

CHAPTER 4

IN THE LAND OF DESTINY

So everything was set. After giving my final instructions to Veldora, I waited for an envoy to direct me to the Council site. I didn’t know where it was, so I’d be going along with Ramiris—who, by the way, also didn’t know.

I asked why, and she had replied, “Because someone always comes to take me there!” Which made sense, I suppose, in its own way. The way she always got lost, wherever she went, I guess it’s just a given that she had a guide. If someone doesn’t really feel like memorizing a route, they never will, no matter how many times they repeat it.

Either way, I figured someone would be teleporting in to guide us, so I decided to wait for that.

It was almost an hour before midnight when I was contacted—not by an envoy, but by Benimaru.

“What’s up? Some kind of problem?”

I was expecting the worst, but Benimaru instead had a request for me. Battle had just begun with the enemy, and we already had a full gauge of their capacity.

The gifts Benimaru earned from my awakening had upgraded his class to Oni. This was a type of spiritual life-form, along the lines of the dryads—Benimaru, in other words, had reached the same lofty heights as Treyni. Shuna, Soei, and Hakuro were all Onis as well, which put them about as high up on that ladder as you can go.

This was wonderful, but the issue was the skill Benimaru obtained. The unique skill Born Leader was geared toward granting enhanced control over his powers, as befitting the naturally aggressive Benimaru. No matter how much of it he unleashed, he could keep himself from rampaging out of control. Its secret lay in Compute Prediction, which could fully read the flow of power in his body and prevent bursts of waste.

It was also useful in battles between large armies, not just in duels. He could sense the flow of power among his forces, reading his chances for victory like a prophet. If things were looking bad for his side, he could instantly send orders to his forces and change his strategy. It was almost like cheating. In a battlefield, the correct conveyance of information meant everything, and this allowed him to command his full army without a single miscommunication.

Right now, the combined forces of thirty thousand were under Benimaru’s command, and he could move them as smoothly and easily as his own limbs. These thirty thousand elites were no also-ran army, that’s for sure.

What’s more, the Born Leader skill also came with the Inspire Forces effect, adding bonuses to the forces he led that boosted their power by some 30 percent or more. That meant the entire army was nearly a third stronger. We weren’t losing out in troop numbers; we had better-quality fighters… We weren’t disadvantaged in any way. If we could get that bonus, too, then hell, all the better.

And with all of that, Benimaru could see from the start that victory was ours. Once he did, he had a bright idea for a new strategy.

(…So that’s why I wish to attack the main enemy force. Soei’s ready to go as well, and so I thought that, if Clayman’s castle is indeed beyond that cloud, we might as well lay waste to it, too.)

That Benimaru. Brimming with confidence.

(Isn’t that dangerous? You’ve only barely begun fighting. We don’t know how this’ll turn out yet…)

(We’re fine. I am stationed over here. It would be Soei and Hakuro striking the castle…)

(Wait, my brother!!)

Shuna had interrupted our Thought Communication as she was preparing some tea. Um, this was supposed to be a secure line? She broke in there a little too easily for my tastes.

(Er, hello, Shuna. What did you want?)

I could hear Benimaru’s voice jump several octaves.

(Don’t ask me what I want, my brother! The demon lord Clayman is dangerous! He has the power to bend people’s minds! If Soei or Hakuro fell victim to that…)

(No, they’d be perfectly fine against—)

(You can’t!! If you insist on sending them in, then I’ll join them!)

Whoa, whoa. Shuna’s usually a lot more chill than this. What’s gotten into her?

Benimaru and Shuna continued to argue as I sat there in shock. As my friend in my previous life put it, there’s no way a man can ever win against his younger sister. Benimaru was no longer brimming with confidence at all. The all-out assault from Shuna sent him reeling.

The next thing I knew, Shuna was beaming at me. “All right, Sir Rimuru! Give me your orders to move out!”

Um, how do I respond to that…?

I didn’t want to send Shuna anywhere lethal, but she did have a point. No matter how unlikely, I’d never want Soei to be thought controlled. I wanted to keep them from doing anything dangerous, but taking a castle to rob the enemy of an escape point was a classic strategy. With Clayman gone for the Walpurgis Council, now would be the perfect opportunity.

Still… I mean, as long as I made sure Clayman didn’t get away, we’re good, right? And it’s not like I wanted to kill every single one of the magic-born working for him.

(…You have nothing to worry about, Sir Rimuru,) Soei chimed in. (I promise I will keep Lady Shuna safe.)

(And with me around,) Hakuro added, (it will be no problem to at least peek into the enemy’s stronghold. They might be holding Lord Carillon there. I feel we need to investigate.)

My Thought Communication was getting worryingly busy. Shuna must’ve recruited them both to convince me. It was rare for her to act so selfishly, so I could understand why they wanted her to have her way this time. The fact Carillon was last seen being taken in the direction of Clayman’s castle also intrigued me.

“I am terribly angered by all this, Sir Rimuru. It is hard for me to contain my feelings. What Clayman has done is unforgivable!”

Dahh… Yeah, I get that. I know I’m not the only one who felt a little helpless against him, back there. And I can see how Shuna would resent being left waiting around on the home front.

(All right. I’ll let Shuna join in. But Soei and Hakuro, I want her safety to be job one for you. And if their HQ has more defenders than you predicted, put safety first and just bring back intelligence for me. Even if you discover Carillon, don’t reach out to him unless you’re sure it’s safe. Got it?)

(Thank you for accepting her request.)

(I will be fine,) Shuna replied. (I can simply teleport out if something happens.)

(Indeed.) Hakuro laughed. (If anyone might be taking their sweet time in there, I imagine it would be me.)

(All of us have resistances to spirit-based attacks,) pointed out Soei, (so I imagine we will not waste much time. And with Lady Shuna there, there is nothing to be concerned about. If we do discover Lord Carillon, we will think over matters then.)

That put my mind at ease a little. Certainly, with Shuna’s unique skill Parser, she’d be able to identify any attacks aimed for her mind—and with Spatial Motion also in her arsenal, I didn’t see that much to worry about. She didn’t have that much magical energy to tap, but the skills in her quiver were excellent.

Soei was right about Carillon as well. He might not be there at all, so there was no point harping on the issue.

(All right. You have my permission, then, but always make sure you’re on top of the situation over there. Just in case, I’ll have you begin operations at midnight, just after the Walpurgis Council begins.)

(((Yes sir!)))

So now I had a three-member team attempting to infiltrate Clayman’s base of operations.

It was just before midnight now, so I decided to take a moment to ask Veldora about the demon lords. “I have no interest in such little gnats,” he began (of course), but he still had a fair amount to say about them all—except for Leon, who ascended to the role after he was sealed away.

Given his penchant for violent rages across the countryside, Veldora had fought against a demon lord or two in his time. Around two thousand years ago, he attacked and destroyed a city of vampires, which naturally earned him the anger of legions of those creatures—a chase he apparently loved. One of them, a female vampire, was particularly beautiful (and beautifully dressed) and boasted strength beyond all her peers. When the dust finally settled, her cadre of vampires disappeared from the scene, and Veldora didn’t know what had happened to them.

“What was her name…? I believe it was Lu, erm, Lurus? Or Milus? Regardless, I never treated her that seriously, but she was a rather challenging plaything for me, so I would be wary around her. She can’t take a joke, do you see?”

I think that was more Veldora’s fault than hers. Anyone would be a little pissed off after their homeland was burned to embers. Of course, that was millennia ago; maybe she’s mellowed.

“Ooh,” interjected Ramiris from adjacent to me, “didja know that guy Valentine’s a demon lord now, too?”

This Valentine had apparently taken over the original one’s role about 1,500 years ago. I can only hope time’s healed wounds between these vampires and Veldora.

Daggrull, the demon lord giant, was another keen rival of the dragon’s. They had tussled several times, with no clear victor ever being crowned, and if Veldora bothered to remember his name, he must’ve been a pretty mean match. This guy had the power—or the guts, at least—to take on a dragon type. Probably a standout among the demon lords. Better watch for him.

Our conversation moved on to the topic of demons. Veldora had apparently dispatched several groups of demons in his time—a practice he found fun, since even if you incinerated them, they always resurrected to an even stronger form over time. A bunch of great playmates for him, really.

Not even he had fought the lord of these demons, however. This king held his domain in a castle on the frozen tundra of the northern continent, a place so frigid that he never bothered to make the trip.

“It is far too cold up there! What’s the need for me to pay a visit? Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

That sounded pretty evasive to me, but he refused to give up any more details. No need to think about that now, though. It would be going pretty far out of his way to storm the place.

“Yes, well, Guy isn’t any pushover,” Ramiris observed. “Me, him, and Milim are the oldest demon lords you’ll ever find!”

That’s doesn’t mean much coming from Ramiris. Suddenly Guy sounds like nothing special at all. But ah well. I’ll back-burner this guy.

So how many demon lords does that leave remaining? I had already met Milim, Ramiris, and Carillon; we had just discussed Valentine, Daggrull, and Guy. There was Frey, the one who Phobio said had dealt the decisive blow to Carillon. There was Leon to think about, along with my current target, Clayman. So one more…

“Mm? I couldn’t say.” The allegedly sage Veldora was useless.

“Oh, you must mean Deeno!” Ramiris cried. “He’s even more of a goof-off demon lord than I am!”

I suppose he and Ramiris were two peas in a pod, then.

“We are not!”

I’ll just ignore that.

So that’s ten, some of whom had a bone to pick with Veldora. I’d need to keep that in mind as we discussed matters. Many seemed far more capable of defending themselves than I thought. Using this wimp Ramiris as a baseline could land me in deep trouble—maybe it was better to assume Milim was par for the course with them. Even after my evolution, I was leery about my chances of beating her in battle. We had sparred a few times, but she wasn’t being at all serious about it. I needed more data. In sparring mode, I could totally take her on now, but I couldn’t be cocky until I knew what she was more fully capable of.

I still couldn’t believe that Milim de facto approved of rubbing me out. There’s got to be something behind that. She’s not the type to backstab her friends or be mind controlled like that, and there was never gonna be any negotiating with her. There had to be some reason—a reason of her devising, too.

…Well, no point dwelling on it. I’ll figure it out when I see her.

As we talked, I felt a wrinkle in space erupt out of nowhere. Here comes our ride, I thought as this huge, bombastic, ominous-looking gate appeared. Pretty fancy. Me, I usually just kind of ripped a hole in time and space, so maybe I could learn from this. Once I had a concrete image in mind, it’d be easier for me to whip up a gate like this next time and teleport through it.

Regardless, the door opened, revealing a green-haired woman in a dark-red maid’s outfit. She bowed her head toward Ramiris. “I have come to take you, Lady Ramiris. And is this your guest? I’ll be happy to guide you together.”

Then she stood by the gate and lowered her eyes, eliminating her presence as much as possible. A well-trained pro at the servant biz, it felt like.

But something concerned me. She was exuding just as much overpowering force as Diablo at his best. She was a demon, a high-level one. Regular demons could only climb so high up the latter. No matter how long-lived they were, an Arch Demon was about the most they could hope for. Anything beyond that required a certain trigger…which, in the case of Diablo, was me naming him. This let him break out of the base demon framework entirely, evolving him from an Arch Demon to a so-called Demon Peer.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. I have no interest in strength,” he had said at the time, “but now I see there is always something higher to strive for. Perhaps I should try to make more of an effort at this?”

He had “no interest” in strength, but he had a hell of a lot of interest in fighting. As he put it, he had been too content with himself before, since becoming too strong would squeeze all the fun out of battle. Was he kidding with me? Because if he wasn’t, that’s just scary.

And now I had this other Demon Peer here, this maid. Or more like a maiden messenger from the underworld, I suppose. With the kind of anime and manga I consumed way back when, a maid was more a type of battle unit than anything—and with her being a Demon Peer and all, she was clearly one deadly woman.

“Oh, hey! Haven’t seen you in an age, Mizeri! How’s Guy doing?”

Ramiris clearly wasn’t afraid of her. In some ways, it made her even scarier.

“…It is not upon me to worry about the condition of my master…”

“Ah. Haven’t changed a bit, have you? Well, that’s fine.”

She fluttered her way into the gate, the rest of us following behind. We had to hurry, or else we’d get shut out. If I wasted any more time here steeling my resolve and wound up missing my ride there, I don’t know how I’d ever explain that to Benimaru and the rest.

So this maid Mizeri works for the demon lord Guy? The lord of the demons, and one of the oldest demon lords to boot. If he recruited Demon Peers as doormen, that said a lot about his power. Probably shouldn’t try riling him, then…unless the times called for it.

But having someone as strong as Mizeri do this kind of low-end work? Talk about arrogance. Here I thought the demon lords were all I had to worry about. So much for that. Maybe I should’ve taken Diablo along after all, even if he and Shion would’ve gone out of control with each other…

Well, it’s too late for second-guessing. Time to put up or shut up. The world’s rulers are waiting for me beyond—but I didn’t feel scared. That’s because I was one of them. One of the strongest in the world. If anything, I felt cool as a cucumber as I crossed the door.

Benimaru grinned broadly as he surveyed the battle unfolding below him.

It was all going according to plan. The enemy had been lured, like clockwork, right into the traps Geld set—which could have been predicted, given how lightly they had treated the Tempest side.

“Sir Rimuru was right,” he said to himself, pitying his foes. “If they’ve set the table this kindly for us, it would almost be more difficult to lose.”

They could pull this off thanks to the perfect control he had over his armies, but Benimaru didn’t think it that impressive of a feat. As he said, they had caught Clayman’s forces comically off guard—they expected their numbers to overwhelm Tempest, after all. They had pursued the fleet-footed beastman fighters that had posed as refugees, and now they were completely cornered.

Alvis flew up to the point in the air Benimaru chose to watch events from. “It appears to be decided,” she observed, quietly flapping her wings so as not to break Benimaru’s train of thought. “By this point, I see no way for the enemy to recover itself.”

“Ah, Lady Alvis.” He turned his crimson eyes to her. “Enough of that blather. We haven’t won anything yet.”

“Please, Sir Benimaru, Alvis is fine…”

“You are not subordinate to me,” he coldly refused.

“No, perhaps I am not, but we beastmen have given up our command to you for the moment.”

Benimaru nodded his understanding. “Very well. For this battle, at least, I will appoint you as my aide.”

“I appreciate it, Sir Benimaru.”

Now—in name, at least—Benimaru had command of this combined force. With the supervisor of all Eurazania’s armies officially declaring herself below him, Benimaru was now officially supreme leader of the entire show. There was no defying the supreme leader; in the world of monsters, the strongest called the shots.

“…But despite appointing you my aide, I’m not sure there is much left to do, is there? I am keeping a steady watch on matters, but victory is imminent.”

“I agree with you. However, I do sense the presence of several strong members on their side.”

“True,” the unwavering Benimaru replied. “Once the outcome is set in stone, I will send Geld’s troops their way.”

“Hold on,” Sufia interjected. “I want to join in on that!”

“Yeah,” Phobio added. “I don’t want you hoarding all the action, Commander. This is the land of beastmen—our land. If we leave it all to you, Lord Carillon’ll chew us out for it.”

“He’s right! If you’ve left us to ensure everyone is safe, you could at least let us handle this battle.”

“Sir Benimaru,” said Alvis, “I leave command of the armies to you. Please allow us to target and defeat the ringleader of the enemy force!”

All three bowed their heads to him. Benimaru greeted this with a clicking of the tongue.

“So that’s why you made me commander?”

“Oh, how do you mean?” Alvis replied, playing dumb.

“…Very well. I was planning to have you join the fight anyway. However, if you feel you are about to lose, retreat at once. With some of their fighters, arrogance could be your downfall.”

He had a point. Several members of Clayman’s force remained question marks. Depending on who was paired with whom, things could become dicey in the battle ahead.

But, Benimaru thought as he boldly smiled to himself, I’m always here. As long as I can detect when we’re in danger, we will not lose.

Each of the Lycanthropeers already had their targeted prey in mind, sharpening their claws and letting their proud animal instincts run wild in pursuit of these loathsome interlopers.

The trap would go off in another few minutes.

“…I wanted to ask you something else,” Alvis said as she waited. “What will we do with those caught in our trap?”

“Kill them all, is what I would like to say…” Benimaru thought for a moment. “But I would like to leave judgment on that to you beastmen.”

“Meaning?”

“Take anyone willing to cooperate with us prisoner. Sir Rimuru is a generous leader, despite appearances. He is not a great proponent of genocide, although he’ll gladly carry it out if they take any of our lives.”

“…I see. In that case, let us decide how to deal with the prisoners later.”

“Certainly. That is fine. I imagine Sir Rimuru probably pictures them as a potential source of labor.”

“…Oh?”

“You are going to rebuild your capital, aren’t you?” Benimaru casually asked. “The more able workers, the better.”

“You’ll do that much for us?!”

Alvis, along with her two cohorts, was shocked. Rimuru not only took victory almost as a given; he already had the script written for what came next.

Where does that confidence come from?! We’re fighting the closest companions to the cunning, deceitful Clayman, and yet…

The biggest surprise of all, though, was fighting this on the assumption that they’d take prisoners. In this world, it was far easier for most people to kill in battle rather than capture. You would never find a commander who’d care whether a force was partially surrendering before doing them all in with ranged magic. The idea of using prisoners as a labor force had never occurred to anyone before.

This shook the Three Lycanthropeers to the core. It meant that the magic-born working under Rimuru never even considered the possibility of defeat. They went into this fight backed by an absolute confidence in their victory.

“Well,” Benimaru added with a laugh, “assuming our strategy goes to plan.” It only terrified the beastmen more.

And then the battle began.

(Everything to plan, Soka.)

(Understood, Sir Benimaru.)

With that short exchange, the Clayman force experienced its first casualties. They were about a hundred magic-born, led by a named one of some renown, but they all died at once, their magical cores plucked out by Soka when she appeared out of nowhere. The four team members working under him were already busy taking down the other squad captains of Clayman’s army, only striking those targets they were absolutely sure they could defeat. That was Benimaru’s order, and they followed it to the letter.

The result: The enemy’s chain of command was pulverized. Orders from above were no longer making it to the foot soldiers.

“This is a trap! The beastmen have surrounded us!”

“That’s crazy! How could they—?”

“Retreat! We have to regroup our forces!”

By the time they noticed, it was too late. Unlike a human army, monsters tended to over-rely on their own strength and bravery; a leader to guide their instincts was indispensable. Without them, Clayman’s army was doomed to fall to pieces.

(Geld, you may begin.)

(Yes sir!)

His orders given, Geld called out the signal.

“Start it now!”

“““Rahhh!!”””

The next moment, the ground caved in, swallowing up the enemy forces. Tempestians gifted in controlling the earth had unleashed their magic. This natural-looking stretch of land was actually pockmarked with pit traps, an illusion created by their skills.

Only monsters with the power of flight could escape, and even those were quickly picked off by avian beastmen and Gabil’s Team Hiryu. The ones who were caught found themselves in a cavernous underground hollow, the soil liquefied beneath. They were unhurt but buried up to their waists, unable to move.

These were monsters, of course; some used magic or skills to wriggle out of this mousetrap, falling over their weaker companions to reach solid ground again. But the plan accounted for this, too. It helped thin out the crowd. The stronger ones among the force were killed without any chance to resist; the weaker, seeing this, had their hearts crushed. The survivors would know all too well where they stood strength-wise, likely losing their will to fight. The pit trap was set up entirely to procure pliable prisoners, willing to follow orders.

Ten or so minutes after the plan was launched, the battle was already far too one-sided to offer any hope for a turnaround.

“This… This many?”

Benimaru had a bird’s-eye view of over ten thousand Clayman soldiers, cut off and plunged into the pitfalls. Geld’s Yellow Numbers were patrolling the edges, surrounding all the holes at regular intervals and taking out the magic-born who managed to claw their way up. The enemy forces were outnumbered, and any unexpected shows of strength were handled with Tempest’s superior numbers and equipment. Even the most powerful magic-born could be taken out by a handful of beastmen or Team Kurenai. Most of Clayman’s force had marched into what appeared be a flat field; the remaining several thousand were holed up in the rear, but they weren’t enough to change anything.

“We won,” Benimaru matter-of-factly whispered.

“Truly, an amazing show,” marveled Alvis.

“Heh. We were bound to win. That was why we couldn’t afford to let our guard down. I have my own work to do now. Alvis, Lycanthropeers, you are free to do as you like. Take the heads of the enemy leaders!”

“That’s what I’ve been waiting for, man! I’ll be back!”

“Now we can finally have some fun! I can smell the bastard who defied me before. Think I’ll go after him first!”

“I suppose I will join them, too. The rest is up to you, Sir Benimaru.”

The commander nodded, face pointed straight ahead.

“Go!”

“““Yes sir!!”””

With that, the three warriors sprang into action.

Sufia tore across the sky, faster than wings could take her. This was Skywalk at work, an Art only a small handful of magical creatures could wield, but Sufia used it like second nature.

She was headed for a small group at the very far end of the battlefield, unarmed and looking out of place. They were priests, led by Middray of the Dragon Faithful. She didn’t know them, but Sufia’s animal instincts told her that these were the strongest forces the enemy boasted.

As she sped forth, she heard the voice of Gabil, commander of the skies. He, and the hundred members of Team Hiryu, were following her.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! Let me give you a hand, Lady Sufia!”

“Ah, Gabil.” She smiled a beautiful, heroic smile. “Sorry, but you might be left with the short end of the stick here.”

“Wah-ha-ha! Not a problem for me. We’ve taken care of most of the aerial forces, and I wouldn’t want to take any more work from the flying beastmen. Where are the enemies that lie between us and victory?”

“Ha! Victory is ours, yes, but I think we have to put down the people in the back, just in case things go haywire on us.”

“Right. I hear you loud and clear! You get that, men?!”

“Understood, General!”

“As long as you don’t screw up, either, General!”

Gabil snarled at his dragonewts. Their exchanges usually went something like this. Sufia chuckled at it a bit before focusing her lethal energies on the target ahead.

Middray had set up camp in a safe spot toward the rear…although it wasn’t a “camp” so much as a completely different location, a medic facility built by the supply team. He hadn’t asked for this battle, but being so belittled by the force all this time made him feel too embarrassed to face Milim again.

Lady Milim will surely deride me for this, too…

The thought concerned him enough that he demanded to be stationed on the front lines. That request was turned down by Yamza, who certainly didn’t do it out of concern for Middray’s safety—he just didn’t want anyone else horning in on his upcoming glory.

Still, victory was all but guaranteed today. Their force was three times the size of the enemy’s, which was not at all a coherent fighting unit. They were being forced to retreat while guarding a large crowd of refugees, rendering them incapable of any counterattack.

It’s more dishonorable, if anything, to attack an opposing force like this…

Such was the thought in Middray’s mind in the days leading up to this clash. Things, however, did not quite work out that way.

“We might be in trouble, Father. The battle’s all but lost, isn’t it?”

“Mm… They are weak, Hermes, too weak. I had no idea the demon lord Clayman’s soldiers were this incapable…”

“They aren’t, Father! The enemy just had the superior strategy!”

“What? Don’t be stupid. We should have the power to force our way right through any of their silly tricks! If that’s the weak excuse you have for this, I’m disappointed in you, Hermes!”

“Look, if this was just a one-on-one duel, that’s one matter, but in mass combat like this, the quality of your army’s command is what decides the day! That, and how well you can catch the enemy unawares. Today, that was the opposing side. They hid their war power until the last moment and even sprang a trap on us.”

“Pfft. I can see that much!”

Middray was never one to use his head very much. Hermes had a habit of bringing up all these meddlesome, annoying topics with him, just because he happened to be a little smarter, and he never liked that much. Now, however, even Middray could see that there was nothing he could retort with. The scene presented to him was all the evidence Hermes needed.

“But, Father Middray—”

“I know. The fighters headed our way… They’re powerful. As much as I hate to say it, we are standing in the midst of a battlefield. If they’re coming for us, I say we come for them!”

“So it goes, does it? Very well, then…”

Hermes reluctantly agreed as Middray next to him began to burn with a desire to fight.

Here, in the rear of Clayman’s forces, was fought the most intense and ferocious of the day’s conflicts.

Landing on solid ground, Phobio silently ran forward. Discovering a group hiding in the shadows behind the battlefield, he stopped right in front of them.

There stood a man wearing a mask of anger and a girl wearing a mask of tears. This strange duo was Footman, the Angry Jester, and Teare, the Teardrop Jester; both members of the Moderate Jesters and both here observing the battle by Clayman’s request.

“Hey,” Phobio quietly said, holding back his rage. “I owe you one from last time.”

Footman’s eyes twinkled ominously beneath his mask. “Oh-ho? Well, well, if it isn’t Sir Phobio!”

“Sir Phobio,” Teare said in a chiding, singsong voice as she traipsed around him. “The beastman who could never quite become a demon lord! Sir Phobio, the one who lost to Milim! Thank you so much for helping us out then!”

“Heh. Glad you still remember me. It’d be a shame if I killed you when you had no idea why you deserved it!”

“Ooooh? What’re you angry about?”

“How odd. What could this fool be so livid for? Those raging emotions are so delectable, but there’s no reason for us to die here.”

“Oh, not at all, not at all!”

“Shut up! Maybe I was a fool for letting you trick me, but a fool like me doesn’t need a reason to ask for a little payback from you guys!”

Phobio broke out his sharp claws. Teare and Footman were unmoved.

“Hmm? You want to go with us? You shouldn’t push yourself like that. You’re too weak for that!”

“Hohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! None of that, Teare. Sir Phobio here is trying to make us laugh with this little joke of his.”

Neither could successfully rile up Phobio. More than anything, he regretted letting his short temper steer him straight to failure in the past. So, once the greetings were over, he quickly stepped forward and instantly closed the gap between them.

“Ngh…!!”

“Tch!”

Realizing their mind games had no effect against him, Footman and Teare changed their approach. Things began to move quickly. The air twisted around them, opening a portal through which a man with the head of a wild boar appeared.

“Long time no see, Footman. Remember me?”

“Hoh? Hmmmmm? Ah, the orc general? My, look at how impressive you’ve become!”

Footman attempted to sound playful with the sarcastic taunt, but the expression on his face indicated he was in trouble.

Despite appearances, Footman was a coolheaded, calculating type—a trait Geld was fully aware of. The jester was with the forces that laid waste to the ogre village that Benimaru and the others called home, and Geld knew his powers were difficult to ignore. Footman was on a different level from other magic-born, as far as Geld was concerned.

Plus, there was Teare. Footman’s peer in many ways. The extent of her powers was an unknown, but she wasn’t one to be underestimated. Phobio might have been the Black Leopard Fang of the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance, but even with his strength, taking on Footman and Teare by himself would spell trouble.

The beastman let the rage bubble within. Heh-heh… Well done, Sir Benimaru. Not a disagreeable piece of prey at all!

The commander, overseeing the battle from the skies, had ordered Geld to assist Phobio. He wondered why at first, seeing as it meant Geld would abandon his command post, but now he saw that Benimaru was right. The rest of the battle had already been decided, to the point that even Geld’s aides could handle it well enough. Only the top leaders among the magic-born under Rimuru’s command could handle two Moderate Jesters like this.

“Allow us to assist, Sir Phobio.”

“Ah, Geld. Thank you!”

Phobio wasn’t turning him down. Even here, he could sense the difference in combat ability between him and this pair. To him, the best path to victory was worth choosing more than his own pride.

So began a smaller battle between two duos, in the shadow of a small hill away from the battlefield.

The reports Yamza received from this battlefield bewildered him. The overwhelming advantage he thought he had was just an enemy trap all along.

He didn’t want to consider the thought of defeat. It would obviously enrage Clayman. He had to find a way to turn this around, to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat—but he doubted he had the man power left to achieve it. He still had enough of his wits to realize that, and now he had to think of other forces he might be able to stir into action.

The five fingers, Clayman’s inner circle of associates, was led by the middle finger, Yamza, the strongest magic-born out of them all. Only Adalmann, the pointer finger, and Nine-Head, the thumb, could compare with him.

Adalmann, head of the defense forces in Clayman’s castle, began life as a wight, a deathly spirit who resided in the Great Forest of Jura. He was a well-known bishop during his living years, but that meant nothing now. Clayman’s accursed magic had greatly boosted his power as a monster, transforming him into a wight king that ruled over the undead. The holy force he wielded when he was alive had transformed into impure demonic power that he used to curse the living.

But despite his vast strength, Adalmann had one weakness—his lack of intellect. The only thing he could do was follow his orders to destroy any intruders; that’s why he wasn’t involved in this war.

Nine-Head, meanwhile, was a fox spirit, an extreme rarity in her field. She was still young, just three hundred years old, and only three of her tails had grown out. Her magicule energy, however, was already well past Yamza’s, up to the level of Clayman himself. She was with him now at the Walpurgis Council, serving as his bodyguard, so Yamza couldn’t tap her for backup, either.

It’ll have to be Adalmann, then…

The problem was how to call him over. Actually, no, it wasn’t a problem. It would be simple to have him show up right this instant. Yamza would have to then gather up his surviving troops, flee back into Milim’s domain, meet with him there, and go back on the offensive. That’s the best approach, he thought. Walpurgis Councils had lasted upward of a month in the past—if all went well, he could wrap this whole thing up before Clayman came back. It wouldn’t exactly be simple to make Adalmann move, but it wasn’t impossible.

Either way, if he stood down and accepted defeat right now, it was clear Yamza would be purged. Lord Clayman is a vicious man. He would do away with me in no time—I am sure of it… And even if I were lucky enough to survive, I don’t want to turn into a soulless puppet. As much as it vexes me, I must admit defeat here—but I will reign victorious in the end!

Yamza turned his gaze toward the battlefield—and there, he witnessed a sight that made him doubt his eyes.

In the front was a bewitchingly beautiful woman, her hair a mix of blond and black. She held a golden staff and was boldly racing across the land, as if no one was around her at all.

Protecting her was a group of Carillon’s finest, the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance. They numbered only a few dozen, but almost no one could defy them in combat, each one bearing the strength of a thousand. There was Zol, an elephant beastman; Talos, a bear beastman… They couldn’t beat the Three Lycanthropeers, but they were all stout fighters, worthy of serving under the great Beast Master.

They were also accompanied by a group in crimson garb, using searing flame spells to burn away the supplemental forces kept in the rear. They meant little to Yamza, but there was no doubting they were ranked above the magic-born around them.

Things had suddenly become very bad for him.

The unbelievable visitors deepened Yamza’s gloom.

“It can’t be… Why are the Three Lycanthropeers here?! Have they abandoned their troops and come to provide reinforcements themselves? But how could that…?”

He could hear the trusted magic-born around him shouting. Agitation was in the air.



“They’re pointing their greatest force toward our main army?! What are the lookouts doing?!”

“Allow me to interrupt, sir! We can’t make contact with our lookouts. Someone has killed them all!”

“What?!”

The enemy was moving so fast, they were completely behind on dealing with them. By the time Yamza noticed that, they were already lethally late. The realization made the blood drain from his head. There would be no regrouping now—even escape would be fiendishly difficult.

No. No, no, no, no, no!! I may not even be able to escape here with my life!

Yamza began to panic. If this was one-on-one, he might be able to deal with that, but he wasn’t self-absorbed enough to think he stood a chance against a squadron like this.

“Buy me some time! I will return to our homeland and bring Adalmann back here. He can summon the dead to restore our forces!”

It was just a pretext. He already knew all was lost, and he had decided to run away, as fast as possible. Luckily, he had only volunteered his fealty to Clayman, so his behavior was not restricted the way it was with the other four fingers. Following him any farther would be suicide, and that made it easy for Yamza to sever all ties.

“Yes sir!”

“We can give you three hours, sir!”

His men each gave him stern, resolved looks that did nothing to move his heart. All he could think about was how stupid they were. The next moment, he chanted a teleportation spell. But something was off.

“It’s…not working? Is this a…Spatial Blockade?!”

Yes. He was already too late. The moment Yamza and his men saw Alvis, Alvis’s gaze landed on them as well, thanks to the power of her skill Snake Eyes. It was an extra skill, one that applied a large variety of ailments—paralysis, poison, insanity, and so forth—and worked on anyone caught in her line of vision. A tremendously useful skill, the only way to escape it was by either successfully resisting it or simply weathering it out.

And Alvis had another card up her sleeve—the unique skill Oppressor. This spatial skill gave her the effects of Mind Accelerate, Spatial Control, and Spatial Motion, letting her impede enemy movement and give her allies superior positioning.

A single motion from her was enough to neutralize all the masses surrounding Yamza. The more weakhearted of them were instantly driven mad; the stronger ones were still paralyzed long enough for the poison to kill them off. Some had even been turned to stone. Less than a hundred managed to emerge unscathed. Before they could put up any resistance, the unworthy had been denied even the right to stand before Alvis.

Her Spatial Control had snuffed out Yamza’s magic, having the power to both obstruct spells and fix their spatial coordinates in place to prevent them from affecting the air around the caster at all. No magical escape from this area was possible now—“this area” being the range of Alvis’s vision. The entire battlefield was now in her total control. Such was the power of the Golden Snakehorn.

Realizing escape was impossible, Yamza gritted his teeth.

He still had a last resort. But it was a forbidden one, one that he’d prefer not to use. Beyond that, the only path to survival involved winning this.

“…So be it. Let’s show them what we’ve got.”

“Ah, Sir Yamza!”

“Sir Yamza at his finest could overwhelm even the Three Lycanthropeers!”

“Let me join you, sir! Our fighting will surely please Sir Clayman!”

His men were elated for the fight. Yamza found it boundlessly foolish. The demon lord Clayman sought only two things: victory and profit. He would never accept this performance—wasteful attrition, followed up by total defeat.

The only thing he believes in is pure, unadulterated power…

No matter how faithful Yamza was to him, Clayman never saw him as one of his own. He was just a useful pawn, a talented minion; that was as far as the lord’s affection went. The Ice Blade had been a gift, yes, but it was simply provided in an effort to strengthen him. It was all for Clayman’s sake.

Still, Yamza provided him with respect and reverence, and the gifts he received in return helped. They both had a common interest. But Yamza had no intention of offering his life to Clayman.

…About time to head out. I have to survive this and bounce back!

This failure would force him to go into hiding for a while. But a Special-A talent like him, a giant among high-level magic-born, would no doubt be picked up by another demon lord before long, he thought.

(I like this,) he Thought Communicated to Alvis. (One of the greatest magic-born under the Beast Master’s command, part of the valorous Three Lycanthropeers. Are you willing to duel with me?)

It was a risky bet. He wanted to defeat Alvis, the strongest figure in the group, and crush the enemy’s will to fight. Perhaps that would be enough to change the script—and even if it didn’t end well, he thought it could give him a chance to escape.

(Very well, Sir Yamza—head of the five fingers beneath the demon lord Clayman. I will show you how far out of your element you are!)

This, Alvis thought, would prove once and for all where Clayman and Lord Carillon stood with each other. She promptly transported herself before him with Spatial Motion, and in an instant, Clayman’s surviving servants swarmed over her.

It was not what one would normally call a strategy. Beastmen are mostly simple folk, easily provoked, and this cowardly approach took full advantage of that. If they can exhaust Alvis, even a little bit, that’ll make it easier for Yamza to win—such was the reasoning behind this kamikaze strike.

“You think those tricks will work?!” Alvis shouted as she turned up the intensity on her Snake Eyes. To Yamza, though, they had already done more than enough. That single instant, when Alvis used her power, was the exact thing Yamza needed for his assured victory.

“…Got you!!”

In a flash, he was upon her, slashing his sword at her exposed back. And just before the tip of his blade reached her body—

“Nuh-uh! Backstabbing someone like that’s not manly at all!”

Someone had leaped straight out from Alvis’s shadow, babbling to himself as he deflected Yamza’s sword.

“Dehh! Who’re you?!”

“I’m Gobta! We were hiding out just in case this happened!”

As he explained that, more and more figures popped out from the shadow. They were, of course, the Unified, four-legged goblin riders, tapping their physical agility to attack the magic-born that were still moving.

“And you didn’t tell me?” Alvis said. “I was wondering why something didn’t feel quite right.”

She had actually noticed them all along. That was why she was unafraid to go plunging in like this.

“Heh-heh! Benimaru ordered us to,” Gobta casually replied as he fired off a Case Cannon bolt at Yamza. He could tell the moment he crossed blades with him that this wasn’t a battle for him to win. So while the commander was distracted by his short sword, he thought now would be his best chance. Gobta’s definition of fair and square differed a bit from the norm—it was something he asked of his foes but never followed himself.

Still, Yamza managed to deflect the blast with his sword.

“Out of my way, weakling!”

He pointed the tip of his blade at Gobta and cast a spell, sending an Icicle Lance hurtling his way. Gobta simply used his dagger to fire an Icicle Lance of his own—not to fire back, but because he had planned for this follow-up strike from the start. It wound up saving Gobta’s life, as the two magic bolts met in the air and dissipated.

“That… That had as much force as this magic sword?! And without casting? Cheeky little weakling, are we…?”

Now Yamza recognized Gobta as his foe—but Gobta had already pretty well exhausted his arsenal. Uh-oh. I couldn’t follow that counter of his at all. That ice just happened to save me, but if he stabs me with that thing, I’m a goner. Probably oughtta start runnin’, huh?

Fortunately, the goblin riders had already made their contribution to this fight. No one would complain if they retreated now. Gobta made up his mind.

“All right, let’s pull—”

But just as he began to make the order, Yamza’s sword sailed right past his nose.

“Pyah?!”

In another stroke of luck, he had taken a timid step back just in the nick of time. It made Yamza almost lose his nerve. This little sneak made it past my attack three times? Three in a row couldn’t be any coincidence, as he saw it—that supersonic swipe he just made proved that the hobgoblin before him was no also-ran.

“Heh-heh-heh… Oh, how the Lycanthropeers have fallen! Sneaking their minions into a one-on-one duel!”

The boast, made with wide-open, bloodshot eyes, was part of Yamza’s strategy. By his estimation, dealing with both a Lycanthropeer and this mystery intruder at once was dangerous.

Gobta seized the opportunity. Woo-hoo! That means I don’t have to fight this crazy-dangerous magic-born, right?

He suppressed his joy just long enough to declare “All right, I’ll serve as an observer for this duel, then!” Yep. Definitely an observer. With all his tactics exhausted, that beat just standing there and getting in the way. Rimuru could accept defeat, but he could never accept his people getting killed in action. Gobta wasn’t stupid enough to volunteer to be war casualty number one for Tempest.

“Oh, you can have him if you want,” Alvis playfully said.

“If I take your prey,” Gobta wittily replied, “wouldn’t that hurt your honor as a beastman, ma’am? I don’t need it that bad, so go ahead and fight all you want! Sorry I got in the way!”

Alvis accepted the inane excuse without a word. If anything, it was the luckiest thing to happen to Gobta all day. He had dodged a bullet with this total unknown before him. Alvis had no intention of letting anyone else score this kill anyway, and he had wriggled out of a battle against a foe that completely outclassed him.

Whew. That’s the end of my work!

At the very far end of the rear guard, the group of priests led by Middray was clashing with Gabil’s Team Hiryu.

Of course, only a few were standing by now. Nearly two hundred fighters on both sides were lying on the ground. But Middray was unhurt, his white robes free of dirt and grime, and it was clear he was still going strong.

“Waaah-ha-ha-ha! Not too shabby, you guys. I see you are the descendants of dragons!”

Middray flashed a contented smile, surveying the fallen and pretending the panting and exhausted Sufia in front of him didn’t exist.

“Don’t you ignore me!”

Sufia, half Transformed into her beast form, had used her vastly strengthened physical skills to attack Middray. But the head priest, perhaps sensing this, had simply leaned over to one side, preventing her from landing a lethal blow. The effort had left her wide open.

“Hyah!”

Taking the clawed arm extended out to him, he tripped up Sufia’s legs, picked up her body, and sharply slammed her against the ground. The judo-like throw was unique to the Dragon Faithful.

“I wasn’t ignoring you at all,” Middray happily explained. “I don’t have much opportunity to use this against monsters, so this is rather fun for me. It’s been ages since I had a foe so worthy of that throw.”

This was more than Sufia was willing to bear.

“D-dammit! You, you made me…”

She was being treated like a plaything, her face red with humiliation. But she had to admit it. Middray, this man standing before her, was more powerful than she ever imagined. Now he was surveying the landscape once again, waiting for her to stand up and ignoring her until that happened.

Curse him, he’s treating me like a second-class fighter! And how could my Self-Regeneration fail me like this…?

It was true. Sufia’s skill was not healing any damage, because her physical body hadn’t sustained any wounds. She was exhausted simply because her stamina was tapping out on her, and the force of each slam added to the burden. He was wounding her internally, where the damage wouldn’t be visible.

But Sufia stood up anyway. As the Snowy Tigerclaw, she could not let this affront continue to stand.

“Imagine, a bastard like you serving Clayman. I thought Yamza was the best around here, but I suppose my instincts were correct all along.”

“Yamza? Ah yes, sir. Yamza. He is rather capable, I’ll admit, but not enough to serve as a playmate for me. I may not look it, but I’ve sparred with Lady Milim on regular occasions, you see.”

“Milim… The demon lord Milim?! So you’re the Dragon Faithful?!”

No wonder, Sufia thought. They seemed so different in disposition from the rest of Clayman’s troops. They seemed to enjoy fighting for the sake of fighting, not at all concerned with actually killing their enemies. And compared to the other magic-born, they were all overwhelmingly strong—and enjoying every minute of it.

“Ooh? Say, that dragonewt just felled Hermes! Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha, that was quite a performance!”

Hermes was tangling with Gabil, and Gabil had just knocked him down with his spear.

“F-Father, stop laughing and help me, please!”

“You lost, fool! Just sit there and think about what you could’ve done better!”

He laughed at his associate, lying there on his back and pleading for assistance. He could tell that Hermes wasn’t as bad off as he claimed and that Gabil had no intention of taking his life.

“All right. Counting me, that leaves three remaining. You command a truly wonderful set of fighters, given how evenly we are matched. It proves you’ve honed your bodies and your minds, instead of relying on skills.”

“I suppose I should appreciate the compliment. My name is Gabil. And you are with Lady Milim…?”

“Indeed! I am Middray of the Dragon Faithful.”

“And I am Sufia. Sufia of the Three Lycanthropeers! I have no ear to lend to the servants of Clayman, but if you worship Lady Milim, that is another story.”

“Mm. Lady Sufia, is it? I will make sure to remember that. So what’ll it be now? I could take on the both of you at once, if you like?”

Middray calmly folded his arms, implying that he liked his chances.

“Can I ask you a question before that?”

“Mm? What is it?”

“I… I just mean, how can a mere human be so strong? Or are the Dragon Faithful human at all? Something seems strange about you.”

Middray nodded at this, his curiosity piqued. “What do you mean by human?” he asked. “That’s the crux of it. If you are inquiring about our species, however, the answer is simple. We are dragonewts, like Sir Gabil over there.”

“What?! The same as us?”

“Yes, precisely. The difference is that instead of evolving from lizardmen, we are the descendants of dragons that ‘humanized’ themselves and mated with the human race. But in essence,” he closed with a smile, “we are the same.”

“Ah… And come to think of it, my sister Soka turned wholly human in appearance.”

“Yes. But almost none of us can bring ourselves back to our original shape. The priests you see strewn around us don’t have any skills like Dragon Change or Dragon Body. There is hardly any difference between them and human beings.”

Middray turned his eyes toward Sufia.

“But that power is still handed down. Our worship of the dragon does not allow us to forget the blood within us. Any more questions, Lady Sufia?”

“No. Human, monster, it doesn’t matter. I just wanted to know if your skills were the result of a weak human building himself up to perfection. You say you are little different from humans, and if so, I must pay respect to your efforts.”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You think the same way I do. One may be born with strength, or one may acquire it. Magic-born are so weak because they rely too much on the strength they’ve always had. That’s why they compare their strengths based on magicule capacity and so on. True strength can’t be seen with the eye. The level of your skills is the only solid, trustworthy index there is.”

Sufia was born strong. She had more fighting skill than most monsters, through no special effort of her own. Her massive well of energy, and the surging aura it created, made even magic-born go out of their way to avoid her. Her battle senses made full use of this, and her instincts alone had brought her to where she was. Now, Middray’s words made her realize how little time she had spent polishing her Arts, her learned skills.

“So you mean I can become stronger?”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Precisely. There is no such thing as an experience that can win over being in actual battle. Here, come at me! I’d be happy to spar with you.”

He remained where he stood, arms crossed and standing high.

“Lady Sufia and me at the same time?” a dubious Gabil asked. “Are you sure you aren’t being a little too conceited?”

Middray just grinned at him. “Hmph! I could take you on without even using my arms, little man!”

Gabil wasn’t about to take that sitting down.

“Lady Sufia…”

“We’ll tackle him together. We have to admit it. He’s a strong one!”

The battle between Alvis and Yamza was about to reach its raging climax.

The two were evenly matched, but Yamza had finally used his ace in the hole.

“Ha-ha-ha! Well performed, Lycanthropeer! Your ability to keep up with me is astounding. But now, my victory is assured!!”

“What?”

“Pfft! Did you think this magic sword was my only secret weapon? Yes, you may be strong—strong enough to hold me back. I will freely admit that. However! What if there were two of me?”

With that shouted question, he unleashed the magic inside the bracelet on his left wrist. This was a Doppelganger Bracelet, an incredibly valuable Artifact capable of producing a perfect copy of the wearer, right down to their clothing and equipment. Now Alvis had to fend off two Yamzas at the same time—and if one was an even fight for her, she would have to be at a severe disadvantage.

“Well? If you capitulate to me now, I could be convinced to spare you—”

“So what?”

“…What did you say?”

“You think that parlor trick will outclass me? You really are nothing more than a lackey of Clayman’s. Quite the would-be finisher, there.”

Alvis didn’t give an inch, openly ridiculing her foe.

“Then die!”

And even before Yamza could scream that at her, Alvis played her own final card.

Now the top half of her body was a beautiful woman, the bottom half that of a large, black snake. This was Alvis’s true, Animalized form, and now she was ready to use its full force.

Unlike Phobio and Sufia with their focus on close-quarters fighting, Alvis was usually thought to be a long-range specialist, lobbing her magic attacks from afar. In truth, however, she was a dyed-in-the-wool fighter, masterful at short range in the way anyone serving the Beast Master needed to be.

Her fighting style, however, ventured from the beaten path. Alvis brought her staff up to her forehead—and in the next instant, it disappeared, as she grew a golden horn from above her eyes. Finally free, her aura surged outward from her, greatly amplifying her power. This was her second Transformation and her most secret of abilities.

She stood there, her entire body protected by dragon scales. The whole space around them belonged to her, her aura producing streaks of lightning in the air.

“Wha?!” Gobta spat out, sensing danger. There was no way Alvis could remain coolheaded enough to tell friend from foe like that.

“You said your name was Gobta? You have my permission to move out immediately.”

“Ohhh, you don’t need to tell me twice, ma’am! Riders, retreat!”

One shout from him was all it took to make the goblin riders flee the scene. The surviving magic-born took the opportunity to quickly surround Alvis.

“You fool! You intend to take us on alone?”

It was nothing for her to worry about.

“Is that how little you think of me? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Die, you mob of idiots!!”

By the time Yamza saw it unfolding, it was already too late. One magic-born before him fell to the ground, spewing blood. One turned to stone and shattered against the earth. One had his body literally rot away on the spot, until nothing but a pile of dust remained. His army was being killed, struck by ailments by one degree or another, and Yamza had no way to stop it.

“Yoouuuuuu!!”

Alvis was, in the end, best suited for close-quarters combat. The Golden Snakehorn’s lone horn on her forehead became a symbol of the death that permeated the atmosphere—and then Yamza realized that his defeat was total.

“Surrender, and I will take you prisoner and guarantee you your life.”

Her offer was the only method of survival he had. A quick stare with her Snake Eyes had completely shattered his Doppelganger’s body. It even had the power to destroy equipment, apparently, leaving Yamza’s partner to fade away before battle even began.

…My limbs are starting to go numb. I won’t be able to defend myself before long… What kind of sheer strength do these Lycanthropeers enjoy?!

It was bad luck that Yamza had to be paired with the strongest of that trio. He chose the wrong woman to pick a fight with, and he had no idea. Alvis rarely had the chance to fully exercise her power, since she was often picked to serve a commanding role. As a result, she was seen as the de facto manager of the Lycanthropeers, not as a formidable warrior in her own right.

That was Yamza’s appraisal as well, and he had totally underrated her.

The war was won. But it was not over. Clayman was a sly demon lord, one who would never forgive betrayal among his own armies. And just when Yamza prepared to nod his agreement to Alvis’s offer:

(—You know I would never permit that, yes?)

It was Clayman’s voice, booming within Yamza’s mind. “Uh?” he instinctively grunted. Then his body began moving, beyond his own control.

“S-stop! Stop that! Please, Sir Clayman, stop this at once!”

A hand took a bluish-purple orb out from his pocket, then brought it to his mouth.

“Mmghh!!”

He locked his jaw as tightly as he could, trying to scramble away from it. It was a pointless act of resistance, and it didn’t last long. Struck by Clayman’s Marionette takeover, Yamza’s body was no longer his own to control.

“…What are you doing?” a suspicious Alvis asked. But by the time she did, Yamza was busy swallowing the orb in his hand—a section from Charybdis’s body.

“Hah? Harbhh, nnhhh… Graghaghaaaahhh!!”

“What on—?!”

Alvis tensed up, confused—as long, thin tendrils shot out from his body toward the dead lying around him, taking in the corpses. He ballooned in size, turning into a vast, grotesque ball of flesh. Uncontrollable magical energy flowed within the Alvis-dominated air, forming a hurricane-class blizzard.

The creature before her consumed, expanded, and burst. Having no monster core of its own, it was a self-destructing being, rampaging across the land before meeting its demise. But its temporary power was every bit as strong as Yamza’s—and the nature of it was deadly. Its insatiable desire to eat everything in its path was just the same as well.

This was the “forbidden” tactic Yamza was reluctant to use, the intricate trap Clayman had laid. Charybdis had now appeared once more.

Alvis’s face tightened as she threw her full force into an attack. It didn’t work. No regular strike would ever pierce this constantly expanding Charybdis. Its Ultraspeed Regeneration took in the corpses around it, rapidly reforming it into a temporary body for itself.

“Ngh! This monster…!”

All Alvis could do was gnash her teeth, her Snake Eyes and lightning having no effect. This monster was disaster-class, on a level far, far above her. Even the strongest of the Three Lycanthropeers could do little about it by herself. The only saving grace was that this was a distance away from the main battlefield; there was time before this could start to affect her allies but only until Charybdis could finish creating its body.

Desperation flew in like a violent storm. The worst part was how this monster wasn’t satisfied enough using Yamza as its substitute core—it had taken in his Ice Blade as well, sucking up all the heat around it and making the local temperature plummet. The monster was destroying all in its path, turning its aura into an Ice Blizzard, pummeling the area with icy snow and intense wind. That was scary enough, but what Alvis feared even more was the moment when it released all the heat energy it had taken in.

Those who can teleport out might be fine, but everyone else…

…would die.

“I hate this! May all the gods curse that bastard Clayman!!”

Letting her true nature take hold, Alvis screamed as she continually attacked—again and again, no time in between to breathe. It was all in vain. Even if she scarred Charybdis’s exterior, any damage to the monster itself was light. It just healed itself too quickly.

“Dammit! I’ve just got to get everyone out that I can—”

Even through the desperation, Alvis tried to take the best measures she could. To her, this meant trying to relay a plea to Benimaru to retreat everyone from the battlefield.

In the end, however, this never happened. It didn’t need to.

“You’re ignoring orders, Alvis. I told you to get out if you faced a battle you cannot win.”

There, with no previous warning, Benimaru himself appeared.

“…Sir Benimaru?!”

“Oh, Charybdis, eh? My offense did little against it last time, but how about now?”

He gave her a defiant smile.

“Sir Benimaru, this monster is just too—”

“I know. It’s perfect for testing my current powers.”

Benimaru raised his right hand and grasped it—both Charybdis and his own strength. The fight was over in an instant. His feet planted on the ground, his sword, covered in jet-black flames, slashed the monster’s flesh, although it did not fully slice through its freshly constructed body. But something was different from before. Unlike with Alvis’s efforts, the Self-Regeneration never started. Dark flames were dancing across the gash, rapidly engulfing its entire body.

“Tch. Not quite there yet. We have no time to play with here, so I’ll sadly have to end this.”

He turned back toward Alvis, leaning his sword against his shoulder, seemingly unconcerned with Charybdis.

“My apologies. I was hoping we could spar once it had achieved its complete form, but…”

The gigantic beast had not taken to the air yet, but its body was already nearly the length of half a football field. Now, however, it had been fully encased in a black dome.

“Away with you,” he whispered, and then a percussive boom! shook the land.

It was Hellflare, his wide-range razing attack, this time far more powerful than ever before.

Benimaru’s Dominate Flame gave him a full grasp of the flow of magical energy, stabbing right through Charybdis’s Magic Interference and rendering its body into ash. It proved to the world that Benimaru’s control over magicules completely overpowered this monster’s.

“You’re kidding me!”

Alvis’s surprise was understandable. If his attacks worked on Charybdis, it meant Benimaru’s magic force surpassed the monster’s. This meant that Benimaru himself was disaster class, on the same level as Alvis’s master, the demon lord Carillon.

“I have some business to take care of, Alvis. Effective immediately, I hereby appoint you as my aide to command our entire force.”

“…Yes, Sir Benimaru.”

She undid her Transformation to kneel down and take the post. She had more than a few questions for Benimaru, but now was not the time for them. Calming her frenzied mind, she meekly accepted her orders.

Charybdis was an unprecedented, unexpected threat, but when faced with that irresistible force, it fell without a moment’s delay.

“Hoh, hoh-hoh-hoh… This is quite a surprise. I was expecting Yamza to turn tail and flee. But imagine, dispatching Charybdis that easily…”

“Mm-hmm! I kind of have an affinity for it, but not even we could pull off a kill like that.”

“Clayman’s forces are destroyed. The mission’s a failure—the losses immense. He should have just sat there and played nice, the way our fellow jester told him to.”

“Yes, yes. Well, Laplace warned him. Clayman can’t blame anyone for it but himself.”

Footman and Teare exchanged looks as they spoke. Before them was a heavily wounded Phobio, kept on his feet by the attending Geld.

“We’ll need to brief him about this, so I’m afraid playtime is over.”

Footman himself was unhurt. Teare wasn’t, but she was still healthy enough to fight. Judging by their injuries, Geld and Phobio appeared to have lost the day.

“You think you can leave?” Phobio groaned, staggering as he tried to keep himself up. “I knew you guys were bad news. If we can keep you here, Alvis and Sufia will show up before long. Plus, we’ve got Sir Benimaru. It’ll be the end for you.”

He was scarred from head to toe, but his wounds had already closed up. The speed at which they healed was mind-boggling, going well beyond the Self-Regeneration most beastmen had and almost reaching the realm of Ultraspeed Regeneration. Phobio had inherited that skill to some extent after the previous Charybdis swallowed him up.

“Just give it up already, kitty!” Teare shouted as she gave Phobio a punch that sent him reeling. It didn’t leave Phobio down for long. In a few moments, he was back on his feet.

Teare was the quicker of the two, but she could never quite land a lethal blow. Phobio, on the other hand, was slowly but surely damaging Teare’s body. He might have appeared defeated at first glance, but the longer the fight lasted, the more likely it was that it’d end otherwise.

Footman, meanwhile, was rolled up like a meatball, bounding around at hyper-speed and trying to run Geld down. Geld used his great shield to deflect his trajectory, swinging his Meat Cleaver to try to smash him up. His attempts were blocked by Footman’s thickened skin, preventing him from dealing decisive damage.

On offense and defense, it was safe to call them perfectly even—but only because Footman hadn’t begun seriously fighting yet. And now, with Charybdis defeated, Footman’s recess time was over.

“Mgh?!”

Geld, realizing this, positioned himself in front of Phobio.

“What is it, Geld?”

Before he could answer, Footman began raining attacks on the both of them. These were balls of magic, each one enormous and stuffed with energy—a simple attack but one with enough force to alter the landscape around them. One of the magic orbs was enough to shatter Geld’s shield and even smash up the armor covering his body. It damaged Phobio in the process, and he no doubt had Ultraspeed Regeneration to thank for still being alive.

(Hooooooh-hoh-hoh-hoh! We weren’t tasked with taking care of you two, so we’ll extend you the honor of letting you go.)

(I hope you’re grateful! If we were serious about this, neither of you would be in this world any longer!)

Neither Geld nor Phobio could stand up any longer to contest them. When the dust from the explosions finally settled, Footman and Teare were gone.

“…This was a total defeat,” Geld groused. “I thought I had some strength, but I suppose there’s always someone better than you.”

“No, Geld. If you hadn’t been here, I’d probably be dead right now. Sorry to drag you down…”

“Not at all. We may have lost the battle, but we’re still alive. As long as we win next time, we’re good.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right!”

Phobio was not a weak beastman. Footman and Teare were just too strong. Strong enough that you could even call them demon lords. Perhaps Geld had more magical energy at his fingertips, but without the ability to use it shrewdly, that power meant nothing. Geld focused entirely on defense against Footman, but even he knew that he’d never win in a serious fight opposite him. For now, though, that was fine.

(Sir Benimaru, the jesters have fled.)

(I saw,) came the Thought Communication reply. (They might think they’re letting us live. How naïve of them.)

Benimaru’s orders for Geld were to discover what the enemy was capable of and keep Phobio safe. I couldn’t just sit there and watch things unfold, he thought, but not killing me was a bad mistake. Sir Benimaru has recorded how that battle worked out—and then Rimuru will analyze it and break open the secret to their strength.

Thus, this was a defeat with some benefits to them. Mission accomplished. And if he can’t win now, he can close the gap with his future training. He had hoped to settle the score with these guys for using and abusing him, but Geld simply didn’t have what it took.

But next time, I’m winning, he silently resolved.

(I’ll go back to my command, then.)

(Please do. There’s one more dangerous element on the field right now, so I’d better tackle that.)

Sir Benimaru sure has it tough, Geld thought as he closed the link. This battlefield was full of dangerous elements, and since they had to deal with them all at once, he was forced to divvy up his army’s assets and scatter them around. Benimaru intended to sort these conflicts by priority and step in himself to handle any rescues needed, but one misstep along the line could lead to serious danger. He seemed to be handling his post well, however. One would think he’d focus on finding and killing Footman first, but he successfully managed to put overall victory above his own vendettas.

This isn’t some general with a thirst for blood, I suppose. Compared to when we fought him, the growth he’s shown has been amazing…

It made Geld trust in Benimaru all the more.

It was several minutes into the battle—minutes that, to Gabil and Sufia, felt like hours. But it ended unceremoniously.

“Mgh?!”

“What on…?!”

“Huff…huff… What…what is the matter…?”

After the second or third repetition, Sufia had learned how to roll with Middray’s throws, helping recover her energy. Gabil, meanwhile, had flung his spear wildly around at this attack he wasn’t used to, completely exhausting him. Middray, dealing with them both, appeared completely unhindered by fatigue—compared to sparring with Milim, this wouldn’t even make him break a sweat.

And Middray was the first to notice it.

“All forces, use your healing magics!” he shouted, the casual ease disappearing from his face. “Stand up! Stand up and rouse everyone around here!”

“This is bad, Father Middray,” Hermes said, apparently feeling much better now. “This guy… The reading I’m getting is huge.”

“I know that! This is Charybdis, the beast Lady Milim dispatched just the other day. Or is it its remains?”

“Yeah… It looks unstable to me. I imagine it’ll disintegrate before the day is through…”

“But this is a battlefield. If things go wrong, it could rapidly evolve. Better not to give a monster like that the food it craves.”

The fallen priests around him cast healing spells to revive both themselves and Team Hiryu under Gabil’s command.

“Charybdis?” Sufia asked. “The monster that used Phobio as a core to revive itself with?! I thought Lady Milim had already destroyed it!”

“Yes,” Gabil added, realizing this current match was over. “If it was Charybdis, Lady Milim definitely killed it…”

“Calm down. It’s not the real thing; just a fragment of its force. I think it used Yamza as its replacement core…”

Middray was using Dragon’s Glance to analyze the innards of the creature. It was not as strong as Milim’s own Dragon’s Eye, but it still provided him with ample enough vision and analysis skills.

Hermes, meanwhile, was surveying the area for any other potential threats. “Looks like you’re right, sir. That ass Yamza was trying to kill us, but his soul’s already been consumed. With how he is now, we’ll just have to keep damage to a minimum and wait for him to fall apart,” he coldly concluded.

“Did you hear that? Keep your weapons at the ready, people. And don’t get greedy! If buying time is all we need, that won’t be a tall order.”

“Let us help you out,” Gabil added, in sync with Middray as if they were old friends. “We are more used to high-altitude flight since last time. If we can catch those scale attacks before they strike, they cannot hurt us.”

Even a crazed, twisting beast like Charybdis had a tendency to chase after anything moving. A flying target, Gabil reasoned, would make the perfect lure. Sufia was also thinking unusually lucidly, trying to execute on what she could do here.

“Right,” Middray began, “I’ll aid in the retreat so it can’t feed off any of our ground forces and—”

But before he could finish, things took an abrupt turn as Benimaru all but vaporized Charybdis.

“What…on…?! He just pulled off the most unbelievable thing!”

“…Who is that guy? A demon lord? Unless you’re Lady Milim, how could some regular magic-born do that? He has to be some kind of monster…”

Only Middray and Hermes had an accurate bead on the situation. Sufia and Gabil saw it at the same time but couldn’t parse what just happened. All they could see was that the evil aura of Charybdis had been snuffed in an instant.

“Hey, what’s going on? Tell me!”

“Yes. We seek an explanation as well.”

“Yeah, um, I’d want to explain,” Hermes said, “but…”

“I don’t think we need to,” Middray finished.

Before either of them could, the air in front of them twisted and warped, revealing a magic-born with hair as red as roaring flames. It was Benimaru, sword rested on his shoulder, and he was here to take on Middray, the last threat on the battlefield.

“Well,” he said with a sneer, “I see you’ve been entertaining my friends?” Then he realized something wasn’t quite right about this picture. There was evidence of combat around him, but there were no injuries—and by the looks of things, no hard feelings on either side.

“Sir Benimaru, wait! These are Lady Milim’s fighters, the priests of the Dragon Faithful!”

“What? Lady Milim’s?! In that case…”

“Yes! They healed our wounds with magic!”

“…I see. It seems I’ve jumped to conclusions. You seemed like such a threat in this theater, I couldn’t help but be alarmed.”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You didn’t jump to conclusions at all. We were actually fighting, yes. And we did perform some healing, but that was to prepare for what we thought was an oncoming disaster. Now I suppose all that wasn’t necessary.”

“…Ah. So what now? Are you taking us on?”

“Well, what should we do…?”

“Because personally speaking, I would prefer not to engage in combat with Lady Milim’s forces.”

“No, I suppose not. I can understand wanting to try it, but there is no quarrel between us. I would simply want to compare our powers.”

“Yes… I can see that.”

The two gave each other knowing grins.

“Whoooa!” Hermes interjected. “Not good, Father!”

“Yes, Sir Benimaru! If you hurt one of the Dragon Faithful, there’s no telling what kind of calamity that would bring upon us!”

“You heard her, Father Middray! Sir Rimuru is Lady Milim’s friend. It would all end in tragedy, I am sure of it!”

Sufia silently resented Hermes and Gabil for stepping in.

“Fair enough,” Benimaru said. “Besides, if I don’t come at him trying to kill him, I expect it’ll result in nothing but defeat for me—and I don’t like engaging in losing battles.”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Quite so. And I’m not sure even I could withstand a blow like the one that buried Charybdis!”

Middray might have laughed the concept off, but he had a suspicion that he could win the battle before Benimaru had a chance to bust that out. That would result in a life-and-death duel, however, going well beyond the boundaries of a friendly sparring session. A battlefield was the wrong place for this, and it no longer meant anything anyway.

Thus ended the battle in the former kingdom of Orbic, while the unified forces enjoyed a near-total victory. But this wasn’t the only battlefield.

At the stroke of midnight, Shuna, Soei, and Hakuro sprang into action. They quickly discovered Clayman’s headquarters within the wetlands covered by the mysterious mist and began to stealthily make their way there.

Beyond these wetlands were several murky swamps, gas bubbling out from the surface. This was what created the cloud of mist, making things seem eerier than they already were. The moment they waded in, visibility plummeted to nearly nothing.

“Uh-oh. This mist is blocking our Magic Sense.”

“It is,” confirmed Soei. “That was why we called off our investigation. With this poor visibility, anyone inside would have to rely on their own five senses to ‘see’ around them. That’s what the enemy must use to keep track of what goes on in here.”

“Mm, I see. So we face a brutal disadvantage.”

“Indeed, Sir Hakuro. You and I can use Covert Agent to hide our presences, but Lady Shuna…”

“I should be fine.”

It was true. Hakuro could use his Haze concealing skill to all but disappear to the external observer, as could Soei. You could be standing right next to them and never realize it. Shuna, despite not having this exact Art, could still perfectly heal herself.

“Hmm… A combination of illusory and mystical magic? It doesn’t work like Haze, but it has the same effect. Well done, Lady Shuna.”

Hakuro was right—this approach was Shuna’s original creation. While she wasn’t quite as gifted at it as Rimuru, her Creator unique skill allowed her to conjure up her own magic spells without a recipe.

“Then we should be fine,” Soei said. “But I want you all to remember that Thought Communication won’t work in this fog. Visibility is low, it is hard to stay in contact, and we all need to proceed carefully and cautiously. Also…”

Even with Soei’s Replications, Thought Communication–based conversation would be impossible. Instead, he provided a length of Sticky Steel Thread around each of their wrists for emergency contacts. Focusing on this thread would allow them to maintain at least a modicum of communication, but if the string broke, that would be the end of the contact. Using it required a great deal of caution.

Shuna and Hakuro nodded and wrapped it around their wrists. They were ready now. “Let’s get going,” Shuna said, and the three ran off.

Then, after several minutes of walking, Shuna stopped.

“…Oh no,” she whispered. “We seem to have fallen into a trap.”

“A trap?”

“I can feel my senses going haywire on me, yes, but I don’t feel any enemies around the— What?!”

Before he could finish speaking, Soei felt multiple presences nearby appear from out of nowhere, virtually surrounding them.

“How on…? Where were so many of these enemies hiding, such that we couldn’t notice them?”

“No, Hakuro! They weren’t hiding. We were lured right to them!”

“Ah… This fog. The cloud’s doing more than confusing our sense of direction. It’s concealing the enemy and inviting us right to the middle of their circle…”

“I see. That explains the odd feeling I had just now.”

“You’re right. The mist is triggering Spatial Interference to lure intruders from any direction to a specific place—”

Before Shuna finished explaining this, one of the presences appeared. Soei and Hakuro steeled themselves toward it, keeping a watchful eye out for the still-unseen monsters in the mist, as Shuna closed her mouth and focused on it—a skeleton dressed in a vestment of pure white.

“Such massive magical force,” she whispered, beads of sweat on her forehead. For a moment, she thought it might have been Clayman himself, although she banished the thought quickly. It was past midnight; the demon lord should be over at the Walpurgis Council. Perhaps it was one of Clayman’s five fingers, then—but the figure before them exuded pure presence, beyond that of the Lycanthropeers and approaching demon lord level. The power of this magic-born was overwhelming; it was a wonder that it was subservient to anyone else.

She recalled what Mjurran told her about Clayman’s most senior leaders—and that one of them was geared strictly toward defending their base.

“…You must be Adalmann, then. The ruler of this land—the wight king with power over countless undead…”

Hakuro had just used Heavengaze to reach the same conclusion. But this figure was more ominous than how Mjurran described it, its force far more massive. The guardian of this wetland was a wight king on the level of a demon lord.

Soei accepted Shuna and Hakuro’s appraisal, finding no reason to doubt it. Then, quietly, he sharpened his bladelike mind. No matter who the enemy is, he will kill him—that was his credo.

But just as Soei was about to move, the wight king spoke.

“Indeed, I am Adalmann. I have been ordered to protect this land by the great demon lord Clayman. Lowly intruders like you may do nothing but humbly submit your lives to me. Do it, and I will kill you without pain.”

This was the command of a kingly figure, not the words of a foe who saw Shuna and her companions as equals. Considering the massive, overwhelming amount of Adalmann’s magic energy, anything else would almost seem improper.

Now, all around the area, a legion of over ten thousand undead were writhing, as if attracted to the seemingly inexhaustible supply of magicules. Cracking, wrenching sounds filled the air as they moved to encircle the trio.

“We are fully surrounded,” Shuna breathlessly reported. “This mist is working alongside a directional barrier to prevent teleportation outside. All our means of communication are blocked. The only way to get out of here is to defeat this Adalmann foe.”

“Then we must strike their leader at once.”

“No disagreement here. A blow from me can even kill the dead.”

Hakuro and Soei had no interest in following Adalmann’s advice. As Shuna explained the situation, they both went on the attack. But Adalmann simply laughed in their faces.

“Heh-heh-heh… You appear not to know your place. I generously provided you mercy, and yet, you remain foolish to the end. You will regret refusing that offer shortly.”

He breezily swung an arm. The next moment, the most surprising thing happened—the white blade of Hakuro, instantly zooming within range of Adalmann, was blocked by the knight who had appeared in front of him.

Hakuro stepped back in shock, failing to believe that this killer blow could be parried. This was a death knight, ranked A-minus in the Guild system, but from that clash, Hakuro could sense something was off. It was a powerful monster, yes, but no garden-variety death knight could ever block a slash from him.

“You are no normal adversary. Very well. Let me give you my full attention.”

He had an accurate bead on this death knight and the threat it carried for him. Its strength relied not on physical toughness but on the built-up level of its skills—which meant Heavengaze would tell him nothing about it. So he used his own physical might to confront it.

“……”

The death knight was silent; the corpse serving as the shell of its body was incapable of speech. But there was a blistering blue flame in its sunken eyes. The light of consciousness was in there, the pride of a former human being, and it told Hakuro that his challenge was accepted.

Even after abandoning life, this death knight was a proud, noble warrior. The difference in magical energy between the two was negligible, as was their physical muscle. It marked the beginning of a clash between built-up skills, one that quickly made sparks fly.

Before Soei, meanwhile, was Adalmann himself, an enormous shadow from out of nowhere blocking all attempts to attack him.

“Deh!” Soei glared at the towering shade. “No… A dragon zombie?”

“No, Soei!” Shuna could see it more fully, through the muck. “Nothing that weak! Its magicules outnumber yours; it stands at the peak of the undead—it’s a death dragon!”

Soei’s face tensed upon hearing this. He could manage this solo, but fighting this foe while guarding Shuna was a different story. The usually reliable Hakuro was too busy with the death knight. He had to dispatch this death dragon as soon as possible, or else Shuna would be overrun by the thousands of undead lumbering their way in from all sides. Now, Soei realized, was no time to hold back.

“Then, die! Mystic Thread Strike!”

Without delay, Soei dealt out the most powerful attack he could, a killer move that fricasseed the enemy with thousands of branching strings of Sticky Steel Thread, each granted the Insta-Kill effect from his Shadow Striker unique skill. They created a virtual garden of beautiful, bloody blooms, like a kaleidoscope. Even a half-spiritual life-form like an undead would be snuffed out by this spiritual body-slicing move—or so it should have.

“No! It’s regenerating?!”

Soei could feel himself begin to sweat. The sixty-foot-long beast’s body was ripped apart, seemingly ending the battle. But then, as if nothing was amiss, the death dragon’s body reassembled itself. It went so fast, even faster than Ultraspeed Regeneration, that it seemed like nothing less than immortality.

“Then let me destroy you, soul and all…”

“Soei,” Shuna shouted out as he steeled himself, “calm down! You know how to analyze your foe’s strengths. You should know that you can’t beat a death dragon!”

“But…”

“That dragon’s soul is within the magic-born Adalmann,” she quietly declared. “Don’t worry about me; just work on keeping that dragon where it is. I’ll defeat Adalmann!”

“That’s too dangerous!”

“No, Soei. Listen to me. I’m angry.”

A cold smile stretched across Shuna’s face to dispel Soei’s worries. They shined a piercing light, exhibiting her raging emotions. The sight made Soei clam up, unable to speak.

As the former princess of the ogre tribe, Shuna’s words had the power to make others do her bidding—and now, that power was stronger than even the otherworlder Kirara Mizutani’s Bewilder unique skill. Besides, Shuna wasn’t some precious cargo that required constant protection. Soei knew that. So there was only one answer.

“Yes, Lady Shuna. Best of luck.”

She contentedly smiled. “You too, Soei. That dragon’s all yours.”

Soei nodded back, giving Shuna his full trust, then threw himself back into his own fight.

Shuna, left alone, didn’t waver at all as she confronted Adalmann. The wight king rewarded this by glaring at her.

“Hoh? And what do you intend to do, little girl? What could you do without anyone to defend you? How are you going to engage ten thousand foes at once?”

There was an odd sort of joy in Adalmann’s voice. He was enjoying this, in fact. The demon lord Clayman’s orders were absolute, but Adalmann was still afforded his own sense of free will, although his activities were limited in every other way. The only thing he was allowed full rein to do was wipe out intruders.

Clayman’s other minions derided him for having so much power but so little brains to back that up—and it was only because he was not allowed to leave this land or do anything on his own volition. And it was perhaps the way that he wasn’t even allowed to provide excuses to them that made people fail to realize it.

Adalmann was less a magic-born and more a weapon, a base-defense mechanism bound to this land. His soul remained unbound, but his behavior was now automatic, following the orders input into him. He spoke of his loyalty to Clayman, but that was just an act. He had been preset to pay his formal respects to the owner of this device.

In his heart of hearts, Adalmann wanted to be released from these bonds. That was why he enjoyed talking with Shuna. The defense mechanisms worked automatically; he had no authority to alter them in any way. The chats he had with intruders were his only hobby to speak of, the only thing no one else could interfere with. The demon lord Kazalim, creator of this structure, offered him that much mercy. Or maybe not. But Adalmann wanted to think so. That gesture, after all, was what had allowed him to live all this time, a thousand years or so, without succumbing to insanity.

Even if it was just a measure to keep this system running longer, I have to thank him for that, at least.

And he meant it. That was why he never spared any effort to hammer down intruders, regardless of what he thought about it. But at least he prayed, as he imagined an army of ten thousand undead preying upon Shuna, that it could be done painlessly.

But then her voice rang out sharply once more.

“No need to worry about me. Alignment Field!!”

At that instant, the area within a three-hundred-foot radius of Shuna became holy ground, where nothing of evil alignment could tread. It was another original product of Shuna’s mind, using her experience to Analyze the Anti-Magic Area and Holy Field, then Fuse them together. This barrier obstructed all magicules, but it could also be set to block fire, wind, or any one of the other four major elements, making it a shockingly formidable defensive spell.

“Now we won’t be distracted. If I defeat you, that will destroy the defense system with you at its core, right?”

“…Hmm. Impressive. And you’ve seen through my secret as well. What is your name, girl?”

Shuna was absolutely right. If Adalmann died, the whole base-defense system would crumble. It was structured to bind Adalmann’s soul down, using it to circulate the large amounts of magicules it required. That would no doubt free the death dragon serving him—as well as the death knight, Alberto, who was once Adalmann’s friend and confidant. Shuna had seen all that at a glance, and Adalmann offered her his honest respect for that. Respect and the ever-so-slight hope that she might be able to release him from this pain.

“My name is Shuna.”

“Shuna… Lady Shuna. Then let us settle this for good. If you can defeat me, I will follow your wishes.”

“My, thank you for the polite request. However, all I seek is the destruction of the demon lord Clayman. If you stay out of my way, I could leave you alone to live on this land, perhaps?”

“Heh-heh-heh. I’m not sure that’s possible, I’m afraid.”

“No? I thought you might be capable of conquering the ties that bind you, but perhaps I was wrong. Oh, well. In that case,” she said without a moment’s hesitation, “I will kill you as I intended to.”

If I could conquer them, thought Adalmann, I would have done it eons ago. Kazalim is a man to be feared, a foe no one can hold a candle to. The nickname Curse Lord is not just bravado. And she makes it all sound so easy…

“Then the time for talk is over,” he declared, still having no ill will toward her. “Try to resist me with everything you’ve got!”

………

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…

Adalmann was born a prince in one of the small nations under the jurisdiction of the Holy Empire of Lubelius. These lands were all too weak to have their own standing militaries, instead relying on the Temple Knights sent from the Church’s central headquarters. In exchange, they were required to adopt Luminism as the state religion and provide money and qualified personnel for their knight corps.

The Western Holy Church of the time didn’t enjoy the influence they wielded now; this was before the advent of their Crusader groups. Practitioners who showed talent could be granted the name of “acolyte,” a nonhereditary title, but that was it. In the midst of that, Adalmann was an exceptional performer—and with his elder brother taking over the country and quickly giving birth to an heir, he was free to devote himself deeply to spreading the faith, joining the Church’s missionary corps and quickly making a name for himself.

He was devout to the faith, constantly fascinated by the divine works of Luminus. Never once did he doubt the existence of this lone, true, powerful goddess. That devotion eventually led him to learn the “divine miracles” of the Church’s archbishop class, making him the greatest master of holy magic in his era.

In time, he advanced to the rank of cardinal, the loftiest in the Western Holy Church. In the Lubelius noble hierarchy, he was no one particularly special. But he redoubled his efforts, extending his interests to magic beyond the holy spells he was familiar with. He would hold long discussions about magic with Gadora, one of his best friends at the time, as he incessantly polished his skills. The effort eventually paid off—he became an Enlightened, transcending the bounds of humanity itself.

An Enlightened was a person who retained their human form but on the inside was a demi-spiritual being, similar to a higher-level elemental. Their powers were leaps and bounds above those of a regular human, and they were often seen as defenders of the human cause. This power quickly put Adalmann in a position of immense central authority.

Time passed. Adalmann’s intensive study continued. And eventually, he took the next step forward, to the highest peak of mankind—a Sage. As he did, he was greeted with wondrous news: He would be called to the Inner Cloister, at the top of the Church’s holy mountain.

The offer filled him with joy.

Finally, an audience with Luminus herself!

He always believed that Luminus was real, an unwavering belief that served as the source for all his faith. So he promptly set off for the holy mount, not believing for a moment that it would lead to tragedy. That belief, sadly, would ultimately betray him.

………

……

…

The intense magical battle continued.

“Melt all and wear it away—Acid Shell!”

The aspectual spell Adalmann had just cast conjured balls of liquid in the air, each capable of melting flesh to the bone. They rained down upon Shuna.

She didn’t miss a beat.

“Flame Wall.”

The barrier of fire deflected and vaporized all the magic-infused droplets. Between accelerating her mind to a thousand times normal, possessing superior Analyze and Assess skills, and changing the rules with Cast Cancel and Control Laws, Shuna’s unique skill Parser was made for a clash of magic like this. From the moment Adalmann began constructing a spell, she had a way to deal with it.

“Then how about this? Malicious dead, accept this sacrifice—Curse Bind!!”

This was necromancy, an offshoot of elemental magic that took advantage of the negative energies from ghouls and the undead. Curse Bind was a particularly nasty one, summoning zombies that latched on to anything living—human or magic-born—and drained away their life energy.

Even that wasn’t enough.

“Holy Bell.”

Shuna’s refreshingly clear voice reached Adalmann’s ears, and right after came the tolling of bells he was once well used to hearing. That was all it took to send the grudgeful zombies to the afterlife.

“…It can’t be! Why? Why is a monster wielding elemental magic?!”

Adalmann’s eyes shot open at the divine miracle playing out before him. The magic was deployed all too beautifully, reminding him of his youthful days spent studying.

This was holy magic in the air, something a monster girl should never be able to weave. The unbelievable sight made him scream without thinking.

Shuna smiled as she decided to answer Adalmann’s question, even though she had no obligation to. “Do you find it strange? Perhaps you need a little more imagination. Holy magic is not the exclusive domain of humans; it will work with anyone who believes in the power of miracles, based on the strength of their belief.”

Conventional wisdom in this world stated that holy magic worked by forging a pact with an elemental spirit. This was both right and wrong. The fact that magic-born could cast healing spells indicated that “holy” magic was possible for them without any pact with a holy being. Most humans, and even monsters, didn’t understand that.

The sole condition for acquiring holy magic was having faith—believing in miracles, to put it another way. Good, or evil, didn’t factor into it; the strength of one’s emotions was directly converted into power. That was how this family of magic worked. (This was also the reason why the Dragon Faithful that worshipped Milim could access holy magic.)



Hearing this terse explanation was staggering to Adalmann. I—I was wrong the whole time? I was betrayed. I lost my faith in the goddess Luminus. I thought I would never be able to wield holy magic again…

Luminus betrayed Adalmann—or to be precise, he had been trapped by the supreme leaders of Luminism. He still didn’t know why. Perhaps they feared his rise in power; perhaps it was another reason. All he knew was that Luminus, his goddess, offered him no helping hand.

It’s almost comical, in a way. The Seven Days Clergy tricked me into setting off to quell a large army of undead attacking our people… I never could’ve guessed it was a trap. And thanks to that Gadora conducting magical experiments on me, I’ve been revived as this twisted, reviled figure…

Unaware that he was being led to his grave, he waltzed right into the far edge of the Great Forest of Jura, where he still dwelled today. He was awaited by a legion of undead, led by a dragon zombie. He was accompanied by Alberto, acolyte and his closest friend, along with four knights and an expeditionary force that loved him, and they fought with all their might. It wasn’t enough.

Adalmann fell to the ground—and died once. But then Reincarnation, a Mysterious Art placed upon him by his other friend Gadora, activated and resurrected his soul—a soul that had already been poisoned by the miasma across the land, the malice of the dead around him. He was reborn not as a man but as a wight, transformed into a skeleton. The metamorphosis had caught the attention of the demon lord Kazalim, and now here he was today.

“Thus, if you are incapable of handling holy magic, then I am positive you are incapable of beating me.”

Shuna’s words hit home like a knockout punch, reminding Adalmann that he was still in battle. “Wh-why?” he instinctively asked. “Why did you think I was a master of holy magic?”

“Because of how you look,” came the cold reply. “That white vestment, which only high-level bishops and above are permitted to wear. You were worthy of such fine robes, and yet, you whine and carry on about being unable to conquer such a basic bind like this. I hardly needed to examine you closely to see that you wore that robe simply out of blind attachment to your former holy magic.”

She had him pegged the entire time. He could hear it in her voice.

“Nnnhh… I have let you spout far too much nonsense!!”

Adalmann flew into a rage—not at Shuna but at himself. Seeing his true heart now, something he couldn’t notice until it was pointed out to him, made him both exasperated and enraged at his own spinelessness. But he could also feel an inexplicably refreshing comfort in his heart, like the fog of a thousand years had finally lifted from him. He let his raging emotions drive him to cast another spell.

“I offer this prayer to my god. I seek your divine powers. May my request reach your ears safely—”

Yes. I simply lacked the resolve. Having my beloved friends turn into undead, I couldn’t let myself die and leave them behind… I wasn’t good enough. Necromancy and aspectual magic cannot cleanse the undead. Who could say how many times I wished I could tap into holy magic…

Those “friends” were one reason why Adalmann was bound to this area. He couldn’t abandon the fine men and women who died here but lived on as accursed zombies. And that intent was the bond that tied them to this land. Finally, just now, Adalmann realized the mistake he had made.

So he connected together a complex seal with the bones that were his hands and boldly declared his prayer to the lands above. It was an incantation, as shown by the complicated geometrical shapes that appeared in the air before him.

This girl, Shuna… I have no grudge against her. If anything, I owe her a great debt for opening my eyes. But suicide is forbidden to me. I apologize, but I will need to have you join me—

That apology came from the heart.

The checks placed upon him by Kazalim ranged far and wide, holding Adalmann down—but if he was caught up in the fallout from an attack on the enemy, that was hardly his fault. He planned to destroy himself, taking Shuna along him, for only then could he free the people who unwittingly joined him.

A layered circle of magic spread out, covering Shuna and Adalmann.

“—and render all to dust! Disintegration!!”

“I was waiting for that! Overdrive!!”

Just before Adalmann could complete his spell, Shuna used Parser for a Control Laws rewrite. The results wrested control of the local spiritual elements away from Adalmann, driving them haywire.

“Wh-what…? You have less than a tenth of my magical energy! How could you possibly overwrite my magic?!”

Magicules and spiritual particles were controlled by magical force. Having his magic overwritten could only mean that Adalmann’s force was overpowered by Shuna’s. To him, Shuna looked hopelessly outclassed, but now, at long last, Adalmann realized he was wrong on that score as well.

“Impressive. Let me reward you by releasing you from this land!”

The wight was swallowed up by a flood of light, unable to hear Shuna’s words to the end. She had used magic on him, realizing that someone like Adalmann—at least her equal in terms of holy magic—could collect the energy required to purify the local area. She wasn’t expecting him to break out the most powerful of all holy spells, but luckily for her, she knew how that one worked. That was what made it so easy to overwrite.

The light now permeated the land, enveloping not just Adalmann but all the other undead—cleansing them.

Hakuro and Soei ran up to Shuna.

“I tell you, I wanted to end this sooner, but that death knight was far more capable than I estimated. You saved my life there, Lady Shuna.”

With the land fully cleansed, the death knight reverted all the way down to a lowly skeletal fighter and fell to the ground. Following Adalmann’s will, it had lost any further desire to fight. The sight was enough to make Hakuro realize the battle was over. He regretted losing such a challenging opponent, but protecting Shuna took priority over everything else, and she required his attention right now.

“No, Hakuro, you were a great help to me. You too, Soei, distracting that death dragon’s attention and buying me so much time. If it had fallen out of our control, I doubt we could have won.”

“It shames me that I could not defeat it.”

As Soei implied, the death dragon was a powerful foe, capable of healing light damage instantly and boasting an aura that infected the mind of anyone who touched it. It took someone like him, capable of controlling multiple Replications at once, to emerge from that unscathed. If anything, he deserved praise for holding out so long against a foe that shut down his decisive weapon.

The death dragon, too, vanished upon Adalmann’s defeat, unable to maintain its existence after the magicule supply that powered it was shut off. Soei didn’t much like how it ended, but anything you can walk away from is a victory.

A victory, yes, but one with regrets. The three looked at one another and sighed.

“Still,” muttered Shuna, “if Adalmann had engaged me seriously from the beginning, none of us would be alive, would we? I think I let my anger drive me to be a little too reckless.”

Adalmann never let up on her at all during the fight, but he also never attempted anything underhanded to snare her. If he really intended to kill them all, he could’ve done so in many other ways. Shuna could see that, and it filled her with regret.

“Quite true,” Hakuro commented. “Perhaps our new strengths have made us grow a tad conceited.”

“Certainly. It is just as Sir Rimuru fretted about. There is no telling what may happen in battle. I should have gathered more intelligence.”

In the end, however, a win was a win. Clayman’s domain had lost its main line of defense. But that didn’t end things. The trio had a job to do—seize Clayman’s castle and fully neutralize the threat inside.

Noncombatants comprised the majority of the people remaining in the castle, none of whom signed any oath of loyalty to Clayman. The more quick-witted among them, or those who took the employment simply for money’s sake, surrendered without a hint of resistance. There were also many who were restrained in the castle by mental or spiritual bonds, but a combination of persuasion and magical de-cursing on Shuna’s part allowed them to capture the entire castle in short order.

With the occupants neutralized, it was time to start searching. They had already confirmed that the demon lord Carillon wasn’t being held here, but they wanted to seek out anything they might be able to use against Clayman.

As they did, a figure approached them.

“…Please, one moment.”

“Mm? You’re still alive? Did you need me to finish you off?”

“Wait, Hakuro. He has no will to fight left.”

It was Adalmann, and Shuna had to calmly keep Hakuro from drawing his sword. The wight fell to his knees, accompanied by a single skeletal fighter.

“Please, allow me to call you Lady Shuna. Thanks to your magic, all of us have been released from the bonds that tied us here. Perhaps it was fate that kept us alive without being cleansed. I have a request that I hope you will let me propose.”

“…What is that?” a quizzical Shuna asked, fearing this would be yet more trouble for them.

“Thank you for hearing me out. I was hoping I would be able to meet the figure that you have devoted your faith to, Lady Shuna. When I lost my faith, I also lost the chance to ever reach the heights of my power ever again. My faith in my goddess Luminus is dead—and I need to find a new god for myself.”

“““……””” The three each gave Adalmann incredulous looks.

“I… Well, we have a great respect for Sir Rimuru, yes, but we don’t worship him,” Shuna stammered in reply.

“Sir Rimuru, you say?” Adalmann was unfazed, still eager to sell himself. “Truly a wonderful name, one fully worthy of describing the glories of my new god. We may merely be a pair of fragile undead, but I believe we may be able to offer you assistance. Lady Shuna, would it be possible to arrange an audience with this Sir Rimuru?”

Shuna wanted to remind Adalmann of the difference between blindly, unconditionally worshipping someone and treating them with respect while dealing with your problems by yourself. But she didn’t. It seemed like too much to get into. Instead, she conjured up a mental image of Rimuru, the boingy slime she knew.

Well, why not? Once he sees Sir Rimuru in the flesh, that might be enough to make him give up.

Adalmann seemed to be the type who got the wrong impression of people easily. It would take time to persuade him to think otherwise, so Shuna figured it’d be expeditious for everyone involved if she just nodded and said yes.

Once the dust settled, Shuna was in command of Adalmann and the several thousand undead that “survived” the battle (or whatever it was that undead did). Clayman’s castle was now fully conquered.