you guys are doing fine.›

‹We were okay up until yesterday. Today has just been awful.›

‹Hahaha, seems like you guys have had it rough. So, what do you plan to do next?›

‹It depends on Master Gadra. We can’t conquer the 60th floor alone and there is no way to sneak into the labyrinth.›

‹Just as I thought. Then, let me ask you one thing.›

‹Yes?›

‹How strong do you think the boss of the 60th floor was? What does your gut tell you?›

This was something that only the trio could understand. It meant how strong the opponent was when compared to the ranks of the Imperial Guardians.

Shinji thought hard to himself. He wasn’t typically interested in the “rank battles” of the military. He didn’t have any ambition of rising through the ranks, so he hadn’t participated in any.

Yuuki had taken him under his wing, and Shinji was indebted to him in other various ways, and thus he became Yuuki’s subordinate with the intention of repaying his kindness. Since he was reluctant to help criminal organizations, Shinji instead chose the path of the army. So when Yuuki became a corps commander, he was quickly moved from his former department, the Armored Corps, to the Mixed Corps.

Some of the otherworlders had a similar mindset. They didn’t show off their powers and tried to live a carefree life, avoiding serious responsibilities. The powers and abilities of these people were a mystery, so it wasn’t really known whether the Imperial Guardians were actually the strongest. But at least on paper, they were the strongest force in the Empire. In a sense, it was natural to use the rankings as a guide.

‹Let’s see. Probably at least within the upper fifty. Anything lower is out of the question, I’d say.›

‹And that’s just for this knight, Albert, alone?›

‹Yes. Ah, I’m not sure if this will help you get an idea for its power, but I had once joined an archdemon subjugation force as its military doctor. I only caught a glimpse of that demon, but the wight king that I saw today has about the same magicule count as that thing.›

‹Could you be referring to Lakeshore Dyed Scarlet?›

‹Ah, yes. That’s right.›

‹Understood. That’s actually really helpful. Then, you three should take it easy until Old Master Gadra joins up with you.› Yuuki advised as he ended the call.

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The Lakeshore Dyed Scarlet incident was one of the most hideous stains on the Empire’s history.

A vassal state adjacent to a beautiful lake rebelled and called for its independence. At that time, the king was outmatched in military strength and—out of sheer desperation—ultimately triggered the ensuing tragedy.

It was a forbidden secret art called demon summoning. The king ordered the magicians to summon the strongest demon they could control, and the court’s magic division complied. As a result, the little country was destroyed when an archdemon answered the summoning.

As a small country with a population of less than ten thousand, there was no way it could stand a chance against the Empire. Nevertheless, the king had a reason for declaring independence—as it would happen, an Imperial aristocrat wanted the princess of the country, the king’s only daughter, as his concubine.

The Empire was exceedingly large and powerful, so the emperor didn’t pay attention to every little thing that happened in the small, remote vassal states. Even though all of the land belonged to him, the regional management was split up among the nobility.

The treatment of the vassal states remained at the mercy of the nobility. It was a common sight in the Empire to see the margraves, who were in charge of the local regions, abusing the emperor’s name for tyranny.

The demon demanded the king’s daughter as the price for its summoning. The king adamantly refused, but the head court magician, whose mind shattered the moment he saw the demon and went insane, complied with the demon’s request.

The demon possessed the princess’s body with a sinister smile on its face. The king was furious, but his anger turned into terror as the demon, now in possession of a physical body, went on a rampage.

When word of this little country’s ruin reached the Empire, they decided to subdue the demon. Had they acted any later, the world would’ve seen the birth of a second Guy Crimson.

The beautiful lake turned scarlet, stained with the blood of the small country’s inhabitants. This abominable incident was known ever since as the most tragic event to tarnish the history of the Empire in the last few centuries.

The Lakeshore Dyed Scarlet incident was resolved by the Armored Corps, which had branches throughout the Empire.

That was how it was written in the official report.

However, reality was often different.

The main army was no match for the archdemon. Shinji, who was a medic in the subjugation force, had watched from afar as a battle between a small number of elite soldiers and the archdemon played out, ending with the defeat of said demon.

Something about the entire incident was fishy. It was true that the nobles had been tyrants, but Shinji questioned the truth of the matter surrounding the attack the demon had led against the country’s citizens.

Besides, the Empire’s initial response was abnormally fast. Information about the incident was transmitted to the mainland of the Empire, from which they decided to dispatch a subjugation force, then the subjugation unit was organized. With this much time, the demon’s incarnation would have been completed. However, that didn’t happen.

Shinji believed that the fact that the Empire was able to prevent the demon’s incarnation at the very last minute proved that the Empire knew about the situation from the very beginning. But he didn’t plan on telling anyone else about his conclusion. Witnessing the strength of those who fought the demon for himself, he realized that there were things in this world that you were better off not knowing.

It’s likely those people were top-ranking Imperial Guardians…

Shinji firmly believed that he couldn’t beat them no matter how hard he tried. He truly felt that he lived in a different world than them.

This was what made him lose interest in rank battles.

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Shinji took a deep breath to release his tension as Mark and Xin called out to him.

“Finished?”

“…Good job.”

“Yeah, the report is over with. Let’s take it easy until Master Gadra arrives.”

“Sure. Anyway, Shinji, you’re actually a survivor of the Lakeshore Dyed Scarlet?”

“…I’m glad that you survived.”

“Well, you know, all I did was play dead at that time and got away with it, but I think it was a fine play on my part, if I say so myself.”

“No, no, just coming back alive is incredible. Less than thirty percent returned from that mission, huh?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to join anything like that ever again. For one thing, I ended up being completely useless as a medic back there.”

“…Eh?”

“I mean, everyone who got hit died immediately so I didn’t even have a chance to do anything. That’s why my priority was to just get the heck out of there.”

“That’s awful. Are archdemons that dangerous?”

“For the demon that I saw, dangerous doesn’t even begin to describe it. Actually, I felt like our eyes met but I think it let me go. And those crimson eyes…I nearly wet myself just thinking about them…” Shinji explained, laughing at their surprise.

“However, if that skeleton is on the same level as the terrible archdemon, then we obviously can’t beat it.”

“…Are they really at the same level?”

“Judging by their magicule amount, at least. They say the longer a demon lives, the stronger it becomes. The one I saw must’ve been on the older side.”

If not, then the higher ups of the Empire wouldn’t have taken such measures, he was about to add, but stopped himself.

“Well,” Shinji continued, “worrying about that won’t solve anything. I heard they’re working on a machine which can be used to measure the power of others, but it will probably be meaningless. That knight, Albert, was unbelievably strong for his magicule count. Besides, I want you two to remember the classes we got in school; your physical strength isn’t the only thing that can win you a fight, is it?”

“I understand what you mean.”

“…Yeah.”

“That’s what I mean. Among the demons, there are some with immeasurable strength. That’s all you need to remember.”

As Shinji recommended, the other two left the matter alone.

Changing gears, the trio rushed to the Freedom Association’s office before it closed for the night. They wanted to sell the magic crystal and excess equipment to the Materials Department.

“Hey, hey, this is a magic crystal from the lower floors, eh? The quality is completely different.”

“Oh, is that another slotted weapon? Were it made of pure magisteel, you’d never find anything like it in another country, y’know?”

The Association workers were happily discussing the trio’s findings, pleased to handle all the materials from the lower floors.

You could make more profits if you carefully selected the buyers. However, since the trio’s purpose was to infiltrate and investigate the labyrinth, they didn’t want to spread their name or make more acquaintances than were really necessary.

Besides, the sales they made in the Association were superb. Their investigation had hit a dead end, but the profits they made were quite good. They had earned a lot of money within the past few days.

Military personnel received an annual salary, the payment being in advance. So if you were promoted, the difference would be paid the following year. Even those who didn’t have money would be paid in advance on the day they joined the army. This was paid as part of the salary, after calculating the number of days remaining in the year.

Basically, you had nothing to lose in the army. Even if a soldier died on the battlefield, the advanced payment was to be considered as part of the compensation.

Common soldiers—privates—received only the basic pay of ten gold coins, which amounted to 1,000,000 yen per year. The army took care of their food, clothing, and shelter, so the poor considered the salary to be a small fortune. Various benefits, bonuses based on rank, as well as hazard pay could also be supplemented.

Mark and Xin had the rank of first lieutenant, while Shinji was a major 15 with a military doctor qualification. They didn’t have the authority to command others, but their positions came with certain privileges.

In the Empire, otherworlders were given preferential treatment. At the very least, they were treated as second lieutenants, but Shinji was given better treatment than the others. That was why the trio’s salary was much higher than ordinary soldiers.

The bonus given to a first lieutenant was 36 gold coins. The bonus given to a major was 44 gold coins. Four gold coins were added to the bonus amount for each rank you climbed. The annual salary of Mark and Xin totaled to about 50 gold coins and Shinji’s was a little less than 70.

Even though soldiers earned more than commoners, it wasn’t enough for them to live a luxurious life. They would be rich in the countryside, but the cost of living in the capital was high. However, you would face this world’s harsh realities if you left the army to live independently.

Being able to live a stable life was attractive in itself.

But today, they had learned something.

The three of them were debating whether they should quit the army and live together in the Labyrinth City. They earned more than 300 gold coins in their latest sale with the Freedom Association alone. This short-term mission had earned them way more than what all three of them combined could make in a year.

On top of that, they could never have hoped to possess their own unique-grade equipment unless it was provided by the Empire. All in all, the mission was greatly rewarding.

All of them had realized this truth but hesitated to say it aloud. They walked without saying a word before stopping to eat at one of the high-class restaurants of the capital city Rimuru.

They hadn’t experienced luxury in a long time.

“…Are you sure this is a good idea? Selling equipment on our own like that?” Xin, who was a little timid, asked nervously.

“It’s totally fine,” Shinji assured him, unperturbed. “It’s not like we sold everything, and we have already set aside some samples.”

“And no matter what, we can’t bring everything back with us,” Mark added. “So, if we keep the good quality ones, then there won’t be any reason for them to complain.”

All of the goods looted during a military action belonged to the army, except when soldiers were permitted to plunder. In this case, they couldn’t complain if everything were taken away from them.

However, Shinji and his crew were tasked with the mission to investigate the Dungeon while posing as adventurers. So, it would only seem natural for them to play the part; you could think of it as a perk of this kind of job.

Besides, Yuuki wouldn’t ask them to hand over any of the looted goods. There was no doubt that the trio could keep everything except what they had to submit as part of their mission.

“But, you know, if they’re going to take away all the money we earned, we’ll seriously consider immigrating here, right?” Shinji suggested, and they both readily agreed.

One gold coin equaled 100,000 yen. This held true in the Empire as well. The gold coins made in the Dwarven Kingdom were in circulation far and wide, and even the Empire recognized them as legal tender. Since the coins they had earned were the same, they could still use them back home.

“I seriously think we should do that.”

“…Yeah. I was joking earlier, but if we try our best, we are pretty sure to have a better life here.”

Shinji was half serious about that, but Mark and Xin were way more interested than he thought.

It was true that the Empire was the hub of cutting-edge technology and fostered a prosperous culture—the capital was especially advanced. The food was tasty, and the living standards were high. As long as they had the money, they could live as happily as they did in their previous world.

However, the trio were active soldiers in the army, so it wasn’t an understatement to say that death was waiting for them around every corner. In that respect, the Dungeon was a blessing for them. After all, death would never catch them there. They were skeptical at first, but after experiencing it for themselves and getting resurrected, their doubts were instantly erased. If they didn’t have to worry about dying, then they could earn as much money as possible and live every day to its fullest. It was quite reasonable for Shinji and the others to think this was the better choice.

But even if you had enough money, it would be useless if there wasn’t any entertainment to spend it on. This, too, was possible in Rimuru, which had more than its fair share of entertainment centers.

They had a place called the Colosseum, which was open to the public on days when there were no events taking place in it. On such days, the citizens were free to hang out and play there. Sports like football, baseball, and various others were popular and commonly played in Tempest, so those who challenged the labyrinth also had a great time. There were hot springs and opera houses as well. Plays were also staged, which—as they found out during their investigations—were packed every day.

The trio found that the food was just as good—if not better—as the Empire’s. The Japanese flavor that Shinji missed dearly, plenty of sweets, and a wide variety of liquors. Even the dishes that didn’t exist in this world had been recreated here. As someone from Earth, Shinji’s heart was truly enamored of this city.

Frankly, they were obliged only to Yuuki, and it seemed like Yuuki himself didn’t want to be hostile to Demon Lord Rimuru. So even if Shinji and his friends were to move to this country, they wouldn’t really be considered traitors.

“Despite desertion in the face of the enemy ensuring us a death sentence, and the fact that we are currently on the eve of war, it’s not like we are currently at war.”

“I was thinking the exact same thing, Shinji. We can still resign from the army voluntarily, right?”

“…I think it depends on Yuuki-san.”

Had war broken out, it would have been desertion, but fortunately, the situation was still peaceful. Depending on how you interpreted things, it wasn’t impossible to retire and leave the army.

“The problem is the war,” muttered Mark.

This was the exact reason why they couldn’t come to any concrete decision. There was no doubt a war was about to start, and this land would be directly subjected to its ravages. If it weren’t for that, they would have already chosen to immigrate here.

“Which side do you think will win?”

“…Rather, if we were ordered to attack this city, what would we do?”

The three exchanged looks with one another.

The food, which they found so tasty before, suddenly lost all its flavor. There were two reasons why they couldn’t do such a thing. They had only stayed in the city for a short period of time, but it had already grown on them. The thought that this city would vanish disheartened them. There was another reason, too…

Considering the strength of the boss in that labyrinth, it wasn’t hard for them to believe that the powerful people in this country had incredible abilities.

“Normally, I’d think it’s only natural for the guardians who protect important facilities to be strong, wouldn’t it? But is this country’s army really weaker than the guardians of the Empire? That borders on wishful thinking,” Shinji reasoned.

“That’s what I think as well. Demon Lord Rimuru himself must be on another level,” Mark murmured in agreement. “A long time ago, that evil dragon Veldora annihilated an entire city, and that story doesn’t seem to be a joke. I think even that wight king is capable of the same.”

Shinji nodded. In all honesty, the monsters in this country would be capable of causing similar calamities.

“It’s just my estimation, but it seems like archdemons are capable of using nuclear magic, and I think that is comparable to the tactical nuclear weapons on Earth.”

“I think so, too. Our common sense dictates that ‘war is about numbers,’ but fighting that boss using quantity seems futile.”

“—I don’t think we can win unless we have dozens of warriors who are at our level.”

They all had worry in their eyes as they glanced at each other once again.

It was immediately after this that they received the ‘Magic Communication’ from Gadra.

An old man prostrated himself before me. Behind him were the three challengers, who I had been watching on the big screen yesterday, also prostrating.

The old man was called Gadra. He was the one who had requested an audience with me through Razen and Diablo. He wasn’t wearing anything flashy, just a somewhat high-tier magical robe. His eyes were sharp and didn’t match his old body.

Just as I’d thought, Shinjee was actually Shinji. His real name was apparently Shinji Tanimura. It appeared that the other two had registered themselves using their real names. These three seemed to be this archmage Gadra’s subordinates. The trio worked for Yuuki, but this time, they were under Gadra’s care as assistants in this investigation.

That was what they’d told me so far…

Gadra assumed this pose right after he had finished talking and the others followed suit, but if they were to keep this up any longer, the talks would go nowhere.

“Uh, well…I figured as much. Anyway, we really can’t have a comfortable discussion like this, so why don’t we go somewhere else?”

“Raise your heads,” Shion ordered them after I spoke.

For some reason, she said it rather pompously. This was why I found formalities annoying. I always felt like I messed up the procedure, and the truth was that I really didn’t want to do this.

“Y-yes ma’am!!”

Given Gadra’s exaggerated reply, I already knew that the upcoming discussions would be a hassle.

The meeting place was the reception room, the cheaper one. If I had to pick, I’d prefer this one since I could comfortably relax there. The opulent one had high-class furnishings, and I just couldn’t stop worrying about it getting nicks and scratches. If someone spilled tea, the expensive carpet would be ruined.

Live within your means—as a lower middle-class citizen, I was more comfortable with the furniture I was used to. Shinji and the others appeared to be of the same mind; their faces weren’t quite as gloomy.

“Coffee or tea—which do you prefer?” I asked them without beating about the bush.

“T-then…coffee,” answered Shinji.

“S-Shinji!!”

Gadra’s expression changed to anger as he shouted, but I calmed him down.

“Gadra-san, how about you?”

“M-me? Uh, t-then, I’ll have the same thing as Shinji.”

Huh? Maybe coffee didn’t exist in the Empire? I felt like it did, but it might not be in their market. When I turned to Mark and Xin, they started nodding wordlessly. Guess they wanted the same thing, too.

“Shuna, four Americans 16 !”

“Americans?!” Shinji sputtered.

“Ah, you want something weak then? Maybe a blend? How about our national pride, a Tempest?”

“N-no no, I didn’t mean it like that, um…”

“Mhmm.”

“Y-Your Majesty Rimuru, are you perhaps an otherworlder?” Shinji inquired.

“Yeah, what about it?”

Eh, why is he asking this now? Wouldn’t that be part of basic information collection?

As I dwelled on the thought, I examined the four of them a little closer and noticed that only Gadra had an “I screwed up” expression. He was probably already aware but had forgotten to tell them. Whatever, it didn’t really matter.

“All right, let’s hear the details.”

Shuna gave them the coffee she had prepared; there was also milk and sugar on the table. I listened to what Gadra had to say while Shinji and his friends looked really impressed with the coffee set. Shinji took a sip of his coffee and murmured, “This is delicious!”, which earned him a sharp glare from Gadra. I was kind enough to ignore it.

“Actually, I am a reincarnated person.”

Old Master Gadra casually dropped a sudden bombshell. The trio was just as shocked as I was and turned to face him.

Master Gadra had wanted to become a great sorcerer for as long as he could remember, so he reincarnated himself countless times. Each time he was reincarnated, he studied all the treasured books he could get his hands on in various places; hence, he had accumulated a vast wealth of knowledge. It was during this time, when he was researching magic in secret, that he met Adalmann and became fast friends.

“As I said before, I have nothing but hatred for the Western Holy Church. They killed my friend Adalmann. For centuries, I have been planning to pit the Empire against them.”

Following his small rant, Gadra continued his story. When he learned that Adalmann had fallen into a trap and was killed, he vowed to take revenge. With this resolve, he went to the Empire with nothing but his name and labored to slowly gain their trust.

He seemed to have fought Veldora as well; his past was more extreme than I’d imagined.

“To be honest, I am glad that I had completed my reincarnation ritual in advance. I wished to see it with my own eyes—the natural-born apex of ‘monsters’ 17 …”

Only four True Dragons existed in this world and they were the strongest race in existence, standing above all other monsters.

Gadra said that from his actual battle experience, he didn’t think that the Imperial Army could ever beat Veldora. He pointed this out right in front of the dragon himself, so that guy was now repeatedly glancing at me with a delighted expression.

Good grief, stop it already. Sure, he’s amazing, but I don’t feel the need to praise him for it.

“No, they could have achieved a tactical victory, but those imbeciles wanted to control Veldora-sama. I advised them over and over again to give up since it was impossible and futile.”

Gadra was only interested in taking his revenge against Luminism in the West, so he didn’t want to expend any men on something which was evidently in vain. He desperately tried to make them understand the reality of the situation, but the corps commanders, all of them blinded by pride, refused to listen.

And yet… From his story so far, Gadra seemed to be a man of integrity, but simultaneously responsible for the Empire’s growing imperial ambitions.

I asked him to cut to the chase and elaborate on recent developments in the Empire.

“So you’re saying that it’s mostly your fault that the Empire is trying to start a war?”

“Well, that’s one part of it, I guess…”

No, no, no, you’re trying to be evasive. Regardless of how you looked at it, the fault lies with this old man.

Realizing that I was in a bad mood, Gadra rushed to make excuses.

“It’s not like that! The Empire has always been a hegemonic power, and if we don’t set a direction, the ravages of war will spread throughout the land. That’s why I had them look westward. Well, it fits with my purpose, too. I thought it would be convenient.”

How could it be convenient?! We’re getting dragged into this for no reason at all!

“I was also against invading the Great Jura Forest, considering Veldora-sama lives in it, and I didn’t want them to make the same mistake as before. I proposed that it would be better to focus on the Dwarven Kingdom, but there are too many stubborn people who would rather solve everything by force…”

Gadra began ranting about something again, but my attention was focused on a different point entirely.

“Wait a minute. So the Empire really is planning to attack the Dwarven Kingdom?!”

I hadn’t really expected this possibility to be true—did we now have to consider the potential of them passing through the Dwarven Kingdom?

“I see you are aware of that. However, it’s not like we’re attacking them. My proposal was to form an alliance with King Gazel and have them turn a blind eye towards any action taken by our army. I hold a grudge only against the Western Holy Church…”

Gadra was already informed that Adalmann was safe and was promised a meeting with him right after this one. As a result, he realized how fruitless all of his efforts had been and turned his back on the war.

It seemed that he was close to the emperor, but not close enough to put a stop to the whole military campaign. Thus, he planned to advocate against the war in the upcoming conference. It was a bit too convenient to think that Gadra’s help could avert the war, but if it did, then I would definitely stop complaining. In any case, we wanted to get as much information as we could out of him.

Benimaru and others were on standby in the adjacent room, listening to our conversation while holding a strategy meeting. My job was to keep Gadra happy and talking.

“And King Gazel refused, didn’t he?”

“Well, that was a given. And then, a plan to assassinate him was proposed, but I was against it. ‘If we’re going to do it, then we should face them head on’—is what I told them!”

That’s not a scenario you should be proud of. Old Gadra was way more militant than I thought.

Even though I was getting more astounded by the minute, I still kept him talking. He told us a lot of useful information—from the breakdown of the Imperial Army to the mindset of the upper echelon. He even revealed the shocking news that Yuuki was planning a coup. I had pretty much wrung him dry at this point.

Finally, Gadra began speaking his mind in an honest and light-hearted way.

“I don’t have any obligations to the Empire. The army corps that I raised was disbanded, and my men were taken away. These three are my disciples, so I borrowed them. Although it’s hard to say that he is well, if Adalmann is doing all right, then I will not have any regrets leaving the Empire behind.”

He said it himself that deep in his heart, he was a self-centered person with no sense of loyalty whatsoever.

This old man really was something. I had to keep it a secret, but I couldn’t help but feel some respect for him.

“That’s why, from now on, if Your Majesty could grant me the honor of even the lowest office among your followers, I will work my fingers to the bone!”

The guts he had to ask me to be my subordinate even though he had just stated that he had no loyalty. Yet, I didn’t dislike this sort of person. However, Benimaru and the others were listening to this conversation in the room next door. I had a feeling that Gadra’s attitude might anger them, so calming them down might be a bit difficult.

So after that…

I decided to hire Old Gadra on a temporary basis, treating him as a guest. Since he expressed his desire to be my subordinate, I intended to work him as hard as possible. I didn’t expect loyalty, but I did expect him to spare no effort.

For the time being, I brought him to meet Adalmann and also gave him permission to teleport to the 70th floor.

His knowledge would be honestly beneficial, so making him Ramiris’s assistant might’ve been a good idea. Prior to that, however, I planned to have him do a small task in the Empire.

Shinji and his team decided to stay and immigrate to Tempest. After taking some time off, they were going to decide about their line of work for the future.

It was the trio’s request following Gadra’s persistent pleas to take him in, so I had no reason to decline. Besides, it was clear to them that they would be permanently exiled if they betrayed me. They clearly didn’t want that to happen, and so they pledged their allegiance.

Nonetheless, the trio still held some respect for Yuuki and didn’t want to go against him. I didn’t think there would be any problems in that regard.

“We have a complicated relationship with Yuuki’s side. It’s like we are in somewhat of a ceasefire right now. To be honest, I want to get back at him for pissing me off so many times, but somehow, I can’t bring myself to hate him.”

He may be like that, but despite it all, he was one of Shizu-san’s students. When I remembered Shizu-san, who had happily talked to me about Yuuki, I couldn’t help but feel forgiving. I think I was being a bit naive, but it was also out of goodwill since we shared the same homeland. There wouldn’t be a next time, but for now, let’s put our differences and grudges on hold.

On the other hand, whether or not I could trust him was a different matter. If I had trusted that bastard, I would have ended up getting killed several times over.

“It would do all of you good to not trust Yuuki too much,” I warned them.

Gadra nodded for some reason; it seemed like he had something to say about this. I have an inkling that Yuuki and Gadra knew each other and had a cooperative relationship, so it was a good decision to bring Gadra into the fold, since he would serve as a good link to Yuuki.

I believed that I could trust Gadra due to the simple fact that he doesn’t blindly follow Yuuki.

Later on, I let Gadra meet Adalmann. They spent the rest of the time reminiscing about the old days, and it was clear that they missed each other.

Adalmann agreed to take Gadra in, so I left him in his care for the time being.

But before that…

After obtaining all the information I could from old Gadra, I ordered him to return to the Empire to carry out my plan. The first order of business was to promote an anti-war stance.

“So, are you okay with that?”

“Leave it to me. I’m used to acting behind the scenes.”

Well, yeah, I could’ve guessed as much. Though, normally it would be impossible for just one individual to stop something that the nation had decided to do. It wasn’t as though I didn’t believe in Gadra, but it’d be smarter to come up with a plan B, too.

“What I want the most is to stop the war,” I admitted, “but from what you’ve told me, that is looking very difficult. The Empire is a hegemonic power, right? If so, it will stop at nothing once it has been set in motion.”

“But…”

“That’s why I want to lure them into the labyrinth, when that happens.”

“What do you mean by that?”

If the battle took place inside the labyrinth, it wouldn’t really matter how much damage was done—that was what I explained to Gadra.

“Oh, I understand now. Your Majesty wants to weaken the military power of the Empire and reduce their will to fight.”

“Yup. Yuuki will most likely take advantage of this situation and stir up a mess in their homeland, the Empire won’t possibly be able to continue fighting after that.”

I wasn’t sure if it would go as smoothly as I had just described, but it was true that there wouldn’t be any damage if the battle took place inside the labyrinth.

Once I made this clear to Gadra, I gave him three Resurrection Bracelets and made-in-labyrinth equipment. We planned to use these as bait to entice people to enter the labyrinth. In military terms, getting attacked from the rear was truly nasty. It was hard to imagine them ignoring the labyrinth and marching towards the West, but if they had any incentive to seek out the treasures of the labyrinth…

“Ohh, I see! That is brilliant, Your Majesty. I’m familiar with a certain greedy commander, so Your Majesty’s plan will certainly come to fruition,” Gadra confidently replied.

If possible, stop the war—if not, then lure them into the labyrinth. Everything depended on Gadra’s skills.

Asylum for the four of them was granted at my discretion. And just like that, I had made some unexpected friends and brought an end to this small ruckus.