

Chapter 4

The Empire Strikes First

There lurked a man of many mysteries within the Empire. This man was Tatsuya Kondou, an otherworlder, and he knew every secret among its inner workings. He, indeed, was the darkness of the Imperial capital. His short black hair, with bangs gently flowing into his eyes, softened his otherwise tensive demeanor.

At first glance, he looked like a fine young man, someone in his early twenties. Beneath it all, however, his heart was cold. The eyes on his emotionless face glowed with a sharp light, as if piercing his enemies and seeing through all.

That was to be expected. Tatsuya Kondou, or First Lieutenant Kondou, didn’t look his age.

………

……

…

Here in the Imperial capital, otherworlders weren’t so rare. This was because the Empire had a policy of protecting otherworlders and gathered them in its capital from all over the world. This policy was what saved Tatsuya and so many others. This world had magic, and that was the reason why he had been saved.

Over 70 years ago…

Tatsuya put his life on the line for his country as he engaged in a suicide attack against the enemy’s naval strike fleet. He wasn’t one to argue the merits of that operation. Reflecting back on the situation, he had believed that it was the only way forward.

When he thought about his comrades who valiantly sacrificed their lives, he wished he could find meaning in what they did. This was the reason why Tatsuya would go on to always remember them. In order to let his comrades live within him—to never forget his memories of them—he stayed as a first lieutenant, which was his rank at that time.

He was racing towards his death as it came time for him to launch his suicide attack, but when he was engulfed in the blinding light and heat of the explosion, he somehow found himself in another world. He lived despite staring death straight in the eye.

The emperor himself was the one who saved him.

Fortune had smiled upon him that day.

Tatsuya appeared in a garden that only the emperor and a few close associates could enter. And as it happened, the emperor was relaxing there.

“Interesting. This must be a twist of fate.”

Those were the last words Tatsuya heard before his consciousness faded.

When he awoke, he realized that his body was devoid of any blemishes or scratches from before. Tatsuya’s luck had saved his life. So, in order to return the favor, he pledged the life he had once wasted to the emperor. The power he awakened from crossing worlds and facing death—Tatsuya dedicated it all to him. And to this day, that was the only thing he lived for. He never stepped into the spotlight. He didn’t grow old; in fact, he still looked exactly the same as the day he’d arrived. He resided in the darkness of the Empire—in other words, the Intelligence Headquarters, which lurked in the shadows of the Imperial capital.

The specter that fed on information.

The man who lurked in the shadow of the Empire.

The man who was accompanied by fiends.

A man of many names—that was First Lieutenant Kondou. He was the head of the Imperial Intelligence Agency. None of the corps commanders dared to make light of his existence, as they had never actually seen who he really was.

………

……

…

Gadra had sent Shinji and his team to conquer the Dungeon, and of course, the Imperial Intelligence Agency was well informed of this information.

First Lieutenant Kondou was a taciturn man. “Ah, thank you,” had been his brief remark and nothing more. The informants, accustomed to this, bowed and promptly left. The first lieutenant was not the kind of man to express his thoughts to other people.

The report contained detailed information about Yuuki’s subordinates. There were more than a thousand otherworlders gathered from every part of the world. Less than 10 percent of them did not awaken a Unique Skill. Those people were leading a peaceful life in the Empire’s capital. More than 10 percent had awakened a Unique Skill designed for combat. Over a hundred otherworlders chose to join the army corps that matched their individual characteristics. The rest of them were offered places of employment according to their specialties, where their work greatly varied.

This time, the subject was about the combat-type otherworlders. Yuuki Kagurazaka was the man who created the Freedom Association in the Western Nations. Until a year ago, he made full use of his power as the grandmaster to protect the otherworlders as best he could.

That was what Yuuki self-reported; yet, according to investigations, it was a lie. He buttered up the Rosso family and exploited their power. In the West, forbidden summonings of otherworlders were conducted. And from the investigation, there was a massive number of summoners who performed them. Otherwise, it was inconceivable that such a large number of people specialized in combat would appear. Moreover, it was possible to ensure the obedience of these summoned otherworlders through a curse. As such, summoning was the best way to prepare subordinates who would never betray their master.

Those otherworlders were scattered across each corps.

The alarming implications dawned on First Lieutenant Kondou. That insight was right on the mark; his mental acuity was terrifying, one might say. And as a matter of fact, his fears were justified. The results were evident in this report. Based on Yuuki’s words, deeds, and actions since moving to the Empire, it was determined that there was a huge probability of him staging a coup d’état. Furthermore, the people that Yuuki sent in had all been identified.

Thanks to his achievements, the Empire granted Yuuki asylum. Despite that, he didn’t appear to cherish the Empire’s kindness since he was making efforts to expand his influence as he pleased. He dispatched the people that became his followers to each of the army corps. And to top it all off, some of them were recruited by the glorious Imperial Knights.

The other corps weren’t that much of a concern, but harboring traitors among the Imperial Guardians, charged with protecting His Imperial Majesty, was beyond the pale. To First Lieutenant Kondou, this kind of situation wasn’t one to be overlooked.

How dangerous, Yuuki Kagurazaka—it seems like I must eliminate you.

First Lieutenant Kondou made up his mind, but now wasn’t the time; he had to wait a while longer before making his move.

Intel revealed that the archmage Master Gadra was connected to Yuuki. This information had been corroborated, but it remained unclear just how deep their relationship went. Needless to say, Master Gadra was an important figure to the Empire. Although it seemed unlikely for him to commit treason, Kondou knew that the reason why Master Gadra and the Empire had a cooperative relationship solely came down to his goals aligning with the principles of the Empire. Taking that at face value, it was conceivable that a conflict of interest might arise down the line.

In that case, that old man will also pose a significant threat. If so…

Yuuki and Gadra.

The former had the build of a young boy, yet his conduct indicated a far greater wealth of experience. Like with Kondou, it was dangerous to judge him by appearance alone.

The latter was an old man in appearance. In truth, he was a mysterious person who had been walking the earth for over a millennium. Challenging such a man required more than a half-hearted attempt.

This was the motivation behind why he gathered information. Evidence had been piling up, but it was still not enough. He couldn’t make any open moves just yet.

Each and every otherworlder under Yuuki’s care would be scrutinized with a fine-tooth comb. And then, they would be examined to see if any of them were dominated by the curse.

Nevertheless, if Yuuki or Gadra showed any unnatural signs, then…

“When that time comes, don’t expect a public trial,” First Lieutenant Kondou, the man who worked in the shadow of the Empire, had anything but mercy in store for traitors. “Dance for the Empire. Your lives are already in the palm of my hand.”

In the darkness of the Imperial capital, his eyes shone with a cold light as First Lieutenant Kondou muttered quietly to himself.

A one-eyed man sat in a posh chair in an office with a luxurious desk. He was a skinny man in his forties and wore an eyepatch over his left eye. His name was Calgurio, and he was the commander of the Armored Corps, which took pride in being the most powerful force within the Empire.

On the desk in front of him lay several magic crystals. These magic crystals, which were a source of magical energy, were of high purity and quality. Thanks to the technique Yuuki introduced, magic crystals could be refined into magic stones. By purifying the magic crystal extracted from the core of a monster, one could produce a magic stone, which could store magical energy.

There were also natural magic stones dropped by monsters. That said, these could only be extracted from individuals who possessed an enormous magicule content, such as A-ranked monsters and higher. Such natural magic stones were of incomparably high quality and were commonly used as ornaments or magic catalysts, rather than as fuel. Without a regular supply of them available, they had no value as an energy source.

Calgurio reached for the magic crystal on his desk and picked it up. The closer he examined it, the more readily apparent its brilliant quality became to him. With a heavy heart, he placed the magic crystal back down, longing for that sensation he felt while holding it. Reaching out, he instead grabbed the accompanying report that was delivered to him alongside the crystal. It was a summary of the research institute’s findings. With a magic crystal of this purity, a hundred Empire-made magic stones could be produced. It was so pure that it could even be converted into energy without further refinement. To collect samples this immaculate, one had to slay monsters of rank B or higher.

…That was what the report had concluded.

“Damn you, Gadra!” he erupted furiously. “Don’t you dare think you can hide this cash cow from me!”

He had paid off the research staff so that they would let him know when something amiss had happened, which led to this astonishing report.

Gadra had brought in these magic crystals fairly recently. It was unknown where he got them, but judging from the number, it could be surmised that he found a colony of monsters. Regardless, they were all first-class in quality and further testing showed that they contained roughly equal amounts of energy.

It wasn’t possible to harvest the same consistent quality from different kinds of monsters. The grade of the crystals would inevitably vary between them; consequently, it was necessary to refine and process them into magic stones.

On the contrary, the magic crystals before him were surprisingly uniform. This was a strong indication towards them stemming from a pack of monsters of the same race.

He doubted there was a possibility for them to domesticate whatever monsters produced these crystals, but thought that it would improve the energy situation of the Empire if they engaged in regular raids. However, it was apparently more complicated than that.

Calgurio’s face twisted with burning desire.

If we aim to acquire a sustainable supply of energy, it will be paramount for us to secure the place that produces these magic crystals, the report concluded.

Rather than listing possible locations where such a habitat may be found, they had already secured a fix on the precise location. That place being the Dungeon, rumored to be in the domain of Demon Lord Rimuru.

“Recently, he’s been so chummy with that runt, Yuuki, that he doesn’t even pay me a visit anymore. I can’t let you milk that golden cow all on your own and get away with it! That’s unforgivable!”

This was the cause of Calgurio’s foul mood.

As it would happen, that wasn’t even the end of it. Calgurio heard an interesting story from the high-class nobles whom he was friends with. They came over in great numbers, and, with wicked smiles on their faces, they relayed the information to him. According to their report, Gadra ventured out to investigate the labyrinth and lost three of his disciples while there.

Had that been all there was to it, then there would’ve been little more to do than pay their condolences. Yet, what Gadra brought back with him was the problem. Apparently, he didn’t only bring back the magic crystals, but some other loot, too.

The sword that Calgurio had displayed in his room was immaculate. It was made of high-quality, pure magisteel, and the forging technique spoke of a masterful craftsman. It was a magnificent sword, one that could rival those forged by the best craftsmen of the Dwarven Kingdom. No, if you considered the quality of the material, this one came out on top. The ones circulated within the Empire were a far cry from it.

The noblemen had brought with them swords of exquisite quality, which, after some consideration, Calgurio bought. One of the three swords was sent to his corps’ technical team for examination. ‘These are very rare items, and they may have some kind of mysterious effect, you know?’ the nobleman proudly presented them to Calgurio in the most grandiose and overblown fashion, in a transparent effort to sell them. This was despite the fact that these goods were offered to them by Gadra himself. When Calgurio asked them what Gadra’s demand was, they would feign indifference and reply with suspicious remarks like “Of course, we can’t answer that, can we?”

In the end, he purchased each sword for 100 gold coins, or 300 gold coins in total; regardless, there remained something in the back of his mind that bothered him. The fact that he was offered three swords eventually gave him a hint, but…

Calgurio was born a low-class noble but was able to climb the ranks all the way up to corps commander through his innate talent. The Empire was a society based on absolute meritocracy. Thus, Calgurio held a higher position than a regular high-class noble, whose standing was predicated on their social status. Under normal circumstances, merely speaking to a noble of high rank was unthinkable. But even for such a personage, being courteous to Calgurio was essential.

I know they are looking down on me deep inside, but that doesn’t matter. What’s important is how I get the most use out of them.

High-class nobles would be careful never to act without regard for their own interests. There was no way they told him such information with honest intentions; it was too good to be true.

Leaking Gadra’s words to Calgurio must have been carefully planned out by them. In other words, they were weighing their options between Yuuki and Calgurio.

“Those greedy nobles! Whatever, I’ve got to focus on Gadra now. How dare he tug on the nobles’ purse strings to make them suggest that the Mixed Corps should conquer the labyrinth! He should have referred my army instead… Didn’t expect him to still have a grudge against me for taking the Armored Corps from him…”

The Armored Corps was successfully modernized, thanks in part to Gadra’s help. In spite of the corps’ military force growing by ten to even a hundred times as a result, Gadra did not hold any authority to command it. Calgurio assumed that was the reason why he was jealous of him.

“Anyway, that can’t be helped. It was a godsend that I was able to get information from those nobles. This will allow me to get ahead of them and snatch the authority to raid the labyrinth for my army.”

Of course, greasing the palms of high-class nobles would cost him a pretty penny. And even if he were granted the authority, he would have to share a part of it with the nobles. But still, he didn’t think it was a bad deal.

The magic crystals aren’t the only thing the labyrinth has to offer. This sword is of excellent quality; it’s rare-grade, but it might evolve to unique-grade in a hundred years—maybe even sooner than that, seeing as it’s made of such fine magisteel. This alone should be enough of a reason to seize the labyrinth!

On this closing thought, Calgurio committed himself to winning over the nobles.

As Calgurio contemplated his future plans, there was a nagging question that kept bothering him.

What is this hole even for, anyway?

A high-class noble told him that it had a mysterious effect, but he probably just got that from Gadra. Despite Calgurio’s trained eye, he found nothing out of the ordinary. But nevertheless, that hole in the sword was remarkably peculiar.

What did it mean? Calgurio couldn’t come up with an answer.

Following that, he had sent it to his technical team. However, the analysis results were yet to be seen.

Well, unlike the West, the age of the sword has come to an end in the Empire, anyway.

So, no matter how valuable this sword might be, it would be of no significance to their modernized troops. Only highly skilled warriors could use this sword to its fullest. Indeed, that included Calgurio and his close associates.

On that note, he looked forward to the results of the appraisal.

A few days later…

Calgurio was astounded by the report that had come in.

“I will explain.” It was the director of the technology department himself who presented their findings. Scientific analysis of the sword revealed various facts. Most notably, the hole wasn’t merely decorative. It was an energy absorber and efficient medium for activating magic. In other words, it wasn’t a sword but a magic trigger.

“Demon Lord Rimuru, was it? Looking at this intriguing thing he’s come up with, that guy’s not to be taken lightly.”

“Indeed,” the director remarked. “This sword—or more broadly, weapon—is designed to mimic a melee weapon, and intended to catch an opponent off guard by launching a surprise attack from the magic it possesses.”

Right. The crux of this weapon was in defying common knowledge—allowing those without the ability to wield magic, to suddenly cast it.

“However,” the director inquired, “is it true that he got that from the labyrinth?”

“About that, there is proof. I sent some of my own people, and Gadra seems to have told the truth.”

Calgurio had also sent his men to the monster capital Rimuru to gather information about the labyrinth. Though investigating the inside of it became quite tricky around the 40th floor, they heard interesting stories from merchants and the like.

The slotted swords were discovered in the labyrinth. Although they fetched a high price, they were cheaper than unique-grade weapons.

“So, to what end are they going through all that trouble…?”

“Hmph!” Calgurio snorted. “Give it some thought, and it’ll become plain as day. We wouldn’t adopt a new weapon without conducting trial runs, now would we?”

The director of the technical department was smart, but he lacked tactical vision. With Calgurio’s brief explanation, he finally realized the merit behind what they did.

“Oooh, I see,” he exclaimed. “So, he’s been passing these on to a bunch of adventures to investigate the effects, you think? That’s certainly a reasonable approach. Upon inserting a magic stone into the slot, we found that the sword’s rank rose by a notch. It turned into a high-powered magic sword, but it seemed to have other functions, as well. To figure that out, various experiments would be necessary, thereby requiring a huge amount of time.”

“Yeah. He hands them out at random to let these individuals try them out. And once the experimental data has been produced, he’d surely want to aggregate all of it,” Calgurio mused.

He understood Rimuru’s intentions, to a certain extent. And experience had taught him that these kinds of experiments were time-consuming. At present, this sword was only in the experimental stage. However, it would be dangerous to let him perfect it.

Humans were a peculiar bunch; some of them could intuit the nature of things in the spur of the moment. This intuition tended to be sharpest among those that walked into the line of fire.

“That is clever,” Calgurio muttered, “performing human experiments by putting them into a labyrinth without a chance of death.”

“They say you need this ‘bracelet’ if you don’t wish to die, but how that could be possible still remains a mystery after analyzing it. If the rumor is true, then military training should be a breeze,” the director said, taking out a small, tightly sealed box, and presenting it to Calgurio. Inside the box, one of the treasures that Gadra brought, the Resurrection Bracelet, was stored.

“Of course,” Calgurio pondered, “it is questionable information. However, if my army could seize that labyrinth…”

If this rumor turned out to be true, it meant a huge achievement.

“Oooh, you are indeed an ambitious man, Calgurio-sama. Will you go so far as to wage war against a demon lord?”

“Of course I will. Pointlessly picking a fight with him would be a poor idea, but as things stand, the Great Jura Forest is en route to our invasion. Not to mention, that labyrinth is something we cannot ignore. Someone has to do it.”

“Fufufu, you’re using smooth words to smooth the way, I see.”

Calgurio and the director of the technology department laughed together.

“We can secure a stable supply of magic crystals and an efficient proving ground. And if things go smoothly, the enemy’s new weapons will be ours, too.”

“Then, the Armored Corps must conquer it under your command, Calgurio-sama, before the other divisions get the chance.”

“That goes without saying. I suggest you look forward to it,” Calgurio assured him with a gentle smile.

“However,” the director chuckled, “it seems the old man has become senile.”

“Couldn’t agree more. He was so dazzled by the magic crystals that he failed to recognize the more important things—the labyrinth, its treasures, as well as the ability of the swords.”

“It’s the downside of solely relying on magic,” Calgurio added in agreement. “Weapons that change rank such as this are unheard of.”

Gadra was an outstanding man, but the winds of change were blowing, heralding the end of the age of magic. This new wind—science—blew in and integrated with magic, setting the stage for a new era.

That’s why I am the best person to lead the Armored Corps. That old man as well, I would respect him if he just remained quiet. But if he allied with Yuuki then there’s no need to go easy on him.

Calgurio began to formulate a strategy in his mind. Antagonizing several demon lords would be an ill-fated approach, however, concentrating solely on Demon Lord Rimuru would be a cinch. Along with that, the Storm Dragon was their designated target—the Empire had sought its subjugation for the longest time. Calgurio intended to subdue the Storm Dragon with his newly developed weapons.

To that end, a little sacrifice would be well worth the cost… And yet, Gadra’s stubborn refusal on the matter had driven a wedge between the two of them—one so great, that it ultimately caused them to part ways.

Hmph! If we can subjugate that evil dragon, then even a slime demon lord will be no match for us. Now, I will show everyone that we are the strongest army in the Empire!

The time has come—Calgurio was filled with excitement. He would bring Gadra down a peg or two and cement an unshakeable position in the Empire. To do just that, he needed a crowning achievement under his belt. Therefore, it was paramount for the Armored Corps to subjugate the evil dragon and conquer the labyrinth. And for that to happen…

“At the next Imperial conference, I will propose a march,” Calgurio declared.

“Oh, finally…”

“Mmh,” Calgurio nodded in agreement.

We should not give that demon lord time to prepare. That reason should suffice to silence the opposition. Oh Gadra, I won’t let you steal a march from under my nose. And that brat, are you on cloud nine now that you have Gadra on your side? I’m going to show you your place.

Calgurio mocked his idiotic colleague—the fool who had the chance to grasp critical information, but let it slip without even realizing it.

After all, he is but a foolish upstart, Calgurio firmly believed.

He was incessantly brooding, even while scorning his colleague.

How can I reap the greatest benefit? Lost in thought, Calgurio compiled the contents of his proposal to the emperor.

Calgurio’s hand would awaken the Empire once more.

The Imperial conference was about to start. This time, the situation was unusual, given that the military officers present were rather tense, to say nothing of the civil servants. Perhaps sensing this atmosphere, people unrelated to the meeting didn’t dare approach the conference hall.

This meeting was on a different level. Everyone sensed it.

The attendees lowered their heads as the entrance of the emperor was announced. The silhouette of a person could be made out behind a bamboo blind. That person was the unifying emperor, Rudra Nam Ul Nasca. He stood at the pinnacle of the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire—the strongest military power in the world. His figure was hidden on the other side of the bamboo blind, as were his true intentions, which were never revealed to anyone. A supreme existence, which none except close associates had ever seen, intimidated the people in the conference with his mere presence emanating from behind the blind. Peerless and absolute. Only a tiny handful of people could express their opinion to the emperor.

There were nearly 200 people assembled in the conference room. The Three Commanders—the commanders of each of the military corps—and their adjutants. Neatly lined up, were the elites of the Imperial Guardians. And lastly, the cabinet ministers, who administered the government of the country, as well as the Great House of Peers, which was the Eastern Empire’s backbone.

Eminent figures gathered and lowered their heads.

Only the rustle of clothes echoed through the quiet hall—until even that sound disappeared.

On cue, the prime minister motioned to the ceremonial officer.

“His Imperial Majesty the Emperor has arrived!”

In response, everyone greeted him in unison. It was their chorus of shouts that broke through the silence. Thus began the Imperial conference, which would go down in history as weighing the benefits of their great expedition.

………

……

…

The Imperial conference opened solemnly. Opinions were split on the great expedition. Regarding the war, the first faction wished for it to be fast and decisive, while the other advocated for a more cautious approach.

First of all, under what pretext would we start this war?

What a stupid question.

We will invade because it is what the emperor wishes, simple as that.

Is that possible?

Those were the dividing lines this conference was stirring over. Between those who advocated caution and those who insisted frontal invasion. And the civil servants who were adamant about first launching diplomatic negotiations that included recommendations of surrender and the pressure of threats.

If the emperor willed the coming of war, there would be no room for dispute. However, an imperial order had not yet been given, and so the assembly proceeded according to each person’s intentions.

Starting the war was just a matter of time. So the problem wasn’t when, it was how.

The demon lords who ruled distant lands were also a hindrance, but as long as their territory wasn’t violated, they wouldn’t take action. The hurdle to overcome was Veldora, the Storm Dragon. Therefore, the focus of discussion ended up on the Great Jura Forest.

One person voiced opposition to the war. “With all due respect, Your Majesty, I am against this.” It was the archmage of the Empire—Master Gadra. He had openly and fearlessly offered his opinion to the emperor.

“What a cowardly thing to say! You’re still going on about that, Gadra-dono?” laughed one of the Three Commanders—the commander of the Armored Corps, Calgurio.

This happened every time. The two represented the cautious faction and the belligerent faction.

“The West would easily crumble if we struck them. However, the evil dragon Veldora dwells within the Great Jura forest. It was only two years ago that its revival was made certain, so of course we must be cautious!” one of the sympathetic voices agreed. It was also joined by scoffs calling Gadra soft.

In the 300 years that had passed since the Veldora disaster, the memory of its terror had faded. Now, the belligerent opinions were becoming the majority, squeezing Gadra’s side between a rock and a hard place.

Taking up on this, Calgurio spoke feverishly. “Master, there’s something to be learned from your cautious attitude. Nonetheless, as I have assured you many times, the countermeasures against Veldora are flawless. With our new weapons, we can subdue that evil dragon!”

“You’re ridiculous! Stop living in an illusion, Calgurio-dono. As long as the possibility of it failing cannot be denied, we must, naturally, exercise caution. Not to mention, a new demon lord has risen to power in that forest! Although it is known that the demon lords do not cooperate with one another, it is still unwise to deliberately antagonize one. That evil dragon was revived and seems to have joined hands with the newcomer, Demon Lord Rimuru. Dealing with a demon lord through mutual inviolability is the tried-and-true approach!”

One possible route would lead through the Valley of Death, which was connected to the former territory of Clayman, as it allowed for large armies to pass through. They did not, however, wish to venture into Demon Lord Milim’s domain, which lay beyond it, thus discarding that option. Marching across fertile ground would be significantly faster, but that said, incurring the wrath of Demon Lord Milim was too great of a price to pay. Likewise, passing through the Great Jura Forest would allow them to reach the West. But now Veldora, the Storm Dragon, had returned and was allied with Demon Lord Rimuru.

“There is no reason to make more enemies,” Gadra insisted, receiving nods from several civil servants. On the other side, Calgurio gave a scornful laugh and posed the question: “Well then Gadra-dono, are you saying that we should give up on pursuing the Empire’s dearest wish?”

Taking the route through the Great Jura Forest off the table would cripple their options in terms of dispatching a large army towards the West. Calgurio’s concern was picked up by the army circle on those grounds.

“Calgurio-dono is right. Master, even demon lords pose no threat in the face of the great Imperial army!”

“You’re being insolent before His Imperial Majesty! Gadra-dono, do you intend to defy the emperor’s will?!”

“Nay!” Gadra shouted and refuted the objection. “Come to think of it, rather than fighting a demon lord, it would be wiser to get the cooperation of the Dwarf King. There won’t be any casualties, and it will be easier to conquer the West!”

However, there was someone who laughed at Gadra’s assertion.

“You are being ridiculous, Gadra-dono. The Dwarf King is a master swordsman and a man of great honor. His predecessors were champions as well, and he is exceptionally skilled. His companions are also famous champions. They would be tougher opponents than the newcomer demon lord. As much as I’d like to test their abilities in a match, that’s not our main concern. What I’m saying is that instead of fighting against champions, the optics of subjugating a demon lord are far preferable in the public eye!”

This interjection came from none other than one of the Three Commanders. He was the commander of the Magic Beast Corps, Beast King Gladium. As he merely rose from his seat, the air was heavy with an overwhelming sense of intimidation. Rightly so, for the dignity of a king.

Gladium also ruled over the magical beasts by force. He was one of the best warriors in the Empire and a highly skilled military commander, holding the rank of general. It was said that he was the second strongest man in the Empire. Gladium was not, in fact, a Single Digit but a Double Digit, but his strength led him to become a corps commander early in his career. Owing to his privilege of being freed from participating in the ranked duels, he took pride in claiming to be the strongest. That was why Gladium didn’t have any conflicting emotions towards the Marshal, who was considered to be stronger than him.

It was rumored that he descended from the Beastmen clan, but the authenticity of that rumor was uncertain. Gadra didn’t get along with him as he was the type of person who acted not on logic but on instinct.

“Ah, Gladium-dono, that comparison is wrong,” Gadra replied. “What I’m saying is that we should make King Gazel our ally!”

“You fool,” Gladium shot back. “If you mean to absorb the Dwarven Kingdom at the same time, I understand what you are saying. After all, crushing every fool in defiance of imperial rule would be enough. However! What is your plan? You think of your nonsense as a reason to hold back our forces that are fully ready to march!”

“What kind of drivel is that! You already know that the Dwarven Kingdom is a natural fortress, right? Taking it by force would be—”

“Silence!” Beast King Gladium roared. “Complaining in the presence of His Imperial Majesty—no wonder why you were dismissed from being a corps commander!”

That was, indeed, the truth. Until about 30 years ago, the Magic Corps commanded by Gadra were part of the Empire’s three great armies. Now, however, the best and brightest from the corps had been transferred to the technology department and elsewhere.

That was because the so-called magic relied on talent. To begin with, you could not control magic without possessing magical power. No amount of effort could replace it, thereby softly limiting their numbers. Although it was useful in combat, weapons had been developed to replace magic.

One was a small magic weapon—the spell gun. Using magic stones as the energy source, the magic circle engraved into the gun barrel would activate. It was a weapon by which anyone could use magic. While it fell short in being limited to only a single kind of magic, its effectiveness spoke for itself.

For close combat, there was the Imperial magic saber. It worked on the same principle as the spell gun and was one of the small magic weapons with weapon-strengthening magic applied. It was because of this item that the technical team realized the purpose of the slotted weapons from the labyrinth. They all reached the same conclusion—in other words, they had to be right.

Now that magic could be manipulated in spite of the absence of talent, the Magic Corps had become obsolete. It was a sorrowful event for Gadra as it marked the end of the magic era.

“Ha-ha-ha, Master,” another person sneered at Gadra. “You’ve grown old. Your knowledge of magic is a treasure to the Empire. While I owe you my gratitude for your help in developing new kinds of magic weapons for my Armored Corps, as Gladium said, your remark just now was lamentable. It feels like you are scared,” Calgurio smirked contemptuously.

Stifled laughs escaping from the House of Peers and the army circle could be heard.

“Do all of you even understand? That evil dragon ruling over the storm is the most powerful species in this world.”

“It is you who does not understand, Old Master. The Imperial army of today is different from before. We have learned the knowledge of many otherworlders and gained a technological system—science—different from our own. Thanks to this new technology, the Empire’s military strength has increased tenfold over the previous generation. An old-fashioned mage like yourself can’t keep up in modern warfare. A quiet retirement in the grace of His Imperial Majesty is all that you should hope for now.”

“H-how dare you?!” Gadra cried out with indignation, but in reality, he was just faking it. To begin with, Gadra had already surrendered to Demon Lord Rimuru. He tried his best to advocate against the path of war. That said, the ultimate outcome did not concern him.

These guys are really pathetic. Science indeed produced wonderful knowledge, but even the Sorcerer’s Dynasty Sarion had their own secret knowledge: magic science. On top of that, His Majesty Rimuru also used to be an otherworlder. I don’t know how far this military strength, which guarantees the supremacy of the Empire, could go…

Now that he knew about Tempest—about Rimuru—Gadra doubted the victory of the Empire. It wasn’t that he wished misfortune to befall his former associates, and on top of that, he also felt indebted towards His Imperial Majesty. So, he was trying his best to deter them from war, but if he failed… Well, he would cross that bridge when he got there.

From what he could tell, Yuuki seemed to be gearing up towards staging a coup d’état and planned to capture the emperor, assassinate him, even. Considering his goal was to rule the world, a powerful leader was nothing but a hindrance. In the old days, Gadra would have left him to his own devices. But now that the very reason for war had disappeared, Gadra could no longer tolerate Yuuki’s ways, which threatened to plunge the world into chaos.

Well, I don’t know what will happen after this, but any further advice would be meaningless. In that case, the next step is to carry out His Majesty Rimuru’s order—drawing the attention of the Imperial army to the dungeon.

Gadra quietly steeled his resolve. Then he turned his eyes to Yuuki, who still remained silent.

Calgurio took Gadra’s silence as an admission of defeat. Gadra’s Magic Corps had been disbanded, followed by internal restructuring of the military. The subsequent treatment of Gadra was nothing more than an honorary position, serving as the technical advisor to the Armored Corps. Having said that, his heroic might was well known, and he probably even retained more influence than Calgurio.

It was also Gadra’s own decision to recommend that boy Yuuki to be a corps commander. What a pain.

Calgurio was not amused. Archmage Gadra—that champion had now become old. Still, Calgurio held his grand achievements in high regard and didn’t think he should be disrespected…

Hah, in the end, he is a person of the past. Now, he’s just an orthodox old man causing trouble, huh?

With the passing of time, the war effort steadily increased. And those who couldn’t keep up with that progress were left in the dust—unmistakably, that’s where Gadra now belonged as well.

The Empire entered a new era. The new three great army corps were unlike anything seen before.

………

……

…

First, the Armored Corps commanded by Calgurio. It was the largest military force in the Empire and represented a fusion of otherworld science, technology, and magic. The total number of troops that could be mobilized exceeded 2 million. However, that is including the standing forces in various parts of the Empire, meaning the number of troops who could immediately take military action was, in effect, about 1 million. But even so, it was still an abnormally large army, unthinkable one hundred years ago.

Next, the Magic Beast Corps commanded by Gladium. DNA analysis, an otherworld technology, had made it possible to nurture and raise magic beasts. The training of these monsters lay at the core of this corps. Nurturing magic beasts had been impossible with the conventional knowledge of the past. They realized the potential and committed to further efforts to tame them. By doing so, the tenacious magic beasts became beast knights.

The champions of the Empire spurred the magic beasts in battle. The new generation of champions analyzed the blood of the champions who had been active since ancient times and made their power their own. They were born strong. By awakening the power in their blood, the Magic Beast Corps became a legion consisting of only champions.

It was said that a fleeting 1 in 100,000 had the talent to join this corps, making it the smallest with only 30,000 soldiers. Nevertheless, their beast knights were magic beasts ranked A-minus and above, and their strength as a human-monster union was impossible to gauge. Despite numbering only 30,000 members, they were the most powerful elite force the Empire had to offer.

Last but not least, the Mixed Corps commanded by Yuuki. This division was a hodgepodge, but had a lot of potential. It was a den of misfits, singled out due to their inability to cooperate in groups—at least, that was how the public perceived them. But on a closer look, that was hardly accurate. The reason why the corps members could not coordinate well with others was because of the fact that each and every one of them possessed extraordinary abilities. So outstanding were their abilities, in fact, that managing those guys was difficult. Many of its members were otherworlders whose potential was completely unknown. Due to various experiments that were being carried out inside the corps, there were also individuals who awoke powers beyond belief that could not be reproduced—they became magic beasts, boasting strength beyond A rank. While troublesome to control, they were outstanding warriors. Among them were also human weapons that obtained their power from unknown sources, and as such, many products of experiments were gathered under that banner.

In the past, they were simply being managed and kept in line, but now with Yuuki as their leader, the corps suddenly emerged as an extraordinarily powerful trump card within the army.

The total number of soldiers was around 200,000, half of which were officers and non-combatant staff, leaving around 100,000 troops that made up the actual combat force. Within it was also a hand-picked platoon of elite members that worshipped Yuuki. These individuals became the pillars of the Mixed Corps.

………

……

…

These were the three new grand army corps of the Empire. Together, they were a force to be reckoned with. As soon as the emperor issued the edict, 1,130,000 troops would start military operations.

At present, the Imperial Intelligence Bureau estimated the total military strength of the Western Nations to be less than 1 million. Looking at it in terms of soldiers who could potentially be mobilized, the Western Nations were looking at an underwhelming 400,000—if they were lucky. On top of that, since it was deemed unlikely that efforts to cooperate among the Western Nations would succeed, they concluded that it was unrealistic to expect comprehensive military action from the West.

Against those 400,000 disorderly soldiers, the number of Imperial elites exceeded 1 million. You could say that it was an exceedingly overwhelming military force, the core of which was the Armored Corps of Calgurio. This time, he intended to handpick the best military force to do the job. The breakdown of the 1 million soldiers to be mobilized within his corps was as follows:

• Augmented Legion: the main force.

These were soldiers who had adopted the otherworldly technology and underwent magical modifications. Their individual combat capability was at least C-plus-ranked, and the elite among them even reached rank A. There were 700,000 of them, an unrivaled division.

• Magic Tank Division: a decisive weapon in battle.

It possessed 2,000 magic tanks, a new weapon they had put into practical use. The magic tank, which was operated by five people, was an unprecedented war machine that revolutionized the understanding of battle. The main armament of the tanks, named magic gun, had an initial velocity of 2,000 meters per second. It had a 50-round capacity and could fire five rounds per minute. Its power was tremendous, being able to unleash destruction equivalent to tactical-class super-high explosive magic. Incidentally, although this was fired based on magic principles, the shell itself was a simple lump of iron. It was a formidable kinetic projectile that could easily penetrate through both anti-magic barriers and anti-archer defenses.

Such tremendous power, formerly exclusive to wizards—rare elites—could now be wielded by the hands of ordinary soldiers. Beyond that, when it came to the difficulty of defending against them, the implications were endless. The number of troops, including the maintenance team, was 200,000, and the more tanks they had, the stronger they were.

• Air Assault Division: the highly classified weapon.

They had 400 airships and were the pride of the Empire, the fruit of the otherworldly knowledge. Each craft could carry a maximum of 400 passengers. Of them, 50 were vital maintenance crew required to operate the ship, while the remaining crew would be engaged in defensive magic or gunning. It was equipped with a large number of magically enhanced guns, making it an excellent warship for both offense and defense.

It was also useful as a means of transportation. In this day and age, it could be said that there was “no concept of air supremacy.” Since anti-aircraft precautions didn’t yet exist, it was possible to transport a large number of troops while the enemy was off guard. With the use of airships, it became easy to spring a pincer move on an enemy, attacking them from both sides.

This, too, was an invention that revolutionized tactical theory. The division numbered 100,000 troops, most of which belonged to the former Magic Corps.

With such military might, Calgurio felt that they were unbeatable. For example, the strength of an average knight in this world, depending on the size of the country, was at most C rank. They had to be armed to the teeth, covered in armor, and trained rigorously—all that only to have a slim shot at reaching B rank.

The Armored Corps, on the other hand, performed magical modifications on its members if they so desired. For those who were found to be highly compatible through medical examination, they would have to undergo semi-compulsory augmentation procedures. As a result, they had succeeded in raising the army corps’ combat capabilities exponentially. The same applied to the various soldiers scattered across the Empire. Thus, it gave Calgurio ample reason to believe that the solid foundation of the Empire could never be shaken.

In addition, he planned to spare no reserve for this great expedition, gathering all magic tanks and airships they could muster. In both quality and quantity, these soldiers would overwhelm even an alliance of all other nations. On top of that, they had a number of new weapons they were going to unveil.

Calgurio held a sincere conviction that the Armored Corps was the only way they could demonstrate the might of the Empire to the world. With an army of this might, be it Veldora or a demon lord, there is nothing to fear! My army alone can conquer the world! With such confidence in heart, Calgurio observed Gadra. That was when he noticed: Gadra had fixed his eyes on Yuuki for a while now, and then Yuuki spoke up out of the blue.

“I also agree that ol’ Gadra is being too prudent. From my perspective, you are overly cautious of the Storm Dragon. As Commander Calgurio said, we can take care of him with the current Imperial army, don’t you think?”

It was the first time Yuuki spoke at this Imperial conference. The fact that his opinion was in line with his own made Calgurio wary. This brat, are you volunteering to conquer the labyrinth? You think I wouldn’t notice? You’re so naive! It is of utmost importance to be well-informed if you ever want to assume the important role of a commander! Even while having this thought, Calgurio smiled graciously towards Yuuki.

There was one exception, namely Gladium, but that was only because of his extraordinary strength propelling him to where he was. Calgurio had always regarded Yuuki as an adversary, insisting that it was still too early for him to be a corps commander.

Concealing his inner feelings, Calgurio began spinning his rhetoric. “Amazing, Yuuki-dono. Indeed, an up-and-coming young man such as yourself has exceptional vigor.”

“Well, I still have a long way to go. More importantly, in my opinion, even if we are going to war, we still need to investigate, don’t we? To get out of the Great Jura Forest, we need to pass through the dominion of Demon Lord Rimuru. And by the way, I heard an interesting story about how this capital of the demon lord can escape, buildings and all, into the labyrinth.”

“Oh, a labyrinth?” Calgurio wondered, feigning ignorance.

“Yeah,” Yuuki said, pleased to elaborate. “To be precise, a dungeon. I don’t know what the reason is, but allegedly the capital city could vanish from the face of the earth, leaving nothing but a very large gate above ground.”

Humph, how foolish. I suppose you’re going to offer to investigate the labyrinth and then steal the authorization to conquer it, but…that would be mighty presumptuous.

Calgurio chuckled to himself.

“Huh, are you sure that information is correct?” someone asked, followed by several others.

“If what you said is true, then we can’t ignore the dungeon. They might attack from the rear after the army passes through.”

“You’re right. If the West isn’t stupid, they’ve probably fortified a defensive line. If our supply chain were to be cut off by the demon lord’s army, our troops would be in a bind.”

“Then, passing the Great Jura Forest will be dangerous.”

Those who heard Yuuki’s remarks began to express their opinions freely. Yuuki also looked cheerful, probably because it was just what he wished.

“There’s no doubt about the credibility of the information,” Yuuki affirmed, having waited for the right moment. “After all, ol’ Gadra went to the labyrinth himself and looked into the matter for us! It was because Old Master Gadra saw Demon Lord Rimuru with his own eyes that he deemed him to be a threat. Also, he caught wind of a rumor during his stay. It has been claimed that the labyrinth spans up to 100 floors underground, and that the guardian of the 100th floor is none other than the Storm Dragon Veldora himself. It was a baseless rumor. However, the investigation was interrupted due to casualties in the 60th underground level. It is said that even the Hero Masayuki had not yet conquered that level, so it seems that said level is equivalent to A-plus in terms of difficulty. Regardless of which route we’ll take to attack the West, investigation is essential,” he concluded, setting aside his usual aloof attitude and assuming a serious tone.

“The casualties are…”

“That’s regrettable to hear. I understand your sentiment, Yuuki-dono.”

“Conducting an investigation should be trivial. Why don’t we leave this to the Mixed Corps?”

Hearing the nobles chime in like that began to make Calgurio’s blood boil. Tsk, bribed imbeciles! Yuuki you shrewd bastard. You should’ve become a politician, not a corps commander.

Even those who were not paid off seemed to agree with Yuuki’s sincere attitude. This provoked Calgurio, making him raise his voice.

“Please wait!” he shouted, as he rose from his seat.

Then, he bowed once to the emperor beyond the bamboo blind.

“Your Imperial Majesty! Master Gadra and Yuuki-dono appear to be deathly afraid of Veldora, but I am not. Needless to say, that applies to the West as a whole! It is my desire to give Your Imperial Majesty peace of mind, so by all means, order my humble self to dominate! Then I, Calgurio, will risk my life to deliver!”

Calgurio’s speech to the emperor shocked everyone in the room. Speaking directly to the emperor was a woefully imperious thing to attempt.

“What the! How dare you do such an outrageous thing?!”

“You know that’s unforgivable, Calgurio-dono!”

“Calgurio, are you stealing a march from me? Your Imperial Majesty, my Magic Beast Corps is also ready to go into battle at any time. By all means, order us to go into battle as well!”

At this point, even Gladium presented his corps.

As if in panic, Yuuki followed up: “Then, please entrust the investigation to the Mixed Corps!”

As Yuuki stood up, the Three Commanders bowed together.

Now that it had come to this, only the emperor could suppress the situation.

…No. There was one other person.

She stood up on the other side of the bamboo blind and laughed charmingly—the supreme commander of the Imperial army, the Marshal.

“Be quiet, you foolish ones. You are in the presence of Rudra-sama.”

To address the emperor by his name was a reckless action that no ordinary person would ever be allowed to commit. And here the one who calmly did just that was the one person who was awarded the rank of marshal.

In the Empire, the word “marshal” was synonymous with the strongest. Only a handful of her associates knew who she really was. Her name remained unknown to the public, and it was said that she always stayed by the Emperor’s side to protect him.

At the word of someone carrying that lofty rank, the room fell silent once more. As they prostrated themselves all at once, a voice rang out from above.

“What is it with Veldora? He interrupted our last great expedition, but did it shake the Empire?”

“ “ “No ma’am!” ” ”

“Of course, for this Empire carries the blessing of His Great Majesty.”

“ “ “Yes ma’am!” ” ”

An atmosphere, which while not overpowering, was something no one could defy, dominated the room.

“Yuuki, was it?” the Marshal asked. “You’ve been in the Empire less than a year, but your achievements are impressive. However, you are cowardly. Too cowardly. Do you know why the Empire has not made a move since Veldora’s resurrection?”

“It’s because we were not ready—” Yuuki, confused why this was brought up out of the blue, tentatively gave her a safe answer.

The Marshal, however, laughed scornfully. “Wrong. It’s because of the foolish ones who are trapped by their fear of the past, giving all sorts of reasons just to escape. Isn’t that right, Gadra?”

“Ye-yes ma’am!”

Deep down, everyone knew that was true. And even Gadra couldn’t deny it. It was true that he did not discuss whether or not they could win against the Storm Dragon and carried on being adamant about avoidance. He had no room to object.

But what’s the matter with her? Why is she so impatient now?

Gadra was one of the few people that knew the Marshal’s true face. That’s why he felt that the Marshal, who had always remained aloof, was somewhat impatient. But he could not question that here. Without knowing why, a vague sense of unease had crept up on him.

The Marshal continued pressing questions. “Don’t you think it is highly unlikely that negotiating with Dwarf King Gazel would go smoothly? I don’t think you do not understand that, so why are you insisting? Or were you more stupid than I thought? Perhaps, don’t tell me you are trying to impede the Empire’s supremacy?”

Her cold voice sent a chill down Gadra’s spine. Has she caught on to me? It’s…incredible, Gadra thought. He had served the Empire for a long time, even once as an adviser to the emperor himself. Despite that, Gadra cowered in front of the Marshal. Come to think of it… I don’t even know her name… Gadra was trusted and most certainly invaluable—but that might have been nothing more than his own delusion. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. And for the first time, he started to doubt what the Empire, or rather, who the emperor, really was.

Ignoring Gadra, the Marshal turned her attention to Calgurio. “So, Calgurio. You think you can win, don’t you?”

“Yes ma’am! That is most assured, Your Excellency!”

“Right. Then tell me your plan.”

“Tha-that’s…”

Calgurio’s bravado was overwhelmed by the Marshal’s dominance. It dawned on him that planning an attack through sheer numbers was too childish of a proposal. More importantly though, he had devised a plan against the Storm Dragon. It was something he had carefully laid out over the years. He wasn’t afraid of Veldora. At the end of the day, he’s still a dragon, right?

Indeed, the dragons that nested in the Canaat Mountains were all strong monsters. The lesser dragons that inhabited the foot of the mountains would be easy to handle, but those that had grown into fair dragons would have a strength of A rank or higher. And if they turned into archdragons with elemental attributes, they would become dangerous threats to a small country.

In the case of the Empire, however, it was possible to defeat them by simply dispatching a battalion of about five hundred troops from the Augmented Legion. These soldiers had subjugated dragons several times in military exercises, and as long as they made no mistakes, they could handle the encounter without serious damage. That was testament to the greatness of the Empire. It was within their power as a nation to support tens of thousands of soldiers. Not even a horde of dragons could jeopardize the Empire’s military.

Calgurio perceived Veldora as another type of dragon. Thus, he arrived at the conclusion: What is there to fear from a single dragon?

The strength of a monster was determined by the amount of magicules it possessed, and that held true no matter how powerful it was. Dragons were strong because they had enormous magicule reserves in proportion to their mass. High defenses and breath attacks that could exterminate large areas—they possessed such powerful abilities thanks to their overwhelming magicule capacity.

Taking that to be the case, there was no need to fight them head-on.

Calgurio and his men had a secret plan. The magic canceler—a new top-secret technology they were developing. Using magic to weaken a dragon wasn’t a sure-fire success. Depending on the dragon, such an attempt could be nullified by its ‘Magic Interference.’ But all of that became moot with the introduction of this new technology. The radiation emitted from a magic canceler directly affected the substance called magicules. It could not manipulate the magicules in a directed manner, but instead made these particles’ behavior erratic. In other words, it had the effect of making magicules go haywire.

When used against a mage, it would inhibit the ability to chant, and by extension, the ability to cast magic. When used against a monster, it would disrupt the magicules that made up its body, restraining the ability to act. In short, it weakened their bodies. A successful attack would render a monster totally disabled. This would be especially effective against a dense mass of magicules like Veldora. Calgurio had built his confidence upon this belief.

The second ace up their sleeve was the magic tank. Its magic gun packed a serious punch, able to fell a huge magic beast with a single shot. Experiments performed on dragons they captured showed that even those ranked A could be killed in one hit.

Next up are their treasured airships. The secret weapons described as the culmination of magical technology. Able to reach top speeds exceeding Mach 1, they were impossible to outrun for any flesh and blood creature.

Calgurio devised a strategy against Veldora as follows:

Fast-moving soldiers would lure out Veldora and pin him down by activating the magic cancelers placed in the forest. As a follow-up, the airships would then focus the rays of their magic cancelers on Veldora to immobilize him completely. And then, for the finishing blow: volley fire from the magic guns mounted on 2,000 magic tanks. With this, surely, even that ancient, evil dragon would meet its demise.

Let’s say it did survive… No matter how strong these True Dragons are, there is no way it could make it out unscathed.

Gathering intelligence was key to increasing your odds during a battle. With all of the dragons they had buried came a wealth of information. Calgurio had absolute confidence in their chances of victory.

However, when he was going to explain it to the Marshal, he became reserved in his speech.

“T-that’s why we will deploy the tank division and then lure the evil dragon there…”

Since he believed that the sheer amount of resources at his disposal guaranteed their victory, he held off on finalizing the details of their strategy until they arrived on site.

Even if the roads were unusable, their tanks had no issues cutting straight through the forest. Apparently, there was also a road leading up to the Dwarven Kingdom, one they had heard was wide enough to accommodate a tank with ease. He also estimated that deploying the tanks wouldn’t pose any hurdles, but answering to the Marshal with vague statements was unacceptable.

I was so focused on strengthening our military power that I neglected to investigate the location. That’s where I messed up, huh… Calgurio had to face the bitter reality.

“How incompetent. It appears you have gravely misunderstood: what are you going to do after destroying Veldora?”

“Huh?” Calgurio blurted unconsciously, unable to process the question.

The Marshal stared at Calgurio coldly.

“Why do you presume that the Empire did nothing even though Veldora was sealed all this time?”

“T-that’s because our preparations weren’t…”

“Wrong, you foolish one. It was because we are waiting for that child, Veldora, to be revived to properly settle it with him once and for all. And then make His Imperial Majesty’s might known far and wide. To that end, what were you planning to do once we had destroyed Veldora? Only by defeating and controlling him will the Empire’s victory be sealed!”

Her words resounded in the quiet conference hall.

Everyone was overcome by a feeling that gripped their hearts, an emotion that was neither fear nor awe.

Gadra shuddered as well.

This is crazy, is she serious about that? Didn’t I make it clear that ‘Mental Control’ isn’t going to work? Yet… And yet, there was something strangely persuasive about the Marshal’s words. There was something about them that made him doubt the impossibility of it all.

Upon feeling it, an inexplicable fear washed over Gadra.

Right, now that I think about it, it sure is strange… Who is the Marshal? I have met her, and yet I never found it suspicious that I do not know her name…

A fact that Gadra was strangely reluctant to accept now loomed over him. It was his suspicion that maybe the Marshal was an exceptionally skilled user of ‘Mental Control,’ surpassing even himself, the archmage of the Empire.

It was no longer a mere doubt, as his certainty grew by the minute.

Gadra opened his eyes and gazed intently at the bamboo blind. A delicate silhouette appeared to be visible—a shape beyond the most eldritch of horrors imaginable to Gadra. Caught up in the illusion—that one of the ‘True Dragons’ had manifested in human form—he hurriedly brushed aside the idea.

Everyone swallowed nervously, the tension in the conference hall was palpable.

“Well then, I’d like to propose a plan.” The voice of a young boy echoed in the silent hall.

It was Yuuki. His courage for speaking out in that moment was commendable.

“Do tell.”

A voice, as gentle as it was cold, permitted Yuuki to speak.

Yuuki bowed while burying his inner thoughts.

“I believe that now isn’t the time for quarrels, and each corps should set aside their differences. Please allow me to speak openly.” Following this preamble, Yuuki began to propose his strategy with a solemn look.

Commencing the invasion, the Armored Corps would enter the territory of the Great Jura Forest from the east. Demon Lord Rimuru’s troops were currently gathering near the intersection between the Great Jura Forest and the Great Ameld River. According to reports, they had fortified an inn town there as their base of operations and were on high alert.

The marching route of the Imperial army passed between the Canaat Mountains and the Great Jura Forest. There was no road in the eastern part of the Great Jura Forest, rendering that route far too slow.

If they advanced to the main entrance of the Dwarven Kingdom and then headed south along the Great Ameld River, they would reach this inn town. That was where the real battle would begin—were it not for one problem.

“Wait a minute, Yuuki-dono. If we don’t cross the forest, we will run the risk of provoking Dwargon!” Calgurio interjected, bringing up a fair point. “I heard that King Gazel and Demon Lord Rimuru are on good terms, and the two countries are allies. If we followed your plan, then don’t you think we would be recklessly wedging ourselves in between two fronts!”

Instead of advancing along the Great Ameld River, he proposed they should march through the forest, out of the desire to avoid confrontation with the Dwarven Kingdom. Once the battle began, the dwarven troops would be deployed as reinforcements. In order to prepare for that eventuality, he deemed it unacceptable to leave the supply lines at risk of getting cut off. The troops would be trapped between the mountains and the river. If they were forced into a two-front war, they would lose their advantage in numbers. Even with the aid of airships, they wouldn’t be able to make use of them to resupply if they couldn’t set up a camp.

Calgurio couldn’t let Yuuki’s proposal go unchallenged. But Yuuki grinned as if he had expected this.

“Don’t worry, Calgurio-dono. We aren’t aiming for the inn town, but the Dwarven Kingdom. If we cannot negotiate with King Gazel, then we can’t call his nation a friendly one, wouldn’t you agree? Hostile kingdoms have no need to exist, isn’t that right?”

“What?!” Calgurio was at a loss for words after hearing Yuuki’s speech.

Following that, the conference hall exploded into chaos.

“Are you proposing we attack the Armed Nation of Dwargon?! While yes, we could win, we cannot fathom the scale of destruction involved!”

“If we do that, we won’t have enough remaining strength to attack the West.”

“As we all know, that nation is protected by a natural fortress.”

A multitude of ideas were thrown around the hall, and the resulting cacophony only widened the grin on Yuuki’s face.

“You’re right. That nation is like a fortress. Because it specializes in defense, it is said to be impregnable. But you see, we have tanks, don’t we? Dwargon’s specialized magic defense is what earned them their prominence. If we were to get rid of that, we could cut through them like a hot knife through butter.”

“Hmm…”

Calgurio thought he had a point. Supposing they attacked the Dwarven Kingdom:

The target would be Eastern or Central. If they wanted to catch their enemy off guard, they shouldn’t aim for Eastern, which was adjacent to the Empire, but rather attack the front line—Central—through the Great Jura Forest.

If they feigned an attack on Demon Lord Rimuru’s inn town, only to swing around and lay siege to Central with the tank unit… That would allow them the opportunity to eliminate the inn town while preventing reinforcements from the Dwarven Kingdom.

“I see, that plan may be more interesting than I thought.”

“Right? If the Dwarven Kingdom were met with a crisis, then Demon Lord Rimuru would have no choice but to act. If we take the initiative and prepare the battlefield in a way that allows us to intercept them, then—”

“It means our army will be guaranteed the upper hand.”

That’s a good plan, Calgurio nodded.

“I presume that only a vanguard force is stationed in the inn town,” Yuuki said. “But either way, they will have the edge as long as we fight in Jura’s forests, which will come at a great cost to our side. However, if we launch a full assault on the Dwarven Kingdom first, its natural fortress will provide us with defense, instead.”

His words were laced with deception. If it came down to firing their magic guns, the initial salvo would destroy Central. Even if the enemies escaped into an underground cave system such as a labyrinth, the urban areas near the entrance would be turned to rubble.

Although, in due time, the Empire would take the city and rebuild it, the timeframe would extend beyond the length of the war. This meant that it couldn’t be used to their advantage as Yuuki had described. Calgurio realized this, but he decided to play along with Yuuki’s proposition.

“While I don’t think that is going to work out smoothly, there’s something I need to ask. At the very least, it is more exhilarating to set a trap and wait for the mouse, killing it in one go, than to chase it in the dense forest. After that, we could take aim at the capital of Tempest with impunity.”

“Before that, I still have something to say about my plan. As everyone knows, my Mixed Corps is better at individual combat than group battles. And I think that’s why we are better suited to carry out the investigation of the labyrinth. As I mentioned earlier, there is a rumor that Veldora is guarding the 100th floor. In order to confirm this, too, we require an investigation, correct?”

And there we go—Calgurio smiled internally.

He didn’t expect Yuuki to abandon his goal, so he could see this coming a mile away.

“That’s unnecessary. If you ignore the inn town and head for the capital of that monster country, you will be caught in the crossfire from both sides. It would be better, then, to send my army westward and head towards the Dungeon on an unpaved road. In the first place, I’d have to see it with my own eyes to believe that a city can disappear. Tactically speaking, it would be correct to assume that the main force of Demon Lord Rimuru is on the ready.”

As Calgurio protested, he caught a fleeting look of frustration on Yuuki’s face.

Kukuku, you’re still green behind the ears. Don’t flatter yourself by thinking everything will go your way, kid! Calgurio was filled with delight.

And then:

“Finally, you’re acting like a decent military council,” the Marshal said. “Well then, you seem confident, Calgurio, so I’m going to leave the matter concerning Demon Lord Rimuru to you.”

On her command, the invasion of the Great Jura Forest by the Armored Corps became final.

The Marshal continued speaking. “This alone is not enough. If we are to attack Dwargon, we’d better put pressure on them from Eastern. I’ll leave that up to the Mixed Corps. Together with the task of defending our capital, you, the commander of the corps, will be responsible for its formation.”

“…Understood.”

Yuuki was about to argue but caught himself. Judging from the tone of the Marshal, her decision was non-negotiable.

Instead, the remaining corps commander, Gladium, spoke up.

“P-please wait! Does this mean my Magic Beast Corps will not participate in this war?! I Promise that my corps will be useful, so please consider—” he called out to the other side of the bamboo blind with a ghastly look on his face. If he and his corps were ordered to stay, the Magic Beast Corps, smallest of the three, would be given no chance to show off. The other corps commanders were about to rob him of an important task, right under his nose, making him miss his chance at glory during the war.

I can never accept that,Gladiumwas desperate.

“Don’t panic, foolish one. I have already planned for your time in the limelight.”

“Really?! S-so, what is my role going to be?”

“You are to lead the entire Magic Beast Corps to the north.”

When Gladium finally registered the answer from the Marshal, he was astonished by the absurdity of it. Demon Lord Rimuru and King Gazel would concentrate on defending their nations. They then had the opportunity to blindside the Western Nations, who were fixated elsewhere, by launching a simultaneous invasion. And before the Western States Council could react, they’d need to construct a beachhead.

“To the north?! Are you saying we cross the Canaat Mountains?”

Gladium was shaken as he pieced together what was implied in her statement. He understood the reason. Not just two fronts, it would be a simultaneous three-front strategy; nevertheless, the Empire had enough military power to pull it off.

However, the tactical, not strategic, aspect of this operation posed numerous challenges. The idea of trekking through the Canaat Mountains with tens of thousands of soldiers bordered on insanity.

Gladium was hesitant to point this out, but then he heard the Marshal laugh.

“That’s right, Gladium. Attack the royal capital of Ingracia by sea. The Kingdom of Farmenas, which is in the process of reconstruction, can be destroyed at any time once we take Dwargon.”

“W-what? The sea? B-but I don’t think our nation has naval battleships capable of large-scale transportation…”

“We have them. Right, Calgurio?”

Having been called upon by name, Calgurio knew it was futile to lie. Hearing the Marshal call him without an honorific, he got a bad feeling in his gut, enough to dissuade him from commenting on it.

The Marshal was that intimidating.

“As the Marshal said. The latest weapon developed by my army is called an ‘Airship.’ With the support of the Air Assault Division, which uses this state-of-the-art weapon, transporting the Magic Beast Corps is feasible.”

Calgurio’s remark caused a ruckus in the conference hall.

That meant there was a way to invade the Western Nations without going through the Great Jura Forest. Of course, they were excited.

“However,” Calgurio continued, turning to Gladium, “as they are a necessary trump card to fight the Storm Dragon, we can only provide assistance in the form of transportation. Would that be all right?”

Calgurio would keep 100 of the airships and load up as much firepower as they could carry. The remaining 300 airships were already sufficient to transport well over 100,000 troops, each of them sporting a maximum capacity of 400 people. Excluding the staff operating the ship, they could still carry 350 troops.

The Magic Beast Corps numbered 30,000 warriors and 30,000 beast knights, adding up to 60,000 plus the support force to help them fight at their full potential. And not to forget, their supplies. A total of 300 airships would be enough to transport everything.

The airships themselves could not be expected to take part in the battle, but if it were just about transporting the Magic Beast Corps, they could handle it with ease.

Calgurio promptly drew a line that was absolutely non-negotiable and thrust it at Gladium.

Gladium, well aware of this, groaned to himself. It was an honor for the soldiers to fight against the demon lord Rimuru and Veldora the Storm Dragon. It would be a shame to miss out on the opportunity, but the strategy that the Marshal proposed was equally appealing.

It was an unprecedented blitzkrieg operation that would fundamentally challenge the understanding of war. The sluggish Western Nations would crumble before Gladium’s Magic Beast Corps. This strategy made sense, all but guaranteeing their success.

More importantly, there were champions called the Holy Knight Order in the West. They were a group that specialized in individual combat and were rumored to be the strongest even in group battles. It was said that the Imperial Guards, their partners, were also outstanding. Not to mention the presence of Hinata Sakaguchi in the Holy Empire of Lubelius. She was virtually the strongest knight and served as the head of the Imperial Guards as well as the commander of the Holy Knight Order. Her reputation was heralded across the lands, reaching even the Empire. However, there was a rumor abound that she had recently tied with Demon Lord Rimuru.

If that were the case, the so-called strongest knight would be no match for Gladium, now that her spirit was lost. He would tear apart Hinata’s champions and trample the holy capital.

Gladium felt the beast blood flowing through his veins start to simmer.

“That’s great!” Beast King Gladium roared. “If you can transport us to the battlefield in one piece, let’s go with that plan!”

His agreement further jacked up the excitement in the grand conference hall.

“We will win! We will definitely win!”

“Victory belongs to us, the Empire!”

“Long live the emperor!”

And so on, and so forth, many of them were already beginning to revel in the idea of victory.

As if responding to their fervor, Calgurio made Gladium a promise: “Going by sea, you can give the dragons a wide berth. Rest easy and leave it to me.”

This was one of the plans that Calgurio had in mind from the beginning.

Considering the flight range of dragons, the over-sea route was well outside the purview of the ‘Dragon Roost.’ Plus, since travel by air also let them wholly avoid the sea monsters, which were more than a little pesky, he figured that this was one of the safest routes to reach the West.

It would be, however, impossible to coordinate with the tank units, thus he thought it was too early to propose the plan. That was why the preliminary investigation was perfect.

So, despite the odd circumstances leading to the adoption of his plan, Calgurio was pleased with the way things had turned out.

Interesting. We will transport the Magic Beast Corps with the airships and then focus on support and supplies afterwards. That’s how I’ll let it all play out, and then, I could reap all of the glory. If a large force emerges in the North, it will take the allied forces of the West by surprise. When that happens, they’ll deteriorate into a pathetic rabble. Unable to muster any reinforcements for Demon Lord Rimuru, they will descend into utter chaos.

The Western Nations, who had fixated both eyes on the Great Jura Forest, would be blindsided by such a turn of events. If that happened, nothing could bring down Calgurio’s offensive. He was sure of it.

Concentrating on the Dungeon and the Storm Dragon—Calgurio calculated that doing so would net greater military gains.

“Is there anything you do not understand?” the Marshal asked.

“—No ma’am. I will, in consultation with Gladium-dono, draw up a strategy that will accomplish our task.”

“Aye. Once you drop us off, we will show our enemies just how pitiful they are!”

“Well then,” Yuuki added, “I shall have to make a show of force against the Dwarven Kingdom.”

“Once the war engulfs Central, there will be no further movement in Eastern,” the Marshal said. “However—”

“Do you mean to imply that we can rule out retaliations from bloodthirsty dwarves? I already know.”

Yuuki never lost his spunk, even as he cut off the Marshal.

Everyone else in the room, including the other corps commanders, stared at Yuuki in disbelief.

Is he dense or plain stupid?—his attitude begged the question, but Yuuki shrugged off the glances he was getting.

“Very well,” the Marshal picked up. “Now then, begin preparations at once!”

“ “ “Yes ma’am!” ” ”

The order had been given. Without the emperor, Rudra, saying even a word, the stage was set for the Empire’s simultaneous three-front invasion.

On that day, the Imperial edict to start the war was issued in the name of the emperor. Spirits were running high in the Empire. At long last, after centuries of slumber, the behemoth was raring to show its claws once more.

Yuuki let out a sigh of relief as the Imperial conference ended.

In the previous meetings, the Marshal never spoke. But this time, she was actively interfering. As a result, Yuuki was forced to tweak his plan a bit…

It’s no big deal. My army will be deployed near the Imperial capital as planned. Most of the Armored Corps, which is the most influential and distracting, would invade the Great Jura Forest. I wouldn’t have guessed that even the Magic Beast Corps, with Vega in their midst, would move to the front lines, but I guess the Mixed Corps is all I need for the coup d’état.

The original plan was to build Vega up as the driving figure behind the coup, which also would’ve made him the fall guy if his plan was foiled. Of course, Yuuki’s troops would support him behind the scenes. Rather, Vega was a diversion, and Yuuki intended to take charge of the actual work.

He had no choice but to scrap the plan, but in the grand scheme of things, it didn’t matter much. Because Calgurio, the idiot that he was, had played right into Yuuki’s hands.

Calgurio was more of a strategist than a fighter. He was strong enough to hold his own, but ultimately, he was a man who was particular about strategy and certain victory, avoiding any risk. And yet, when weighing a loss against the potential payoff, greed would get the better of him.

In short, all he needed was a compelling reason. Tempest was rich, and their groundbreaking technology was rife for the taking. And then, if you told him they were hidden in the Dungeon… Telling him directly would raise suspicion, of course, so it was better for Yuuki to make him think he was after it himself. Using the information and samples Gadra had brought back, Yuuki was able to make Calgurio dance to his tune.

Still, though…

“You look so grim, what’s on your mind?”

Yuuki asked the person sitting across from him, Gadra.

“Hmm, it’s about the Marshal…”

“The Marshal?”

“Hm. I was wondering why she might’ve been so impatient.”

“Impatient?” Yuuki blurted. “I didn’t get that feeling from her.”

Yuuki couldn’t fathom why that was keeping Gadra preoccupied. To him, it was neither here nor there, but something about it was plainly bothering Gadra.

“Ah,” Yuuki murmured, “I also thought about it during today’s meeting, but she was quite the monster. To tell you the truth, it would be difficult to say whether I could win against her or not, unless I found out personally.”

Yuuki could gauge the strength of most of his opponents without having to fight them. Now that he had awakened to his Ultimate Skill, he could even see through his opponents’ hidden abilities. So, for him to encounter an opponent who he couldn’t analyze—it was self-evident that she was one dangerous individual.

“Marshal-dono is always appointed right after the succession of His Imperial Majesty Rudra. She has always protected His Imperial Majesty, like she did for the previous generation, and the ones before that. But still, as far as I know, there is no record of the Marshal being involved in military affairs. So why…” Gadra contemplated.

The Marshal becoming a problem was something Yuuki hadn’t accounted for, either. But it wasn’t entirely unexpected. After all, the strongest demon lord, Guy Crimson, seemed to have a bone to pick with the Empire. It didn’t take someone as smart as Yuuki to figure out that something was going on.

Why did Guy Crimson, the embodiment of power, let the Empire do as they pleased? Yuuki wondered if the reason behind the prideful demon lord’s reluctance to make a move…was because of someone even he was wary of. And if he were told that this person was the Marshal, well, he would be inclined to believe it.

At any rate, if the war spirals out of control and engulfs the world in chaos, what follows would be extraordinary. Then, a monster lurking in the shadows might reveal itself!

Yuuki smirked as he played out the upcoming events in his head, barely containing his enjoyment.

Gadra sighed as he watched Yuuki indulging in his fantasies, but alas, there was nothing for him to do about it. Changing gears, he decided to talk with Yuuki about their future plans.

“So, Yuuki, things are on the up and up on my end. Now that my cause for vengeance against the West has disappeared, I would have preferred to avoid war, nonetheless.”

“What do you think that self-centered attitude will achieve? You’ve been encouraging war for years.”

“Well, I can’t deny that.”

Gadra was, by and large, a selfish man who never cared about what others told him. As long as he and his beloved friends were safe, nothing else mattered to him. Indeed, he was a great mage, but he was no god. He did not pride himself on being all-powerful and had a clear understanding of his own limits. That was exactly why he desperately insisted on avoiding war, viewing it as his final service to the Empire.

Demon lords were said to be the enemy of mankind. They were absolute beings, and thus it was wise to abide by mutual inviolability in principle.

He made contact with the late demon lord Clayman to avoid making an enemy out of him. Through this connection, he was able to establish a friendly relationship with Yuuki.

All of this for a single objective: defeating the West—defeating Luminism.

The reason for letting the demon lords rule over a rich territory was to make sure they would not have—or not let them have—territorial ambitions for other nations, so Gadra’s policy was not wrong. All this became meaningless, and that was why he wanted to do the opposite and prevent the Empire from descending down the wrong path.

Not to mention, Gadra saw Demon Lord Rimuru in a new light. He was a kind and genial soul, and Gadra believed coexistence with him to be the wise choice. After all, even his friend, Adalmann, was leading a fulfilling life, despite the drastic change in appearance compared to his previous one.

Even more surprising was the strength of his country. Even Adalmann, who appeared likely to be on even footing with Gadra, carried the mission to guard the 60th floor of the Dungeon. While he was promoted to the guardian of Floor 70, it meant that there was still someone higher up the ladder. And of course, there were his other real executives.

To oppose such a country is the height of folly. Gadra was certain about it. And by extension, he was convinced the Empire would suffer a crushing defeat.

He didn’t know what Shinji and crew thought of Rimuru, but he felt something unfathomable about him. For this reason, he had pulled out all the stops to speak out against the war.

He was let down in the end; nevertheless, he had upheld his end of the bargain with Rimuru. Because he succeeded in directing the eyes of the Imperial army on the Dungeon, all he needed to think about was his future course of action.

“What happens to those who don’t listen to me is no longer my concern. I will request for one last meeting with His Imperial Majesty, and then I’ll be on my way to the monster country.”

“What a remarkably imposing declaration. It’s treason, then.”

“Nothing of the sort. I just strive to live on my own terms. Yuuki, this doesn’t mean that I’m cutting ties with you. Whenever you need it, you can count on me.”

Gadra, despite his selfish side, had another, which showed compassion and kindness to the people he was close with. He seemed to like Yuuki, as his promise showed.

“Ah-haha, I’ll look forward to that time!” Yuuki nodded with a bitter smile.

“Well, I am a newcomer to that country now. I’ll be working to earn their trust from now on, so don’t expect much leverage out of me, if you had that in mind.”

“How mean! Keep those thoughts to yourself.”

“What nonsense. The brash fellow you are ought to handle it. Ah right, those clowns are more befitting of ‘brash,’ but regrettably they aren’t here to say hello. Did you send them off to do some nefarious deeds?”

“Sort of. I could tell you now, buuut Rimuru-san will catch wind of it if I do, so too bad.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Yes, indeed, then I won’t ask. If you happen to need me, I’ll be there for you!”

“Thanks, I’ll count on it,” Yuuki replied with a grin. He had also taken a liking to Gadra. His honest way of life sparked a bit of admiration within him.

After a moment of laughter, the two shook hands.

“Well then, I’ll be on my way. Yuuki, you can go ahead and stage your coup d’état or whatever with as much of a ruckus or fanfare as you want. However!”

“I get it. It’s just that killing His Imperial Majesty is off the table, right?”

“Aye. Great that you understand. Then, farewell!”

And so Yuuki and Gadra parted ways.

Gadra’s request for an audience with the emperor was granted.

I suppose I should warn the emperor—Gadra waited nervously as that though weighed on his mind. Despite the opportunity to state his plea, there was no telling if the emperor would heed his advice. But still, he wanted to offer his final service to the benefactor whom he had served.

“His Imperial Majesty is expecting you,” a guide called out to him. Gadra walked along the hallway, following the veiled attendant.

From the polished corridor of the atrium, the sight of pink cherry blossoms slowly came into view. Eternal cherry blossoms. Their petals, on trees that were always in full bloom, were said to be a symbol of the prosperity of the Empire.

“It is as beautiful as ever. However, it was unpopular with Japanese people who came from another world.”

“Is that so?”

“Hmm, was it “wabi-sabi” 18 or “beauty in destruction?” Cherry blossoms are an ephemeral beauty, lasting only the moment they scatter in the wind. That’s also a way to look at it. Isn’t that right, Kondou-dono?”

“…”

A fierce man emerged from the shade of a sakura tree.

“I thought I’d hidden my presence well.”

“You’re right,” Gadra answered, and took out his beloved cane, “I didn’t notice you at all. It was just, what’s the term, foreboding? Somehow, I guess, I had an ominous feeling for whatever reason.”

The attendant slipped away unnoticed.

“I can’t let you have an audience with the emperor.”

“Why?” Gadra asked incredulously.

“I have no intention of giving you the reason, and it’s meaningless for you to know it.”

First Lieutenant Kondou responded and raised one arm, holding a glossy lump of black iron in his hand. It was a Nambu—the first Japanese semi-automatic handgun.



“You want to kill me?”

Gadra asked, eyes wide, glaring at him, but it did nothing to perturb First Lieutenant Kondou.

“Kondou…you bastard?!”

Just as he was about to raise his voice further, Gadra collapsed as a sharp pain tore through his chest.

He hadn’t let his guard down. He was well-informed about guns and had kept a steady eye on Kondou’s trigger finger, waiting for the sound of a gunshot, which never came.

And more importantly, as he lay there, his consciousness rapidly fading, he realized something. With his last bit of life, he noted that the pain in his chest came from his back, and it wasn’t caused by a bullet—but the stab of a knife. Meaning this wasn’t the work of Kondou, but someone else…

“Why did you interfere?”

“Because this man is dangerous. If we allowed this traitor to live, he would’ve hindered the next reign of His Imperial Majesty.”

That someone’s voice sounded familiar to Gadra, but it seemed entirely out of place. He had to wonder if his mind was playing tricks on him on the verge of death.

“But this man was still His Imperial Majesty’s friend…”

Gadra’s senses grew fainter by the moment as the voice of Kondou faded away.

At last, Gadra could feel death’s cold embrace.

Is this poison? What a thorough job. All of this is punishment for betraying His Imperial Majesty Rudra, huh…

A moment longer, and he would let out his final breath. Lying among the undying petals dancing through the air, Gadra played his final gamble.

He invoked a spell he had prepared in advance… And lost consciousness on the spot.

