

CHAPTER 3

THE BATTLE TOURNAMENT

I had way too much to drink.

As a rule, I can drink as much as I want and never get buzzed off it, but that problem was overcome by toning down my Cancel Poison ability a little. That was a trick Luminus had taught me, and at a festival like this, let me tell you, I was treasuring it. I used that trick last night as well, distracting Raphael just long enough to pull it off and enjoy the pleasant feeling of drunkenness for a while.

The result was this very unexpected headache. Can I do anything about this?

…Unfortunately, your Cancel Pain ability has also been weakened. The pain is likely to continue for the time being.

Oh, come on, that is so on purpose…

I knew how angry Raphael was last time. I bet it’s even worse now…

Understood. This fact cannot be confirmed.

It’s a “fact,” huh? And why isn’t Cancel Pain working? It’s got nothing to do with any of that! It’s crazy!

My complaints apparently weren’t making it to Raphael. I was not-so-graciously ignored, and so I had to fight that headache for a while afterward. I regretted it—a little—and vowed to be more careful next time. Of course, I think that every time, so I’ll probably make the same mistake again soon.

…

I’m sorry.

I know I did this, so please ease the pain a little!

……

Raphael’s exasperation was loud and clear—but after a little while, the pain went away. Let’s try being a bit more careful, for real, next time. Food, after all, can be a sort of poison—not eating it will kill you, but eating too much can wreck your body. Drinking, then, is the same thing—or was that stretching it a little too much? I mean, I should just sit back and enjoy the buzz a little more instead of trying to force matters…but I just can’t help but try keeping up with my friends.

After I stopped by a few places with Mjöllmile and the gang, I decided to go on an “inspection” of the members-only, elf-run club on the ninety-fifth floor of the Dungeon. This was the fanciest club in our nation, passing itself off as a place where only the truly elite gain entry.

For now, it was open to our foreign dignitaries for advertising purposes…and that turned out to be not so smart of an idea. The place was hopping, full of people who couldn’t forget the music they experienced that day and people arguing over the new potion discoveries they just learned about. Gazel and Vester were among them, and once we were spotted, I had to hang out with them for a while. We hit it off, drinking and talking well into the night—and all the praise heaped upon my friends spurred me to get really drunk. I regret that now, but I think anyone there would understand.

And I wasn’t the only one. All the other dignitaries were the same. Which, hey, they paid big money for the privilege, so it’s all good.

Besides, something else good came from it. A drunken Gazel offered to help me with the gold coins we were missing—and then Archduke Erald came along and promised he’d bring our predicament under consideration.

It was all thanks to the power of alcohol.

…

…And so, with somewhat fatigued faces, all of us prepared to tackle Day Two of the Founder’s Festival.

We were at the newly completed coliseum, a gigantic arena that comfortably seated fifty thousand. A roof that jutted over the stands kept direct sunlight from hitting them, extending in a U shape across the arena. It was composed of a thin, membrane-like sheet stretched over a framework that looked like the wings of a dragon—which, really, was designed that way because I thought it looked cool. I wanted something all ominous like that. It really was there to block the sun, but that wasn’t what anyone in attendance thought. They looked up at the eerie sight, telling one another about how surprised they were. It even got some of our weirder attendees oddly excited.

The stands were full now, not an empty seat in the house. Mjöllmile had worked to get people into the coliseum, and now his efforts were paying off. He didn’t leave a single stone unturned. He might’ve been down in the dumps last night, but there was no doubting it—he was a damn capable man.

The flat arena space the stands surrounded was our combat zone, the floor built from gigantic stones carved and buried in the ground. These hard rocks, each around six feet square, were placed in neat tiles to form the foundation. The spaces between them were filled with cushioning that also glued them together, forming what looked like a completely smooth rock surface.

I had crafted this in the short time we had to work with. Regular rock is over three hundred times as solid as concrete, but the type I used here was infused with a great deal of magicules, upping that hardness to ten thousand times—extending six feet into the ground. Not even a nuclear shelter could give you that kind of sturdiness. I haven’t actually tried it, but I bet it would withstand a bout of nuclear magic without a problem—and it was impervious to both magic and physical attacks.

Around this rock-floor arena were two defensive barriers. The first one was a large magic circle that covered the floor and extended out below the stands—covering the whole ground area so we could use this arena for battle training later. The second one was a circular zone one hundred and fifty feet in diameter, where spectators could easily see it. It was within this magic space that the fighting would take place in this tournament.

The purpose of these dual barriers was to ensure the arena stayed intact and keep stray fallout from hitting the stands. The first one blocked magicules from getting in or out but didn’t block any abilities unleashed inside it. This created fears that a powerful-enough spell could impact the area around it, and that’s where the second barrier came in. If things really got hairy in there, I could invoke Uriel, my ultimate skill, and use it to trigger Absolute Defense. I really didn’t want to show it off in public, but it beat having to deal with injured spectators. The skill triggered in an instant anyway, so I doubted anyone would even notice.

With all these precautions, I figured we were set to go. The two barriers alone should handle matters well enough. When my own staff fought in the arena, all bets were off, but the other fighters who qualified for today wouldn’t have enough firepower to break through them. Then again, I wasn’t expecting Masayuki the Hero to join in…

Passions were high in the coliseum. Why wouldn’t they be? The battle tournaments in Englesia were massive events, held every year and featuring contests divided by adventurer rank. In a world without many good entertainment options, a spectacle like this was a festival in itself. However, it wasn’t actually open to the common classes. Only the monied were allowed in; the others had to sit tight and await the results. Some people would try getting a peek of the action from atop a roof or column, but I was sure it would’ve been too far away to see much.

Compared to that, our coliseum had tiered seating, providing space for all the throngs—and there were even giant screens on all four sides showing the action, a nice extra service. Optical magic was inscribed on these screens, making enlarged imagery like this a snap. Some of the attendees at yesterday’s presentation must’ve guessed it was an adaptation of the projector they saw previously. The screens here were drawing even more interest—again, great PR for us.

It was important to cover all the little details like this for our sales pitch. That’s the first step to success, one of the lessons I learned during my time working for a company.

So essentially, you could see the action from any seat in the arena, and the screens were there to give you a close-up vantage point, so I didn’t think we’d be disappointing anyone here today.

And now the competitors were approaching the center of the stage, forming a line that faced the VIP boxes we were seated in. The screens showed each one in turn, in enough detail that you could gauge their facial expressions. They all certainly looked unique in their own way—and I knew at least a few of them. Gobta and Geld, of course, but that wasn’t all…

I basked in the surprise as the introductions began. Each one would get their own little intro, the screens changing their viewpoints to offer a close-up view of the fighter being described. The announcer was Soka, a dragonewt working under Soei, and she began by announcing the six winners of the battle-royale rounds.

“First, our most popular competitor! Winner of the first battle yesterday, his name is Masayukiiiii the Herooooo!!”

She was really getting into it, standing right in front of the competitors with her face unmasked. This wouldn’t affect her work as a covert agent of ours, would it?

“Not a problem,” Soei, on standby next to me, said when I asked. “She is disguised when on duty, and Soka is particularly gifted at concealing herself. Besides, we need someone among our ranks to serve as a known figure, for the purpose of public events.”

If that was his take, I saw no need for worry. She clearly had a gift for emceeing anyway.

“No one has seen his graceful sword skills in person. Why? Because the moment he takes out his blade, his opponent is already dead!”

So how did he win anything up to now? You could get away with that kind of hype in a street fight, maybe, but Masayuki was winning big tournaments, right? Maybe he would finish off a competitor in one blow, but could he trick an entire audience like that?

“How did his fight go yesterday?”

“To be honest, there was little we could learn from it…”

As Soei put it, Masayuki hadn’t even unsheathed his sword. Some of his friends were among those fighting in his round, and they apparently dispatched all the other fighters—a good fifty of them—before conceding victory to Masayuki. There was no chance to gauge his skills at all. If he had this large a fan base, he clearly had to have some ability—but I still couldn’t shake the feeling this was all a big put-on.

Ah well. We’ll see what he’s really made of in the match today.

“With his overwhelming force, he’s become a household name, declaring himself a Hero at his tender age! But what does Masayuki have in store for us today?! Many are those charmed by his sweet face, and many are the women who swooned after one glance from him! Now it’s time for all of us to count our blessings, as we’re about to see him break out everything he’s got!! It’s Ma! Sa! Yu! Kiiiii!!”

“Yeaaaaah!!” the audience shouted, buying into Soka’s hype. Masayuki was hugely popular, wasn’t he? But…I mean, really? He’s actually that popular? Also, did Soka come up with that script? If so, she’s got a hidden talent. Half of that was pure garbage, the other half bare-faced praise. Where did “Ma! Sa! Yu! Kiiiii!!” come from anyway? It all but melted my brain as I was listening to it. And it had to be hard for Masayuki, too—what if he got touted like that and lost in the first round? I’d be too ashamed to show my face. If anything, it was a really mean-spirited way to introduce him.

It had to be Soka backhandedly slamming him, I thought. No wonder she was Soei’s closest assistant. Malicious.

The next contestant was Jinrai the Mad Wolf. He had a grizzled-hero feel, and despite his shabby equipment, he just looked like a badass. One of Masayuki’s friends, too. By the looks of things, he wasn’t an A rank in terms of strength, but I still felt like you couldn’t go easy on this guy. There was a secret lurking around him, if you asked me, and I decided to keep a close eye on his match.

Contestant number three was a man named Gaiye the “Flowing Swordsman,” whose skills with a blade were his main draw.

“He dances like a seasoned performer during battle, stealing the hearts of all who watch! Will he show us his graceful moves today, as the blood sprays around him like crashing waves?!”

Whoa! Scary! Dancing around spraying blood is kind of twisted, isn’t it? He didn’t look as muscular as Jinrai, but depending on those sword skills, maybe he could rank an A? He didn’t look like that much of a threat, but I’m sure he was a talented adventurer.

The fourth and fifth contestants were familiar to me. They were the chiefs of the bovoids and the equinoids.

“Um, why are they here?” I asked Soei.

“Well, there have been some rumors spreading around…”

“Rumors?”

“Yes. You know, your offer of naming the champion one of the Big Four…”

“…What?!”

For whatever reason, word had gotten out—I figured Gobta or someone must’ve blabbed about it. As a consequence, large number of monsters had requested last-minute entries in the battle-royale matches, apparently, resulting in over three hundred competitors and one raucous time at the arena yesterday. This included the bovoid and equinoid leaders, competing against each other as much as the rest of the crowd, and they were both lucky enough to reach the quarterfinals. Or maybe luck wasn’t involved. They were both formidable creatures, easily worth an A rank, and an adventurer off the street probably wouldn’t stand a chance.

Still, really, both of them?

There were a few monsters ranked A-minus in each of their preliminary rounds, apparently, but they literally trounced them all, throwing them around like rag dolls. That’s what being such powerful bovoids and equinoids got for you. Or to be more specific:

“…The winner of the fourth preliminary, Boooooooovix!!”

…Ah, right. I’d named the leader of the bovids Bovix—and to keep from playing favorites, I’d also named the equinoid head Equix.

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This was, of course, so I could have them serve as bosses inside my labyrinth. I wanted one of them to rule the roost down on Floor 50 or (as I suggested to them) maybe even swap duties regularly. They said they had sworn their faith to me, so I didn’t hesitate to put them to work—in exchange for naming them.

I was used to how this process worked by now, so I tried to hold back my magicule energy as much as I could when naming them, but they went and evolved on me anyway. Bovix was now a tauroid, while Equix became a centoid—and given that both were A-ranked before, they had become far stronger than I expected.

Plus:

Question. Am I allowed to apply an experimental Skill Gift to the subject Bovix?

Yes

No

Raphael…er, Professor Raphael seemed awfully excited about the idea. Apparently, in addition to Combine/Disassemble and Ability Adjust, there was a high chance that Belzebuth’s Food Chain ability could be reversed to grant a skill to a named target. The conditions and compatibilities involved were a bit tricky, but Raphael was eager to try it out, so I thought yes to myself.

Report. Granting the extra skill Ultraspeed Regeneration to the subject Bovix… Granted.

The professor pulled it off.

Bovix had already received the extra skill Self-Regeneration when he evolved, and Raphael just applied Ability Adjust to that. What a surprise—and, in much the same way, Equix just acquired Magic Interference, granting both of them a unique addition to their arsenal. It was clear that Bovix could become a melee-attack specialist now, while Equix would focus on magic attack.

And Raphael’s experimentation didn’t end there. The guy even managed to give them an ability I had never heard of before…

…the Unique Gift known as Determiner.

This gift allowed the user to create a space that restricted the powers of the target, a sapping skill that sort of combined the ultimate skill Uriel’s Unlimited Imprisonment and Dominate Space. But it was an inferior version—easily resisted; the space it created was readily canceled out by the target. Not very restrictive at all, really. But if the caster was vastly stronger than the target, they could still drag them into a dedicated space where they’d have the advantage in battle, so a little innovation could still make it useful.

It’d depend on the opponent, really. In an evenly matched battle, it’d never succeed but could still trick a foe if you used it right. In fact, you might even be able to use it as a defensive barrier to reduce that foe’s attack. And if you built a space around yourself where magic was prohibited… Hmm. You could do some really neat stuff with it. Equix would be working in the labyrinth, too, so maybe he could use this skill to dangle some bait in front of adventurers, offering to make more treasure chests appear or whatever.

With this skill, the pair looked more like boss-level foes than ever. And they joined this tournament only because they were attracted to the completely cosmetic title of “Big Four”?

So yes, apparently they had a bet going with each other. Whoever won it joined the Big Four, and whoever lost became the boss of Floor 50.

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It gave me a headache, really—but then I suppose those two were a perfect fit for this tournament.

“Next, we have Bovix’s eternal rival, Equix!! They’ve fought for a hundred years, and still their conflict continues! Will we see a final resolution here in the arena?! Their combined powers will soon summon new winds of carnage, lashing across the entire tournament!!”

Soka nimbly weaved together the words. She was loving this, and clearly she had a talent. She had good looks, too; the audience seemed to like her. There was the tail and wings and horns to consider, but that didn’t get in the way of being “cute,” really.

“And what’s more, either Bovix here or Equix here will become one of the masters of the Dungeon, scheduled to open in town tomorrow!! So behold their strength today—and if you feel worthy of the challenge, summon your courage and plunge into the labyrinth in search of fame and fortune!!”

Actually, she was beyond loving this, advertising the labyrinth for me and everything. Tomorrow was its grand opening, and much of the audience probably didn’t have any idea what it was yet. And given how strong this pair was, would there be anyone stouthearted enough to tackle it? I feared this was a tactical blunder on our part, but then, many adventurers in this world did tend to overestimate their abilities. Let’s hope a lot of them will dive in, attracted by all the money and prizes. Mjöllmile had all kinds of plans underway for it. It ought to be fine.

So which of them was going to win? Depending on the draw, they might never actually face each other. After all this buildup, if one of them got whipped here, it’d sure make us look pretty lame. A lot would depend on the battles to unfold today, but if they didn’t pan out, people might think the Dungeon was a big pushover. We’d have to tackle that possibility if it happened. Besides, if people thought they’d have an easy time in there, that’d just attract more challengers looking to strike it rich.

No need to rig the drawing, though. Let’s just see how it works out.

Still, Equix was the fifth challenger. That left three to go, and just one from yesterday’s rounds.

“Moving on, our fifth competitor—the mysterious masked man who showed unbeatable strength yesterday! Under his lion mask, he remains anonymous; is he a defender of justice or a servant of evil?! And how will he charm us all on the battlefield today?!”

Pfffttt!!

The moment I laid eyes on “Lion Mask,” I spat out the juice I was drinking.

“S-Soei! Is that…?”

“Yes, there is no mistaking him…”

He didn’t name him, but Soei was just as sure of his identity. Didn’t Diablo tell me “none of them would be a concern”? What is he, blind? …That, or Diablo was being way overconfident.

…But forget about Diablo a moment. I could see a trio in the arena cheering Lion Mask on, tears in their eyes. One was tall, with a tensed-up body, a gentle face, and an earring. Another was a huge pile of muscle with a nose ring, and the third was short, squat, and straight-up fat, with a pierced lip. They had wild hairstyles in funky colors, and…well, why beat around the bush? These were Daggrull’s sons.

You could tell because they had clothing on with slogans like SHION FAN CLUB!! and SHION 4 LIFE on them. That’s them, all right. Ever since Shion beat the crap out of them, they’d become her biggest fans. Maybe this was some form of masochistic fetish they’d developed after getting their asses handed to them—I don’t know; that’s not a world I want to get intimate with.

I wanted to ask if they were feeling all right, but I suppose that if you didn’t know Shion, you’d see her as this cool, intelligent beauty. That’s how I had thought of her at first, too, actually. But ahhh, who cares? Let them be. It’s a matter of time before they learn the truth and their dreams are shattered, but that was the life they chose. We had agreed to keep a half-hearted eye on them and put them under Shion’s training, but…

“Hey, Soei, why is that trio cheering for Lion Mask?”

“…Because they all lost to him yesterday, I would imagine.”

Aha.

They might’ve looked like jokes, but they did have the magical energy of a former demon lord. Shion had whipped them thanks to their lack of battle tactics, but they weren’t pushovers at all. In fact, they probably still ranked above the recently evolved Bovix and Equix—and if this masked fighter beat all three of them at once, there was no longer much doubting his identity.

“How disappointing. I’ll need to work them harder than ever now.”

Shion seemed angry at them, but honestly, I had some pity for the brothers. They messed with the wrong guy, is all. They were too cocky for their own good, I’m sure, but against a former demon lord who still packed one of the meanest punches in the world, it was like a grown-up pitted against a team of kindergarteners. It’d be crazy to expect them to win.

Still, though… All three of them getting thrown into the same match? Against that monster? Talk about bad luck on all sides. One of them could’ve had a chance at the grand prize if things had worked out otherwise. But Shion was revving to “train” them more than ever now, so let’s look forward to that.

“…Ahhh, and I’ve just received a message from a certain anonymous fan. It says: ‘I can’t be here, but you better do your best for me! I know you know this, but don’t let anyone discover your secret identity, no matter what! Good luck!!’ Whatever could that mean? I don’t know, but it sounds like a nice message of support for Lion Mask!!”

Of course she knew. Soka knew, and she was enjoying it. Had Milim gotten in touch with her at some point?

Right now—according to what she’d told me, at least—Milim was busily applying the final touches to the labyrinth. I let her go, since it beat her getting in my hair over here, but I never thought she’d meddle with me like this. I hadn’t called Veldora over here, either; he should be with Milim and Ramiris right now, having fun building the Dungeon and losing all sense of time. I didn’t want him getting too excited and razing the place, which was one reason I didn’t invite him. Milim throwing an underling into the arena was a surprise, but Veldora, at least, didn’t have anyone like that to turn to.

So who would win it all here? Lion Mask had a massive strength advantage over anyone else, and while Geld couldn’t match that, I figured he had the best chance at him out of anyone. I wanted him to win, but it’d be an uphill battle, huh? At least Lion Mask’s victory wouldn’t lead to any problems, unless there was some kind of double-KO situation with Geld. I also wanted to see what would happen if he drew Masayuki. The Hero had to fight sometime, after all, if he wanted to win, right?

Either way, good luck to the guy.

Those were the six qualifiers from yesterday. That just left the special entries.

“And now to introduce the strongest of the strong! The greatest among the government officials of Tempest, two titans joining us in the coliseum! Each of them boasts the offensive force of a thousand—and if they win, they’ve been promised a position in Sir Rimuru’s vaunted Big Four!!”

The rumors had already spread like wildfire, but hearing the term Big Four get bandied about was honestly embarrassing. For Shion, though, it was a badge of pride—and I could see the monsters in the audience looking at Gobta and Geld with awe. Everyone seemed to see a lot more value in the Big Four than I originally envisioned.

“First, the elite fighter whose aloof demeanor makes all the girls go wild, the warrior captain who takes his genius in stride—Gooooobtaaaaa!! Ladies and gentlemen, what are we going to see from him today?!”

Aloof? Are you sure you’re using that word right? And Gobta was visibly pale up there on the arena floor. I thought I could hear him internally shouting, I’m outta heeeeeere! I could see why. He was completely outclassed by Lion Mask. If they were to face each other in battle, he’d be beaten beyond half to death even if the guy went easy. Sorry, Gobta. I wasn’t quite expecting this. If you want to resent anyone for this, resent Milim for putting her ringer in on a total lark.

But maybe… Hey, if Gobta really strove for it, maybe he could tap into some kind of hidden strength, you know? For all we knew, he might suddenly awaken to amazing powers, the likes of which not even I’ve spotted on him so far.

…

This ought to be fun! I could see the path ahead for Gobta was just beginning.

Anyway, that just left Geld.

“And with the warm-up acts introduced, I now present to you the star performer—Sir Geld, the high orc savior!! The guardian angel of Tempest, his iron-wall defense repels all would-be attackers!!”

Whoa there, Soka. Did you really call everyone up to now, Gobta included, “warm-ups” and give Geld more of a straight-up intro? He’d been a top official of mine for a while, yes, but… You know, Gobta’s an old veteran by now, too. I guess it’s just a matter of status. If Gobta somehow wins this, maybe Soka would start treating him a little differently.

“Now we have all eight competitors in the ring! Who’s going to reign supreme? The fateful moment is about to arrive!!”

Oops. If she was done introducing everyone, it was my turn to step up and give an intro. I forgot I was supposed to say some opening words in front of the fighters. But I didn’t want to look like I was panicking—that’d just be sad. Rigurd was taking care of our dignitaries for me, so I left Benimaru to guard them, ordering Soei to watch over the whole of the arena for me.

Then I stood up and headed over, trying to act calm and composed as I used Dominate Space to connect a path from the VIP seats to the main arena. When I passed through to the other side with Shion, I was greeted by deafening applause.

“Raaahhhhh!!”

The sight of me filled our residents, and those from nearby nations, with excitement. I had to respond to them. It gave me a little stage fright, but I worked hard to act all high and mighty, like a demon lord should. Taking the mic from Soka, I turned to the competitors.

“Fighters, if you survive through the end of today and win the final round tomorrow, I will grant you the glory of my nation…”

Does that work? I kept my pace slow, giving my best shot at a voice of authority.

Next up, I suppose I ought to give a little encouragement to each of the entrants.

“Masayuki the Hero… Win, and I will invite you to challenge me.”

We’d already worked out that promise. Masayuki didn’t look the least bit happy about it. In fact, he winced, as if to say, What do I get out of that? …Nope. It just didn’t seem like he wanted a fight at all. I couldn’t hate him for that.

My eyes went from him to the next fighter. “Mad Wolf” Jinrai, right? Masayuki’s friend.

“And you’re ‘Mad Wolf’ Jinrai, correct? Do you have any requests?”

Soka deftly brought another mic to Jinrai.

“Oh! I wasn’t expecting you to talk to me, too. I have only one hope, and that’s to help Masayuki. Sorry, but there’s no way I’m gonna be champion. But instead of that, I’m sure the Hero’s going to defeat you for us!”

Um, okay. If Jinrai draws Masayuki, then that battle’s pretty much decided already. No, I guess he’s not gonna win.

“Very well. In light of your sportsmanship, no matter what results we see, I will prepare a new weapon and armor set for you. Please consider it a token of my respect for a gallant warrior.”

Given the occasion, I figured a reward along those lines was suitable. Masayuki’s band joining the tournament certainly put a lot more butts in our seats. I wanted to repay him for it…but more than that, I wanted to impress the world with how bighearted I was.

“Hmph! Well, if you’re givin’, I’m takin’, but don’t think you can win me over with bribery, okay?”

With a final snort, he handed the mic back to Soka. He had a lot of sass, but I thought my kindness came across to him. He wouldn’t have accepted it at all otherwise.

Next I faced Gaiye the Flowing Swordsman. He spoke first.

“Demon lord, I am far more powerful than that ‘Hero’ over there! If I win, you’ll fight with me, won’t you?”

Um? That came out of nowhere. I was a terrible ad-libber, so I wasn’t sure how to respond—but then I received some unexpected help.

“That is very rude to Sir Rimuru. If you insist upon it, then I will be glad to engage you after you emerge as champion. Win against me, and I will make the request to Sir Rimuru himself.”

Diablo, our referee at the side of the arena, flashed a cold smile as he spoke to Gaiye. Whew. Yeah, let’s just leave this to Diablo. I didn’t need any more trouble in my life.

“At the moment,” I said, “I’ve made a personal promise to the Hero. But if anyone else here wishes to challenge me, I invite you to defeat a Big Four member first to prove your strength. Do that, and I will gladly accept your request!”

This “Big Four” concept was proving kinda versatile. I could use it in all kinds of ways, this one included. The more you know.

Soka finally got around to giving Gaiye a mic.

“Heh. A fine way to dodge the question. So be it. To the Hero, to that demon, and to you, demon lord—know that you will all be bowing to me soon!!”

Hoo boy. Talk about being in way over your head. He should really save that talk for after he wins. Better end this conversation before Diablo loses his temper.

“…‘Flowing Swordsman’ Gaiye, if you should emerge as champion, I will grant you the special right to challenge me. How’s that sound?”

Screw it. Let’s move on. He’s not gonna, after all, so no need to overthink that promise much. I could hear Gaiye snort and say, “You better keep your word,” but my eyes had already turned to Bovix and Equix. The two of them promptly took a knee.

“I expect big things from you both. Even if you fail to win in this arena, remember that you will be rulers of your domain in the labyrinth. Do not disappoint us.”

Did that sound good? It came across a bit like a threat, but I couldn’t have a labyrinth boss fleeing for his life in public. They were free to lose, but I wanted them to show off at least a little before they did.

“Yes, my lord! By the name you granted me, I, Bovix, swear I will not stain your reputation as I give everything I have to the battle!!”

“And I, Equix, promise you we will honor your glory. As members of this great nation, we will bestow great prestige to it in our fighting!!”

Good, good. A little stiff, but at least they were prepared for battle. And even if they lost, they could take turns guarding the area halfway down the Dungeon. I didn’t think either of them had a chance here, but let’s just make sure they don’t embarrass themselves.

Which brought us to this guy.

“Uhhh, ‘Lion Mask’… Don’t be too reckless up here, okay?”

“Whoa, whoa, that’s all you got for me? Be serious!”

“I am serious. So, um… Yeah!”

There was nothing I could say to him. I could ask him to withdraw or wish him good luck, and it’d all just seem so weird. I’d be willing to cheer for him depending on who he drew, but if he got paired with (for example) Gobta, that’d be a nightmare. Masayuki would be a perfect opponent for him, but I wasn’t gonna pin my hopes on that.

If his identity got exposed somehow, that’d shake people’s faith in all of us. It’d be a huge wasted opportunity. Honestly, I couldn’t do much apart from hope for the luck of the draw.

Onward.

“Gobta! Great job making it this far!”

“Um, I had a bye—”

“I just know you can win this! I believe in you!!”

I gave him the best pep talk I could, completely ignoring his response. Nowhere to run for him. I was sure he’d do his best to win, in his own way.

And that just left Geld.

“Geld, you’re a strong orc. I want you to use that strength to the hilt in this tournament!”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru!”

I expected big things from him. “Wish I heard some of that from you,” I could hear Gobta say, but I was done with him. Geld was more the strong, silent type, so we were finished in short order. The rest, I was sure, he’d demonstrate with his actions.

After that, it was time to draw the matchings for the tournament. We’d be staging the quarter- and semifinal matches today, with the championship fight slated for tomorrow. That meant six fights today, and we weren’t going to hold a third-place match, so tomorrow would consist of a single bout.

The competitors all drew numbers at random—Masayuki number three, Jinrai number four, Gaiye number five, Bovix number one, Equix number two, “Lion Mask” number eight, Gobta number six, and Geld number seven. These were then put in a bag and picked, one at a time, the resulting pairings being added to an onstage bracket.

The results:

Match One: Bovix vs. Equix

Match Two: “The Hero” Masayuki vs. “Mad Wolf” Jinrai

Match Three: “Flowing Swordsman” Gaiye vs. Gobta

Match Four: Geld vs. “Lion Mask”

This drawing was completely fair, so I couldn’t complain…but damn, Masayuki was lucky. That was basically a bye he drew for the quarterfinals. Meanwhile, poor Geld, huh? Facing Lion Mask first thing and all. Could he win? I was honestly interested. It was definitely an exciting matchup, even though I couldn’t welcome it with open arms.

In terms of testing out Masayuki, it was pretty much the worst drawing possible. Whoever won Match Two would be facing him in the semis, and Bovix vs. Equix would be a hell of a match, too. The problem was, it was too good a match, one bound to exhaust both sides and leave the winner completely out of gas against a fresh, untouched Masayuki. Meanwhile, the top fighter from Matches Three and Four would go on to the finals, but if we wound up with Gobta duking it out against Geld in the semis, they’d also be too tired to thoroughly test Masayuki’s skill. Plus, Lion Mask was in the mix, and him versus Geld was, as I said, a fight up there with Bovix vs. Equix in excitement.

I didn’t know how serious Carill—um, “Lion Mask” was about this tournament, but Geld did have a lot of strength by now. Having them both fight each other in the first round? I just couldn’t believe that draw. It was like destiny itself arranged things so Masayuki would have as easy a time as possible.

Well, no point whining about it. I could make all the predictions I wanted, but nobody knew how this would turn out. And while I pondered that, the first match was already about to begin…

The other fighters stepped out of the arena, moving back to their waiting area. Bovix and Equix stood at the center, staring each other down and talking trash.

“Hey there, Equix. We should have settled this score long ago, just the two of us. Our fates have intertwined for far too long—I hope you’re ready to end it here.”

“Don’t be stupid, Bovix. I, Equix, am the only one worthy to serve in Sir Rimuru’s elite Big Four! It’d be far more suitable for you to hole up in the labyrinth, enjoying your retirement.”

“Silence! Why would the likes of you ever deserve to be in the all-dominating Big Four?!”

Without warning, their battle began.

They were both close-quarters power types, ax and shield against spear and shield in a pitched battle. Seeing them fight, you could tell they were melee types, not the sort to cast magic or other arts. Bovix hefted his large ax upward, swinging it down toward the floor—but it clanged against Equix’s shield as he pushed it back. It brought Bovix’s body down, and Equix wasted no time advancing with his spear—but a nimble backstep from Bovix had its tip whistling through thin air.

The battle continued for a good twenty minutes, an edge-of-your-seat balance between offense and defense that showed no signs of letting up. They had fought for the past hundred years, and this duel didn’t look like it’d end any sooner. The breathtaking monster battle kept the crowd rapt with excitement—after all, one rarely if ever had a chance to see two monsters of their level fight from such a close distance away. Normally, you could go your entire life without witnessing a duel between two A rankers like this.

They were evenly matched, and that was why the battle extended so long. It was fun to watch. But it came to an abrupt end.

“It’s over!”

Bovix moved to finish things, throwing his great ax—a projectile attack that could pulverize boulders, capable of breaking both its target and the weapon they were holding. Equix’s left arm exploded off him, flying through the air. He had sacrificed it to stop Bovix’s throw.

But he just smiled. That was exactly what Equix wanted, and in a single moment, he closed the gap between him and Bovix. Bovix was no doubt expecting Equix to dodge his ax entirely, and this new move left him unprepared for this assault.

“It ends here! Take this—Equine Spear Flail!”

Equix was at his chest, and the flurry of spear strikes he unleashed was impossible to avoid. With no way to dodge them, Bovix suffered a succession of stab wounds all at once. Equix was willing to literally give an arm for this victory, and now he had it—or so he thought.

“Not so fast! Lightning Horn!!”

With a roar, Bovix landed a headbutt on Equix with his horns. Lightning crackled up and down them as they extended out twice as long as before. They were vicious weapons, and they tore into Equix’s right eye and arm. That settled the battle. The spear fell out of Equix’s useless limb as electricity shot through where the horns had stabbed him, searing his wounds. It almost looked like the blood was being boiled out of him.

Equix had gained the Self-Regeneration skill during his evolution, but the lightning damaged him far faster than he could heal himself. Bovix, meanwhile, had Ultraspeed Regeneration, and the massive holes in his chest and stomach were already closing up.

The battle was his.

Injuries that’d normally cause instant death were no problem with Ultraspeed Regeneration. And with Self-Regeneration, even Equix’s many wounds were starting to heal themselves. By the time they left the arena, they were both back to normal, Equix already groaning about how he’d get him next time. Glad to see he was well.

But it was over. Bovix was the first to advance, his masterful fighting earning him cheers from the crowd. What a way to kick off this tournament.

Seriously, though. Seeing it in action again, Ultraspeed Regeneration was almost like cheating.

Equix no doubt used the tactics that had served him well in the past. That onrush, followed by a flurry of spear stabs, would’ve ended most contests. That was why he didn’t fear those obviously fearsome horns for a moment, and that cost him dearly. I hoped this taught him a lesson. He’d need, I thought, to be more careful, eyeing his foe and figuring out where his aces in the hole were.

Match Two pitted the Hero Masayuki against Jinrai the Mad Wolf, and as everyone knew in advance, it ended with a forfeit for the Hero. The two of them just shook hands in the center of the arena—and that triggered wild cheering and applause.

It made no sense. Why would a handshake whip the crowd into such a frenzy? I could hear them shouting, “The Hero has done it again!!” and so forth. Why was he so popular? It was alien to me.

…Ah well. I resolved to stop thinking about things I couldn’t change. On to the next fight.

Match Three was the Flowing Swordsman Gaiye against Gobta. How would it turn out?

By the looks of it, Gaiye qualified for the rank of A, if barely. His weapon and armor were all Rare-level goods, proving that as an adventurer, he was among the best in the business—but Gobta had a set of Unique-class armor. I didn’t think he was Gaiye’s match in skill, but add all their traits together, and you had a pretty decent matchup.

“Ready? And…begin!!”

The battle started at Soka’s signal.

“Hah!!”

With a short breath, Gaiye planted his feet down and thrust his sword. It was a sharp thrust, and I saw where the “flowing” part of his nickname came from. Excellent work. But Gobta’s chest guard blocked it.

“What?! Such fine armor for petty infantry…?!”

“Gahhh! That…that’s too fast!!”

This happened just after the starting signal. Gobta didn’t even have enough time to remove his dagger. Goddammit! I said to myself, scolding him. You’re leaving yourself far too open! Gobta’s armor staved off the blow, but it wouldn’t next time. It was Gaiye’s excessive self-confidence that saved him there, but next time he’d clearly go for a joint or some other unprotected spot.

“Pffft! How about this?”

He unleashed a dancing slash, striking at Gobta multiple times. Gobta managed to dodge them all, already at the end of his rope and practically on the verge of tears. By the look on his face, he was probably aiming to get run out of the ring and disqualified. Victory was quickly off the table; he was just trying to protect himself—and that might’ve been the right answer, but I wish he could’ve tried a little harder. Given how interesting a match this looked like on paper, Gobta’s reaction was a disappointment.

I thought that settled it, but—tantalizingly enough—the battle just refused to end. Gobta kept sidling over to the edge of the arena, and Gaiye kept cutting him off.

“Is he toying with him?”

“He doesn’t seem to be a very nice person, no. Gobta is hardly gallant himself, but I find this man’s behavior quite distasteful.”

Shion and I were in agreement. Hmm… Now I kind of wanted Gobta to win.

“Ha-ha-ha! Think you can run from me, you peon?!”

Gaiye fought with a bastard sword, its length somewhere between “short” and “long.” He also had a gauntlet on his left hand that he landed punches with, no doubt to devastating effect. It was an unusual fighting style, and when he came at you with both arms raised, it was hard to guess exactly what he’d do. To Gobta, who learned more standard swordsmanship, it was no doubt a tricky foe to juggle.

Still, Gaiye never landed any decisive wound. The only real blow so far was the very first one on Gobta’s chest plate.

“Gobta’s being very observant,” Shion remarked. “You wouldn’t be able to dodge those sword strikes for so long unless you could keep up with how he moved his weapon.”

She had high praise for him, and so did I. He did take a few punches, but any sword slashes were always met, and deflected, with his dagger.

“All right! Come on, Gobta! Stay focused! Show me what’s in you and beat this guy! I’ll give you a raise in your allowance! And, um… If you win the whole tournament, I’ll give you that new fishing pole you wanted!”

“R-really?! Then I’m pulling out my last resort, okay?!”

If he had a “last resort,” I really wished he’d used it sooner… But regardless, my encouragement seemed to do the trick. He actually wanted to fight. I wasn’t exactly thrilled with resorting to bribery with him, but with someone as lazy as Gobta, that should’ve been my first tactic. I mean, I already had Geld in there; I didn’t expect much out of Gobta—but with things as they were, I really needed a full effort from him.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don’t try to look smart around me, peon! The likes of you could never beat the strongest out there!”

Gaiye continued to give chase, laughing the whole way. He was no doubt sure of his victory, not even bothering to keep an eye on Gobta. But now Gobta was prepared to do anything to win—and thus, Gaiye was doomed.

“Summon! Okay, come on over!”

Gobta was head of the Goblin Riders—and, of course, that meant he could summon a starwolf and Unify with it. This gave him magicule energy on the level of an A-minus monster, combined with the sword skills drummed into him by Hakuro. Against someone like Gaiye, he could more than hold his own.

Again, though… Why didn’t you just do this first, man? Damn it, Gobta! He just wanted to lose this ASAP, I knew it.

But at least now he was serious about…

Huh?

“Wha—?”

“Summoning, eh? But a dark direwolf is no threat to—”

Then Gaiye fell silent. The dark-colored wolf Gobta had summoned had smashed into him at top speed. The swordsman was wrong—Gobta hadn’t summoned a direwolf of any sort, a C- or D-level threat at best. Instead, this dark wolf, wagging his tail and pinning Gaiye to the ground as he licked him… It couldn’t have been anyone but Ranga.

“Ranga… What’re you doing?”

“Tch… Quite a tactic. I must hand it to Ranga. He’s become quite the schemer.”

I don’t think so, Shion. I really don’t think so. Gobta looked just as surprised as us, so I didn’t think he meant to do that. This was purely Ranga’s doing; he must have barged into Gobta’s summoning without asking. And here I thought he was sleeping in my shadow—I had no idea he’d hatch this sort of plan.

Soka ran up to Gaiye, then turned toward Diablo. “Gaiye is unconscious. A brilliant move. I think the battle’s over.”

Diablo the referee, his face deadpan, ruled this a valid attack. He had to have recognized Ranga, right? I mean, I knew he was in his smaller, regular-wolf size, but… Oh well. They got along, that much I knew.

“And the winner is… Goooooooooob-taaaaaa!!”

Soka’s proclamation was drowned out by the cheers. Given the lack of booing from the crowd, everyone must’ve accepted summons as fair game in this match.

“Really…?” whispered Gobta. Nobody heard him in the roar.

“But, um, can we really get away with this?”

“Summoning magic is explicitly allowed in the rules. I would think it is not a problem.”

Well, if Rigurd thought so, then all right…but Ranga decided to join in, huh? Hmm. Are you sure this isn’t an infraction? Because up to now, I’d given Gobta zero chance of winning his first round—but with Ranga, there was no telling any longer. Considering my initial goal of testing out Masayuki’s skills, maybe this was a blessing in disguise.

Right! Time to stop worrying about it. I defiantly decided to let it go.

Match Four, Geld vs. Lion Mask, was another one worth watching.

“Heh-heh-heh… Nice to see I can kick ass for the first time in a while, huh?!”

Lion Mask was certainly ready for this.

“Being able to cross arms with such a vaunted warrior is a very unexpected surprise. I will make the most of this chance to fight such a seasoned opponent and tackle you with everything I have.”

With that, Geld removed the top half of his armor and readied his fists.

“Hohh! You want to fight barehanded? Nice. That’s another one of my specialties.”

He took his own stance against Geld.

What followed was one for the ages, a battle that was sure to go down in the history of this tournament. It was fist against fist, generating great shock waves of force that sent howling winds across the arena.

Geld didn’t use kicks at all, battling exclusively with punches and throws while shuffling his legs to maintain balance. No matter what attack was thrown at him, he didn’t waver at all. It was… What do you call it? The peekaboo style, a term I remembered seeing in one boxing manga or another. At the same time, the punches he threw as he looked for openings, even the ones meant to keep his opponent in check, had the power of a cannon tucked inside. That was thanks to his lower body, the base of the cannon, transferring all the kinetic energy in his body to his fist. But his fists weren’t his only threat—he had shoulder attacks, and if they got caught in a grapple, he could perform throws.

Lion Mask, meanwhile, was an all-around fighter who could launch just about anything at any time. His arsenal was extensive, his physique virtually the equal of Geld’s; there would be no overwhelming him with power. In this world, magicule energy meant a lot more than external looks, so Lion Mask may as well have been stronger than Geld.

But not even he could stay on the attack for long, a testament to Geld’s superior defensive skills. Kicks that could crush rocks slammed against his arms, attempting to throw him off balance, but Geld paid them no mind. So Lion Mask attempted every other trick in the book—jabs, chops, roundhouses, and ax kicks from all directions. All this at speeds that fooled you into thinking there were multiple Lion Masks. The flurry of attacks all nimbly hit home, but none of them affected a defense-focused Geld.

“Ha! Man, this is fun! You’re taking my blows like they’re a passing breeze!”

“Heh-heh-heh… I am the one who should be complaining,” Geld replied, frustration in his voice. “You give me no chance to counter you. Your attacks seem rough, but each one is well refined…”

He was holding out well enough for now, but he must’ve felt that things would only go downhill from here. Lion Mask’s strength was the real thing—and there was no telling how deep down it went. The way he’d unleash blows that cut through his armor, far enough out of range to avoid counters—it reminded me of an attack helicopter. It was clear who had the upper hand, but it took more than strength to decide a battle. Sometimes, luck played a part—and who would Lady Luck smile upon today?

The crowd was growing more passionate by the moment.

“Wh-whoaaa!!”

“Wow, what is…? What is that…?!”

Someone shouted at the top of their lungs, a bag of fries from the food stalls in one hand. Others were excitedly cheering, their faces reddened from the beer they were drinking. The crowd knew just how amazing these fighters were, and it made them roar their approval. Geld, the calm, reserved professional, against Lion Mask, whose aura just made you want to worship him—this fight definitely made a known name out of the two of them.

The blows they exchanged were devastating, but they didn’t seem any closer to resolving this. It was two steps forward, two steps back, both fighters keeping it even as time wore on. The same held true after half an hour, an excited Soka offering her commentary the whole way. Even Diablo kept close watch over them, eyes deadly serious.

Twenty minutes later:

“You’ve done well to hold out against me this long. My compliments to you!”

“Heh, heh-heh… It—it is an honor, receiving such praise from such a lofty figure…”

“Enough flattery. But let me ask you something.”

“…Anything.”

“Why aren’t you using any skills?”

“Isn’t it evident? Because you still have not shown your true self to me.”

“Heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You call me a ‘lofty figure,’ but you were aiming to win? Interesting. I can’t show you my full true self, but I can show you some real moves!”

They spoke as they kept up the onslaught. The audience couldn’t have heard it, but I picked it all up through Diablo’s ears. Geld’s lack of skill usage was a mystery to me as well, but that was why? Geld wanted to fight against Lion Mask and notch an unconditional victory?

Lion Mask—or, let’s just say it, Carillon—could Animalize at any time to unlock his full force in battle. His current form was just a temporary one; he couldn’t tap his full potential like this. Geld knew it, and that was why he fought strictly with his own body, not resorting to Protector or Gourmet even once. I was sure he didn’t want to get that serious with the fight in public, of course—that anonymous letter read in the introductions all but ordered him not to.

Carillon was no doubt in agreement, and if it meant revealing his identity, then going all out in this arena was off the table. Even so, he was strong. Your average monster or magic-born didn’t stand a chance; he could even conquer high-level elementals.

Despite that, Carillon was beginning to get a little serious.

“Let’s go!”

“Yeaaah!”

A golden burst of mystical force flashed for just a moment, focusing itself on Carillon’s right hand. The fist plowed into Geld’s arms, leaving afterimages behind. The force was shuddering, exploding against both his arms, sending them flying away from the now-exposed pit of his stomach. It was one of his weak points, and Carillon wasted no time throwing a right jab straight at it. The shock wave coursed across Geld’s body with an energy that was physically destructive.

“Well done… This is the end for me…”

Geld staggered back. But he did not fall. He was trying to make his way outside the ring boundary. Diablo ran over to prop him up, looking toward Soka.

“It’s over! The winner is Liooooon…Maaaaaaaask!!”



Massive cheers. Massive applause. The crowd didn’t hold back for a moment, screaming their praise at the competitors.

“I call that Lion Cannonfist. You should be proud, Geld. Not only did you take the full brunt of one of my secret moves and survive—you’re still able to walk.”

“Heh! Heh-heh-heh… I would love for us to fight no-holds-barred sometime.”

“So would I. I haven’t had a scrap this fun in a while.”

Geld and Carillon both nodded, each treating the other with respect. I could tell they had a deep, heartfelt connection now. Neither of them thought this was the end—and it wasn’t. If they both got serious and used their full arsenal of skills, the whole match would’ve been different. But the win went to Carillon this time, and Geld was out of the tournament.

Still, I wanted to tell Geld that I was proud of him. These cheers right now—this was what it was all about. That’s how amazing a bout this was. I clapped as loudly as all the others as Geld left the arena.

The quarterfinals were in the books, and it was time for an intermission. The semifinals would take place after the lunch hour.

A lot of the next round would come down to how fatigued the winners from the last one were. We had healing potions for all the competitors, so their physical injuries were healed, but you couldn’t tell how they were doing magicule-wise from the outside.

With the morning’s excitement still on everyone’s mind, the fifth match of the day was about to begin.

In the center of the arena, Masayuki and Bovix faced each other down, ready to fight for a berth in tomorrow’s final. The big question for this bout: Were Masayuki’s powers real, so to speak? Because unless my mind was playing tricks on me, it looked like Masayuki’s knees were quivering a bit. Trembling with excitement for the upcoming bout, maybe? And the sweat coming down the back of his neck was almost like a river. Was he really as powerful as Hinata? I just couldn’t convince myself of that.

As I observed him, Bovix helped himself to Soka’s mic.

“So you’re the ‘Hero’ who picked a fight with Sir Rimuru? A pity, then, you so fail to realize your place.”

He was taunting Masayuki. But the Hero just gave him an aloof smile—or, to put it in a less complimentary way, his mouth gave an odd twitch—and let it slide. Then he extended a hand to Soka, asking for a mic.

“Heh. Your fighting was a marvel to see.”

“Um… Yes.”

He wasn’t taking the bait. In fact, he was praising him. Masayuki’s more mature than I thought.

“…But that makes it all the more a pity.”

“A pity? What is a pity about it?”

The Hero didn’t seem in a great hurry to start this match. What was he going to say next?

“If you were in peak shape, it would’ve been fine for me to fight with my full strength. But you used the majority of your endurance in the previous round, didn’t you? I just find that to be such a pity.”

I wasn’t expecting him to announce that he’d not fight all out this round. It seemed like a sincere gesture—that, or maybe just making excuses?

“What are you—?”

“I, um, I just mean, if I fought and beat you right now, I wouldn’t get any joy out of it.”

“……”

“I’ve heard the demon lord Rimuru appointed you one of the masters of the labyrinth he’s prepared? I guess you’re more interested in joining the Big Four, but…”

“Fool! The role of master of Floor 50, the midsection of the Dungeon, is a great honor for myself and Equix! But it will not prevent me from aiming for even loftier heights…”

“Oh? Well, sorry to say, but the way I see it, Geld yesterday looked far more suited to the Big Four than you strength-wise…”

“Nnnnnngh…”

First he praised him; then he dissed him. What was Masayuki thinking?

“If I fight you now, I’m likely gonna win. But at your full, rested peak, I don’t know how it’d go—especially down in the labyrinth, your home turf. I just think, you know, it’d be such a waste if we had to settle this right now.”

“Nnnnnh?!”

Whoa, man. I hate to think this, but does Masayuki have no intention of fighting at all…?

“I’ll be tackling the Dungeon here, definitely, no matter how my fight with the demon lord works out. You know? So what do you think? You can get back to full strength, I can meet you down there, and you can try to fend me off.”

Now I was sure of it. Masayuki was acting all breezy and self-confident, but to me, it looked like Bovix was scaring the crap out of him. Was he trying to sweet-talk him into conceding right now…? I had ordered Gobta and Geld to weigh Masayuki’s talents for me, but Bovix didn’t know that. Maybe…

“Hngh…heh… Gaaa-ha-ha-ha! Yes, I fully understand what you mean! And it is true—just as you surmised, I have no strength to spare right now. I defeated Equix by only a razor-thin margin, you see… But very well. I will trust in you and wait down in my labyrinth!”

Dahhhh, I knew it! Bovix actually said yes to him! And even worse, he was grinning like an idiot as he shook hands with the guy! And the crowd was going wild for it, of course. You’d think someone declaring he had no interest in fighting would be greeted with boos and jeers, but for reasons I couldn’t guess, they loved every bit of this. I heard people praising Masayuki’s magnanimity, Bovix’s wisdom for admitting his disadvantage, and all kinds of other strange things, across the whole coliseum.

It made no sense. I really had no idea what was going on. It was so clearly a bluff, but the audience thought it was a genius stroke. I guess he just got some kind of weird charisma—

—Wait a second. If that’s what I’m thinking, maybe I’m getting hoodwinked with everyone else. Was this all just an act? If he wanted to avoid combat with Bovix because he knew I’d be here and wanted to hide his abilities from me, I suppose that did make sense. I couldn’t let my guard down yet.

So Masayuki was still in the running, already qualified for the final. Gobta and Carillon—I mean Lion Mask—were fighting in the second semifinal match, and I didn’t need psychic powers to know how that would go. How well could a teenage hero manage against a former demon lord? Thinking about it that way, maybe this wasn’t such a bad thing.

It helped reassure me a little, at least, as I watched Masayuki leave the arena, blanketed with applause.

Now for the final bout of the day: Gobta against Lion Mask.

This one was pretty much over before it began, but I still wanted to cheer on Gobta as much as possible. I did promise that fishing pole if he won it all, and let me tell you, I was proud of that pole. It was a new model with a reinforced reel, designed by me so I could catch up with him in our informal fishing competition. I wasn’t about to give it up that easily. I could make another pole with little trouble, yes, but it’s about the competition. Gobta wanted it, and that gave him the motivation he needed—which was great for me, so I had to root for him.

I mean… You know. Lion Mask—Carillon—was so gonna win. He was probably gunning for the championship; if not, he would’ve bowed out after that intense fight with Geld. That’d sure help quash my anxiety—about Masayuki, I mean. Carillon would be the perfect candidate to test him out with. I wasn’t sure I could count on Milim’s underling to pitch in for me, but right now, I felt there was nothing to worry about. He could get easily distracted, making me worry he might cut out of this tournament on a whim, but now it was clear I was too frazzled for my own good.

Geld and Carillon didn’t knock each other out, and now all my worries were in the past. The rest, I figured, I could leave up to him.

But, as if reading my mind, Gobta was here and absolutely burning with passion. Why is he always running contrarian to my needs? He never puts in an effort when I expect him to… Whoa. Wait. I was supposed to be cheering for him. Carillon was gonna win, but I couldn’t laugh at Gobta’s efforts, either.

I turned my eyes to him. Gobta, who had summoned Ranga from the beginning this time, had his back turned to me. Oh man, he was just gonna rely on him again, wasn’t he? That’s why he acted so confident—he’d just have Ranga fight for him. Not only was it legal, if Gobta wanted any chance of victory, that was his only strategy.

If I had to guess, Ranga was stronger than Geld. Carillon in no-holds-barred mode was one thing, but this stunted version of him? I thought Ranga had a decent shot.

Which… Hang on. If he did win, what then? If, on the tiny—I’m talking microbe-size—chance Gobta won, then he could reveal Masayuki’s powers for me, and my original plan would finally pay off. In other words, it didn’t really matter who won here, as far as I was concerned. Leaving matters to Gobta concerned me a little, but hey, what happens, happens.

So I started cheering my head off for Gobta.

The match began.

“I’m not the hobgoblin I usually am today!”

Then why were you running from your last opponent?

“Don’t make me laugh, kid. Listen, before anyone gets hurt, why don’t you just hurry up and forfeit—”

“Okay, Ranga, you’re up!”

“At once!!”

Brushing aside Carillon’s offer, Gobta made the first move. He and Ranga worked as a well-synchronized team; they must have strategized a bit over lunch. He was serious. He really wanted to win.

He did, but…

“Tiger Talon!”

Sharp, bladelike claws grew out from Carillon’s feet. He unleashed a tornado-like jumping roundhouse, aimed at both Gobta and Ranga. His long, sharpened claws offered no clue about their trajectory—and even if you dodged them, their tips emitted some kind of vorpal wave that cut through any target they faced. This skill was just something for Carillon to play with, but to Gobta, it’d probably make his life pass before his eyes.

“Byahhh?!”

Gobta fell off Ranga. I knew it. This was just asking too much. He frantically clambered away, attempting to scamper out of Carillon’s sight—but nobody had any right to laugh. I mean, yeah, the crowd was all laughing, but they could do that because they didn’t realize how fearsome Carillon was. Just facing him up and attempting a frontal attack deserved to be praised.

But Carillon left him alone. Or really, he had to—because Ranga, freed from the weight of Gobta, was now snarling at him. He was currently the size of a large dog, but even so, his teeth and claws were sharp enough.

“Tch!”

Carillon stopped those fangs with his left arm, letting it be sacrificed to his bite. Then he brought the arm straight down, sending Ranga crashing toward the ground. But Ranga didn’t relent. With a spin, he kicked against the stone floor and out of harm’s way.

“Wh-whoaaa… That’s some wolf there.”

“Yeah, but aren’t dark direwolves ranked C at best?”

“Oh, you mean the monster Sir Gaiye mentioned? But is that really a direwolf?”

The crowd was already stirring, astonished at Ranga’s moves. Some of them were already conjecturing on what he could be. He’s a Tempest Starwolf, guys. Special-A grade and not the kind of thing you’ll see raiding your garbage at night.

“Elephant Stampede!!”

Carillon broke out another attack. The aura kneaded into it smashed into the ground from the skies above, like random lightning strikes. There might’ve been room to escape in an open environment, but not in this arena—if a ring-out counted as a loss, your only choice was to take the blow. Or so I thought. But Ranga fled right away from it.

“Huhhh?”

Carillon was the most surprised of all. He probably didn’t expect Ranga to just give up the match. It disappointed him a little—and for just a moment, that left him open.

“Yeah, right there!”

Ah!

Was that Gobta talking? And that black shadow setting off on cue—it was Ranga. Just when I thought he’d fled outside the arena, he jumped right out of Gobta’s shadow, like nothing was amiss.

“Weren’t you out of the ring?!” Carillon shouted.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh… A resummon is not against the rules.”

Diablo shot the ex–demon lord down. Carillon blew it. Yes, Ranga was much stronger than Gobta. In Carillon’s eyes, Ranga needed far more attention paid to him. But his opponent was Gobta, and as long as he didn’t step out of the arena, he hadn’t lost. It was an underhanded move, but ever since this match began, he had been toeing the boundary—this was what he’d aimed for the whole time: playing the fool while hungrily striving for victory.

This was how he’d do it, and the results changed the tide of the match.

A fang brushed past Carillon’s head. The attack caught him off guard, and he dodged it by a hairbreadth…or maybe not. I thought he’d fully avoided it, but then Carillon brought a frenzied hand to his face. Just as he intended to, Ranga had struck a successful blow.

The attack took its toll, too. Carillon was on his guard, of course, but he must’ve been confident that he could weather any blow as long as it wasn’t a direct hit. Instead of clumsily staggering back to dodge Ranga, he dodged just barely enough to segue to his next move—a simple choice for someone as dominant as Carillon. As a masterful lord of the battlefield, he had to make it look easy—that’s how he thought, and his powers made that naturally possible. That’s why he had the strength and agility to dodge the attack that came after Ranga’s surprise reappearance.

This time, however, Ranga wasn’t aiming for Carillon at all but the mask he had on. With his honed instincts, Carillon decided to do the bare minimum necessary to avoid taking damage—and that let Ranga bite right through his mask.

Now Gobta was all smiles. “Sweet! Right on target!” he joyfully shouted. Then he whipped out his dagger and launched a shot of Icicle Lance.

“Take this!”

“Y-you little sneak!!”

The bolt wasn’t meant to topple Carillon but to rip the mask off him. Likely realizing this, Carillon fought back with both hands over his face—and that gave Ranga free rein to attack. And with his hands essentially tied behind his back, fending off the starwolf was a herculean task.

“So dirty…”

“What a cowardly way to fight…”

“Fight for real, you bastard!”

The spectators weren’t exactly satisfied with this. But Gobta didn’t care.

“Shut up! In this world, might makes right! Sir Rimuru said so himself!”

He was playing to the audience now, shouting right at them. I really wished he wouldn’t drag me into this…

“Tch. I can see why he’s aiming for a spot in the demon lord’s Big Four. Fighting like that, and not being ashamed of it for a moment.”

“Yeah. In fact, he’s acting like this is a completely normal tactic!”

“He looks kinda dopey, but he’s sharp, you know? He was aiming for that from the get-go.”

“Ahhh, I bet the demon lord suggested it to him. I mean, check out that stupid-looking face of his. You think he could’ve come up with that?”

“Scary, isn’t it? A demon lord capable of bossing around the Big Four…”

Great. Now the crowd was making me out to be some trans-dimensional mastermind. It’s all Gobta, okay? All his fault. And I really didn’t need a Big Four who required my constant input in order to function, but the crowd would never get that. It was just sad.

Now Gobta and Ranga had the initiative—and when Carillon finally took a step outside the ring, it was over.

“Curse him! All right. You’ve outwitted me this time.”

I could tell he was furious, but he still had his reason with him. Better to bow out, he thought, than to continue this farce any longer. And he was probably right—if it became known that a former demon lord lost in a tournament like this, it’d spark an international furor.

…Of course, he did lose only thanks to a publicly announced message from a certain anonymous benefactor. Without that, I doubted this strategy ever would’ve occurred to Gobta.

“Stunning! Absolutely stunning!!”

Soka’s shouting revved up the crowd once more. I heard cheering, shouting, even laughter. Everyone had their own takes, but either way, they truly enjoyed this fight.

“Did that man really need to conceal his face so badly? That seemed rather exaggerated to me…”

Sounded like some of them were even advocating for Gobta. He was definitely the heel of the day, but between his lovable face, his nimble moves, and everything else, nobody could find it in their hearts to hate him too much.

The crowd was happy, for sure. Geld and Carillon’s battle was praised for the high quality of its combat; with this one, people would be talking about Gobta’s antics for a while to come.

This world’s starved for entertainment. Instead of the rule-bound tournament at Englesia, the anything-goes atmosphere of this one seemed to grab people’s hearts a lot more. It was objectively a terrible bout, but in the end, I guess it kinda worked.

Later:

“As punishment for joining a match without permission, I forbid you from lurking in my shadow until further notice!”

Ranga, trotting up to me with his tail wagging, must’ve assumed I would praise him for a job well done. This was a shock to him, but I honestly wondered why he thought I’d like it. But…well…those pathetic, sad eyes he gave me… They tugged at my heart, I guess.

“Ranga, I know I gave you that punishment, but my final decision depends on tomorrow’s contest.”

“…!!”

“You’re theoretically being summoned by Gobta, so listen to what he says and try not to do anything reckless, all right?”

“Yes, master!”

Ranga and Shion were good friends, and I think Shion’s influence made him go overboard at times. I had to put my foot down here, or I couldn’t guess what kind of terrifying things he’d try next. If he remembered his role as Gobta’s summoned beast, everything should be fine—at least, he wouldn’t overdo it against Masayuki, I thought.

“Gobta, I want you to work with Ranga and give me a hundred percent in the final tomorrow!”

“You got it!”

Perfect. I was sure Gobta would have no problem gauging Masayuki’s true might. The worst-case scenario I pictured involved Ranga going into full “beast” mode in front of the crowd and then having Masayuki beat his ass. That meant I’d have to step into the ring, and I doubted we could talk things out then.

I really wished we knew more about Masayuki’s skills in battle. That worried me. Still, I hoped we could settle this without conflict. If Gobta could win, we were good—but that all depended on tomorrow.

Thus, despite a few unexpected twists and turns, Day Two wrapped up in an orderly fashion. Today’s six matches were over, which left only the finals tomorrow—a, shall we say, quite unexpected matchup between Masayuki and Gobta.

Once the arena emptied out, the night stalls reportedly saw massive profits. The fanboys were crazy for Masayuki, so-called hard cores were devoted to Geld or Carillon, and a few dyed-in-the-wool arena-battle nerds tossed their hats in with Gobta. They were all smiles with one another on the streets, talking excitedly about the day’s bouts.

The same was true at our own dinner, spent enjoying a multicourse meal at our tables with the other VIPs. All anyone wanted to talk about was today’s tournament. Apparently, that Gaiye dude was pretty famous; Gobta’s beating him very suddenly made him the focus of attention. A lot of people had high expectations for the final tomorrow, and my own table was no exception.

“That was sooooooo great!! Just seeing Sir Masayuki stand there looked so crazily cool!!”

“You think so? I like Mr. Tempest more!”

“And Geld was so awesome. Talk about letting your fists do the talking!”

“Yeah! When Lion Mask did that all-out assault on him, his face didn’t even move an inch!”

“Exactly! And Lion Mask was fierce!”

“That barrage was something, huh? I was amazed. Just one cool move after another. I wanna learn some of them!”

“You too, Gail? So do I!”

“Yeah, me too!”

Alice was all Masayuki. Chloe didn’t particularly care. Kenya and the other boys thought Geld was cool under pressure, but Carillon was the more popular choice. He was kind of like an action hero, actually, what with the “Lion Mask” bit.

Watching them carry on, I eyed the food on the table with anticipation. Instead of multiple courses, we were all being treated to a fried-shrimp special, along with meatloaf steak and cream-filled croquettes. A very kid-friendly menu, in other words, although I was definitely a fan, too.

If we were nobility, we’d have servants carting all of this over, but tonight we cut that out. Each table was separated by noise-dampening partitions—having to worry about manners every single meal was exhausting, so I had us go with this setup on Day Two. That let us chat all we wanted as we enjoyed dinner.

The kids were abuzz about the battle tournament—and if they were that excited about it, I’m sure ticket sales were through the roof. I had my concerns about tomorrow, but no point worrying too much about that.

I could see Carillon grinning at me from the next table over, no doubt hearing the kids carry on. Milim was there, too, looking a bit more peeved. Guess that noise dampening didn’t work too well after all—they heard every word from us, although the opposite was also true.

“Heh-heh-heh! Glad everybody saw how cool I was. Your kids there have good taste.”

“Don’t be silly! How can you be ‘cool’ if you couldn’t even win the tournament?”

“Oh, don’t be that way, Milim. I wanted to keep things nice and easy, all right? Nice and easy.”

“Pathetic! Have you forgotten your pride as a former demon lord?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Of course not. I got to take on a foe I’ve had my eye on for a while, and I didn’t care about winning anyway.”

“I’m quite jealous,” I heard Middray add.

“You said it! I should’ve just disguised myself and joined in instead…”

Dude, if Milim asked to join, I would’ve stopped her at all costs.

“Whoa there, Milim. That’s way too reckless.”

“He’s right, Lady Milim. A demon lord as brimming with grace as you would never be able to hide her identity.”

Carillon and Middray agreed with me, at least, immediately trying to dissuade Milim of the idea. I didn’t think she was “brimming with grace,” but oh well.

“Ah, whatever. Let’s all watch the final match together!”

“Oh? Are you done with your labyrinth work?”

“It’s all perfect! So I’m gonna go around with Rimuru and his gang tomorrow!”

“Would I be able to join you?” I heard Frey ask.

“I’ll pass,” said Carillon. “My staff invited me out. It’s too bad I didn’t make the final, but I want to take my time and look around town tomorrow.”

So Milim would be watching, too. Carillon planned to go out with his Lycanthropeers, and I suppose Frey would be keeping an eye on Milim. Good thing there was only one round of the tournament left. Milim was excited for the labyrinth opening as well, so I figured we didn’t have to worry about her.

“But if it was that engaging of a tournament, perhaps I should have joined in?”

“Ha-ha! Actually, what were you doing all day?”

“Hee-hee… Middray was in the concert hall the whole time.”

So was Frey, it seemed, if she knew he was there. If they liked the music that much, I was sure the orchestra would be delighted to hear that.

“Huh? You mean that stuff that put me to sleep yesterday?”

“Carillon… A barbarian like you wouldn’t understand high art, I suppose…”

“Whoa, Frey, don’t talk to me like that!”

“Hey, which stuff was this?”

“Music, Milim. Remember that large band of musicians Clayman was so proud of, who played such beautiful music? Well, there’s a band just like that here.”

“I think this band’s better than Clayman’s, but…”

“Oh? So you know that much about music after all, Carillon?”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a compliment to me, Frey!”

“Well, no, it’s not. I didn’t mean it as one.”

“You people just treat me like crap…”

“I’ll have you know, Luminus herself spent the day at the concert hall as well, in the best seat available. I doubt someone like you could fully understand that music, is all I’m saying.”

“Really? Luminus? Wait, she’s here?!”

“Hey! I like music, too, you guys!!”

Certainly a lively conversation. I was glad they were having fun.

As I listened in on the other guests, Hinata leaned closer to me.

“So? If you do wind up fighting that kid Masayuki, what’re you going to do?”

Way to drive to the core of the issue, huh?

“Huhhh? You’re fighting Sir Masayuki, Mr. Tempest? I know you’re strong, but I don’t think you’re that strong!”

“Sure he is! I think he’s way stronger!”

The kids promptly began to argue over who’d win in our theoretical fight. Alice and Kenya sided with Masayuki, the others with me. That gave me a one-vote advantage, which I thought I could gloat about, but:

“Oh, whatever. To be honest, not even I have a good gauge of Masayuki’s strength. You should be wary of him, though, of that much I’m certain.”

That sounded like a warning. She didn’t go into great detail, since doing so would reveal several of her own skills, but apparently she had done some investigation into Masayuki. The results told her that even she would find him a difficult challenge.

“Of course,” she said with a laugh, “I still think I’d beat him, nine times out of ten…”

Then things got worse.

“Oh yeah, I don’t think you could lose to anyone, Hinata!”

“Uh-huh. I hate to say it, but you’re amazing.”

“I don’t think anyone in the world could beat Hinata!”

“Me neither…”

“No doubt about it. Not even Lion Mask could put up a fight against her.”

It was unanimous. Hinata was stronger than Masayuki. Me against him was a split decision, but Hinata against him? Five to zero. I was honestly hurt for a moment.

“Well,” I grumbled to Hinata, “I do think Masayuki’s interested in hearing me out, unlike some people. I don’t think I’d have that much to worry about.”

“…In what way?”

The air suddenly froze between us. That was a land mine. One that was plain as day, and I’d stepped on it anyway.

“Oh, um, nothing. Never mind.”

“If you’re calling me out, I’ll fight you anytime.”

Man, what a temper!

Realizing my mistake, I managed to placate her with the flan I was going to enjoy for dessert. A devastating loss for me. Loose lips, etcetera.

“But you’re right. Masayuki seems open to reason. Yuuki said he was his guardian, so if need be, I can talk with him. But we may not need to.”

“No?”

“Meaning, maybe he’ll lose tomorrow.”

“Hmm, I won’t deny that, but this is Gobta we’re talking about… He’s got a knack for screwing things up right when it counts…”

He was pretty strong, if he’d only take a normal approach to things. But he kept getting these crazy ideas in his mind midway, and that put everything off-kilter. That’s just who he was. And what if he tried something crazy in the final?

…

Hmm?

For a moment, it seemed like Raphael was about to say something. Did I imagine that? Ah well. I’m sure it was nothing important.

But we were talking about Gobta vs. Masayuki. Gobta, with Ranga, seemed to have a clear advantage. If Masayuki could beat Ranga, that definitely made him a serious threat—but somehow, I just couldn’t see the kid like that.

“If you ask me, though, I think Gobta has a lot of potential.”

“Oh, sure,” I said. “I’ll grant you, he has a lot of good sense. But… You know. He’s Gobta.”

Gobta, with a bad habit of doing something stupid and losing a fight he could’ve won.

“All right. Well, I’ll be looking forward to tomorrow.”

With that, she ended the conversation and took the kids out to the night market. Please, I begged her in my heart, please don’t spoil them too much…

Hinata was concerned for me, in her own way. I appreciated that.

If Gobta lost, we’d work something out then. I was prepared for it, and I didn’t think anything too bad would happen as a result. For now, I really ought to enjoy the festival.

We had tons of problems and tons of things to do, but these days really seemed fulfilling to me. I felt happy. So it was time to switch gears. I promised Gazel I would meet with him, and it was time to follow through on that.