

Chapter 5

War on the Horizon

After sending Gadra to the Empire, it was time for a little interrogation. The first person on my list wasn’t Shinji or his friends, but Ramiris. I just couldn’t ignore some of the things that had come out of her mouth. She had pulled pranks on me before, so I was pretty sure that she was hiding something else.

“What? I’m not hiding anything!”

Ramiris started to act very suspicious and fidgety… It was clear that she was hiding something.

From now on, I won’t give you any more cake! With this threat fresh in her mind, Ramiris spilled the beans, and fast.

“What do you want to know, captain!”

Captain… Well, whatever. There was no point thinking about it too much, so I began pressing her a bit.

“Adalmann had a much better showing than I expected, all well and good there. That said, what’s the deal with the others? I didn’t think Albert could drive back Shinji and his friends all by himself! I didn’t think that there would be a death dragon here either… These oddities aren’t happening on other floors though, right?”

Albert wasn’t just your average strong monster anymore. He had evolved from a death knight into a death paladin, ranked at Special A. He could take full advantage of his abilities. Before his evolution, he fought an even battle with Hakurou. Now, there’s no telling how strong he is.

“Hasn’t Albert been teaching the guy named Arnaud? This time, he decided to go test his strength again in the lower floors.”

“Hold on, hold on!” I hastily stopped Ramiris’s explanation. I found it weird that Albert was the one teaching Arnaud. After all, Arnaud was a captain of the Holy Knight Order. He had to be pretty strong, maybe even more so than Albert. And yet, it was Albert who was teaching Arnaud? That’s why I just couldn’t get what Ramiris was saying.

“You see, after Arnaud and his men got scolded by Hinata last time, they went out and decided to try to challenge the Dungeon again. This time, they managed to make it through the 70th floor because the Demon Colossus was still under development.”

“Uh-huh, and then…?”

“Those kids got their asses beaten again, of course!”

“Gahahahaha! It was a sight to behold!”

Ramiris explained happily, as Veldora nodded with a chuckle.

That must’ve been very interesting, by the sound of it.

«Report. The battle log has been recorded.»

For real?! You’re awesome, Raphael-san! I’ll watch the recording later, but for now, let’s focus on Ramiris’s explanation.

“So, how far did Arnaud and his men go?”

They might’ve gotten to the dragon chambers from Floors 96 to 99. The terrain effects active in those rooms were bound to bring any flesh-and-blood humans to their knees, for sure.

“Hmm, if I recall correctly, it was—”

“They were crushed the moment they encountered the next boss. It was funny to watch them cry and flee with their tails between their legs!”

Hey now, that’s quite the sadistic streak you’ve got going there.

…Hold on, the next boss?

“Huh? Was the boss on the 80th floor really that strong?”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“I mean, isn’t Arnaud one of the Ten Great Saints that could even stand against an ex-demon lord like Clayman?”

It suddenly clicked as the words were leaving my mouth. On second thought, Adalmann or Albert probably could have beaten an unawakened Clayman. Moreover, with that weird death dragon thing, who’s to say they couldn’t have defeated even an awakened Clayman.

“Um… Well…”

I was pretty sure we had Zegion as the 80th floor’s guardian. Could this mean that he had metamorphosed inside his cocoon and emerged in his fully evolved, perfect form?

I heard that Veldora had been training him, but that just didn’t add up to me, either. After all, Zegion was an insect-like monster. I had no idea how he’d put the super dubious “Veldora Style Killing Arts™” to good use. I only allowed it because Veldora seemed to enjoy doing it, but I probably shouldn’t have taken it so lightly.

Way back, I had used my own cells to heal Zegion’s wounds and repaired his exoskeleton with magisteel. Maybe thanks to that, he could move at high speed and even summon his own subordinates.

Since this was backed by Treyni-san, I wasn’t going to complain. However, the idea of pitting you against a super-fast insectoid—an insect-type monster—right after a slow-moving colossus definitely rubbed me the wrong way.

“Hey, so how is Zegion nowadays?”

Just when I was about to further question the suspicious Ramiris, Veldora cut in: “My disciple, Zegion, has undergone a complete metamorphosis! He’s become an invincible warrior and inherited my techniques!”

“……”

“Better yet,” he continued, “Arnaud and his friends weren’t even worthy of facing my disciple! The boss of the 79th floor already took care of them all!”

It was starting to make sense. Arnaud and his friends were beaten by the 79th floor’s boss, Apito the Queen Wasp. She was able to travel at ultra-high speeds and spew deadly poison.

Despite the many years Arnaud and his fellow knights had honed their swordsmanship, they couldn’t even touch her. Alas, all of them got stung by her insects and fled in tears…

That’s incredible! I felt like laughing.

“You should’ve told me! You knew that I was busy working!”

“Hey hey, hear me out!” Ramiris squealed. “It wasn’t just me. It was Mentor who started talking about training or something, then went on to teach an insect!”

“Y-you idiot!” Veldora wailed. “Is this a betrayal?!”

“Because it’s not fair that you’re acting like it was none of your business, Mentor!”

“Grrrr…”

I suppose Veldora was in on it as well… I guess that people all wanted a part in something as fun as this. That said, I still felt like I’d been played. I couldn’t believe that they were doing all of this behind my back…

Actually, it was a mistake to have left things up to them. I’d have to think about that later, but for now, there was something else bugging me.

“Hey, I’ve been wondering just now, what did you mean by training Zegion?”

He is an insect, right? Could it be that Zegion’s final evolution had granted him a humanoid form?

I guessed correctly.

“Kukuku, so you have finally realized! I have known from the start that you didn’t realize this. So I kept my mouth shut until now to keep things interesting!”

Heh, Veldora was being cheeky again. Though, this time, he bamboozled me hard.

I began to look through the Dungeon’s recordings, and asked Raphael-san to show me an image of him. In the image, I could confirm Zegion’s slender human form.

That’s it. It was just like that insectoid Shion beat in Lubelius—Razul. Zegion looked just like that absurdly strong Razul. He emanated the aura of a powerful individual.

It was all thanks to the mutation in his evolution that he could attain that form. And it was this form that opened the door to a wealth of new combat techniques.

Apito had undergone a similar transformation. Her body had morphed into a figure resembling a beautiful female. I should have noticed this sooner when Hinata was mentoring her. I thought that they were just doing some mock battles, but it turns out that she was actually learning things from Hinata. Apito picked up some great techniques and became very nimble in action.

It appeared that she had also been sparring with Zegion to learn even more advanced moves.



Arnaud and his men’s bitter defeat was testament to this.

“So, Arnaud and his friends re-evaluated their skills, but…”

They resigned themselves to beginner status and began to conquer the Dungeon from Floor 1.

However, a single knight halted them in their tracks on the 60th floor. The death paladin Albert, the trusted confidant of the Immortal King Adalmann, who was the strongest of all the paladins hundreds of years ago, defeated them.

“And since then, Albert has been beating them to a pulp every time.”

After defeating Arnaud’s team by himself, Albert had asked: “I heard they’d rebranded themselves as ‘Holy Knights’; but I didn’t know their quality also changed—diminished, even?”

That infuriated Arnaud, making him go all out; but even his strongest Art, Aether Break, was useless against Albert. Albert wielded his sword with the same skill he had back when he was alive, and with his monster evolution added on top, Arnaud never stood a chance.

His immortal body never tired and could even recover broken limbs. It really was borderline cheating, so unless you could leverage his weaknesses against him, he was unbeatable. On top of all that, Adalmann had a ‘Holy-Demonic Reversal’ Skill that made him way stronger than he already was.

Of course Arnaud’s team lost, I thought.

Adalmann’s team absorbed the magicules in the labyrinth and evolved into high-class monsters. Arnaud’s timing couldn’t have been worse to challenge the Dungeon.

However, you could also look at it another way. He was lucky to have the opportunity to be taught by the strongest knight from hundreds of years ago.

And now, Arnaud and everyone in the Holy Knight Order were training under the guidance of Albert on a rotating schedule.

As it stood, the 60th floor became a dangerous area. But…

“So then, what about the other floors?”

At this point, I could tell the general situation. Adalmann and Zegion weren’t the only ones who underwent a crazy abnormal evolution.

I was spot on. In the Dungeon, there was a group of strong monsters called the Dungeon’s Elite Ten. If I were to assume, it was possible that they possessed combat skills on par with my executives.

Needless to say, Adalmann was one of them, as was his subordinate, Albert. Apito managed to get into the Dungeon’s Elite Ten because of her abnormal evolution, under the alias “Insect Queen.” As for Zegion, it seemed like he had become the reigning figure of the Elite Ten. Next up was Kumara. If she absorbed the power from her tail beasts, she could turn into her true form, which was her adult form.

“Listen up! I’ll fill you in!” Ramiris announced and gave me an update on the current forces inside the Dungeon. Starting from the bottom:

The four elemental dragons that Ramiris had carefully raised under Milim’s instruction had successfully evolved into dragon lords. It was the result of their exposure to Veldora’s eminence of massive amounts of magicules. The fire dragon lord, ice dragon lord, wind dragon lord, and the earth dragon lord. These were the Four Dragon Lords.

I could barely believe my eyes, but there they were—and that wasn’t even the end.

The guardian of the 90th floor, “Nine Heads” Kumara.

The guardian of the 80th floor, “Insect Kaiser” Zegion.

The boss of the 79th floor, “Insect Queen” Apito.

The guardian of the 70th floor, “Immortal King” Adalmann.

The vanguard of the 70th floor, “Death Paladin” Albert.

As a bonus, there were two guardians on the 50th floor, Gozer and Mezer. Frankly, the two of them didn’t make the cut for the Elite Ten. As for the last, tenth, member, it was Beretta, who was also the manager of said group.

“Nevertheless, I want this trouble—ahem, ahem, this honor to be passed on to someone else…” murmured Beretta, glancing at Treyni-san and Ifrit—I mean Charys.

“Ara, I have the important task of taking care of Ramiris-sama,” Treyni-san said, with a charming smile.

“Me too,” Charys added. “I am the only devoted servant of Veldora-sama, so I am already busy taking care of him.”

It looked like Veldora was taking full advantage of Charys, but at least Charys seemed to be satisfied. He already had his hands full, unwilling to take on another job.

My heart sighed; these two really did take after that butler.

“Seems like you’re having a hard time, Beretta.”

“You understand, Rimuru-sama!”

I nodded.

While catching up with Beretta, I uncovered a number of things.

First of all, who did the Elite Ten belong to? We ran the Dungeon for our enjoyment and the profits. Without Ramiris, who built the labyrinth, or Veldora, whose magicules filled the labyrinth, it couldn’t exist. So, now that raised the question who the Elite Ten should serve. Following the chain of command, that would be Ramiris…

“Oh, yeah. I met with all of them and asked what they want to do!” Ramiris explained.

Beretta would be with Ramiris, so no change there. Every dragon lord turned into Ramiris’s subordinate. Apparently, she even made a contract to seal the deal. Dragon lords had egos, so it was created with their consent.

Moving on to the rest of the team; Kumara had become friends with the kids and was living happily here, so she was overly grateful. I caught wind of her saying that she would become my pet, disregarding the fact that I already had Ranga as one.

Zegion and Apito admired me greatly, too, so they declared themselves my subordinates.

Needless to say for Adalmann, he definitely had a couple screws loose. It went so far that he even worshipped me as a god. Albert was under the influence of Adalmann, meaning his loyalty fell back on me by proxy.

Just like that, the five became my subordinates.

Gozer and Mezer kinda worked in the labyrinth, so they may as well be Ramiris’s subordinates, but… I heard that they declined to join Ramiris and requested to serve me. Whatever. It’s possible that they dismissed Ramiris based on her appearance, given their nature as a power-obsessed race.

“Wrong! Those children got their names from you, didn’t they, Rimuru? They were happier with that than getting a paycheck. They told me they couldn’t compromise it.”

Oh, that’d explain it. It was nice to hear that. I should treat Gozer and Mezer better next time I meet them.

Just like that, I learned about an unexpected phenomenon in the Dungeon while I was inspecting the three intruder’s actions. It was this occurrence that shocked me, but the fact that the guardians were stronger now was good. But it would be a bit of a problem if they evolved way more than we thought. It might be a coward’s bad habit.

Be that as it may, with the existence of the Dungeon’s Elite Ten, no one needed to worry about the Imperial army intruding and attacking us. However, I ordered them to hold back for the normal challengers. Otherwise, it would be impossible for these ordinary people to traverse the labyrinth.

The unfortunate thing was that they’d have to take on a labyrinth containing a number of demon lord-class monsters. The only floor that I wanted to be seriously guarded was the 100th floor, and I’d leave that to Veldora.

As for the other levels—at least up to around the 80th floor—I hoped for the challengers to take their best shot and attack them. We made the Dungeon with a lot of care, so I wanted them to see how cool it was.

But all that would have to wait for peaceful times.

After going through the labyrinth to make sure it was in good condition, I visited each of the guardians. Actually, I wanted to see just how they evolved with my own eyes.

Their growth was staggering. With the power they currently had in the labyrinth, I couldn’t imagine them losing to the Empire.

After a few days…

I went to try out the observation magic I had finally finished after a bit of work. The place was the Strategic Military Control Battle Command Center—commonly known as the “Control Room.” The name had that tacticool oomph to it. Thus, that’s what I settled on with Veldora and Ramiris… After I took a step back and thought about it though, I guess it was kinda long. In hindsight, I probably picked the wrong crowd to brainstorm with. Since Benimaru and the others simply called it the Control Room, few people knew its original name.

It was newly built next to Veldora’s private room on the 100th floor of the labyrinth and could be accessed through the usual war room. If the city above ground was isolated within the labyrinth, this would serve as the main headquarters.

We were absolutely prepared for war. And if the invasion never came and all of this was for nothing, I’d still count it as a win, right?

The results of the observation magic turned out extremely well. The same big screens that we used during the tournament were set up to show situations from various locations. Several places in the Great Jura Forest, along the trade routes of the Dwarven Kingdom, as well as a lot of other critical places could be surveilled at any time. Everything from the sea route bordering the Kingdom of Farmenas to the peak of the Canaat Mountains—all of it was projected in full detail.

The principle behind it was simple:

Lens-shaped water droplets that I had devised for the physical magic Megiddo were controlled by spirits. The huge lenses that I deployed near the stratosphere reflected a magnified view of the target destination. And by reflecting it, they transmitted a detail-rich video of the place.

Taking a page out of Moss’s book, I had sent out a herd of tiny slimes, each a ‘Clone,’ and used them as a medium to activate the magic on site. Because of that, they were all connected to my main body through ‘Spatial Domination,’ allowing for an instant data link, which meant that I could enjoy zero-latency streaming.

My clones were too tiny to act autonomously, which had the added benefit of requiring no magicules so long as I didn’t consciously act on them. On the flip side, moving them to the places I wanted to see was quite the challenge, but Souei and Moss handled that for me quite well. It was a very handy, low-cost solution.

I named this physical magic Argos, the Eye of God.

The feed to the monitor was highly accurate after being processed by ‘Wisdom King Raphael.’ A close-up view of whatever distant area could be enjoyed from the warmth of the Control Room. The completion of this magic system was a delight to everyone. Especially Diablo, who was over the moon, but let’s ignore that.

Next, the surveillance system actually had another benefit that we only found after it was finished. Now people could activate Megiddo in the place shown on-screen while they were in the Control Room. I tinkered around with it for a bit and was stunned. I fired a beam at Gobta’s feet while he was training in a clearing, but I didn’t expect it to work so well.

I’ll never forget the look on Gobta’s face as he jumped in shock.

“Idiot! It’s because you’re not paying attention!”

I may have told him off, but I didn’t think it was his fault.

Megiddo’s performance had also improved. Originally, ‘Great Sage’ had optimized this magic, but the current Raphael-san didn’t seem to be satisfied… Following much more careful refinements, I had developed a system that used a number of lenses floating in the sky at all times, like satellites. By linking it with Argos, Megiddo could even be fired at night. Although it wasn’t as powerful, I succeeded in converging the light by reflecting beams of light from one satellite lens to another.

To be clear, I really did get maybe a bit carried away here, but the results spoke for themselves, so it was time well spent in my book.

Powerful spirits were really the ones creating these lenses, so I just supplied them with magicules. Raphael-san was the one who did all the complicated calculations, so that made it easy to operate.

During the daytime it operated at full power, of course, since that overhead became unnecessary. With more light and heat blasting through it, it was one heck of a heat ray cannon.

If I were to face off against a human army, I bet I could reduce them to ashes without lifting a finger. After my little upgrades to the magic, it really seemed that strong.

Satisfied with the outcome of my experiment, I returned to my office.

Not a moment too soon, Shuna came by to let me know that we had guests. By that, I could see that there were quite a few guests.

Ah, let’s just say that most of my time was spent meeting guests. I spent the rest just developing magic, thinking of cool new products, and ordering the right people to the right places. I was also running the labyrinth and consulting with Myourmiles-kun…among other things. Having fun was also part of my work.

With that being said, treating my guests well was very important, so I took it seriously.

Shinji and the other two were waiting nervously in the guest room, which Shuna escorted me to. They were granted asylum in our country, and so we asked them for as much information as they could share with us over the last few days.

Of course, this wasn’t an interrogation, but a voluntary thing. We had interviewed them peacefully in separate rooms. They were allowed to do whatever they wanted to in their free time, so they could think about their decision regarding their futures.

Today, they came to report that.

“So, have you decided what you’re going to do?”

They were torn between the choice of working in my kingdom or becoming freelance adventurers. If they wanted to continue being adventures, they could strike it rich by challenging the Dungeon over and over.

The drawback being, now that they knew how difficult the Dungeon was, they couldn’t see the prospect of beating it in the future. The Demon Colossus would be placed on the 60th floor, a boss that Shinji’s crew would surely bite their teeth out on. Furthermore, even if they did beat it, Adalmann and his entourage awaited them on the 70th floor. It was a checkmate. This prospect of a dead-end career had them worried, as they weren’t looking forward to grinding the same floor till the end of their days.

Knowing this had killed their drive to press on. In spite of the riches they’d earn, their lives would be monotonous and boring.

I mean, Adalmann and the others had become stronger than I expected, so I couldn’t really blame the challengers of the labyrinth. Normally, them achieving such growth—more like evolution—was unthinkable, but I guess it couldn’t be helped.

Whatever, forget about that.

I stopped worrying about how the other challengers were doing.

Then, how about working in my country?

Although I would give the right job to the right person, I also promised that they would live a steady life. However, right now the war with the Empire was near at hand, so they seemed to be afraid that they would be drafted into the war.

I didn’t intend to force anyone, but I couldn’t guarantee that the three of them wouldn’t get involved.

“Yes,” Shinji said nervously, “after discussing amongst the three of us, we decided to work for His Majesty Rimuru’s country. Because Master Gadra is also going to serve this country, would you allow us to do the same?”

The other two nodded sternly, apparently on board with it.

“Understood. In that case, you’re welcome to join us.”

“Thank you very much!”

“I promise to do my very best!”

“…I’ll do my best.”

Just like that, the trio became part of my country.

So, what kind of job should I give them?

“I’ll let ol’ Gadra-san manage the 60th floor. This way, he can research the Demon Colossus in order to pilot it in the future.”

That old man had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and became deeply invested in the topic. So much so, that he couldn’t contain his excitement when I presented him with the Demon Colossus.

Right now, Adalmann was supervising him. In the future, I had plans of letting Gadra become the guardian of the 60th floor.

“So, you guys don’t want any part in the war, right?”

“Ah…yeah,” Shinji replied hesitantly. “There are people that we know, so if it is fine with you…”

Then, rather than becoming my subordinate, maybe they could become researchers in the Dungeon.

On that note, I decided to introduce the three of them to Ramiris.

We strolled into the dungeon and headed to Ramiris’s lab.

“Ramiris, this is Shinji and his friends, would you like them to work at your place?”

“Ah, Rimuru! Those kids that visited before?”

“Yep.”

Ramiris had been looking for an assistant, but she hadn’t found one yet that was up to task. She couldn’t do things as freely as she wanted with foreign researchers. On the other hand, unintelligent monsters just couldn’t understand her crazy ideas. She had Dino, but she couldn’t rely on him alone. Right then, Shinji and the others appeared, and they happened to be the right people for the job.

“Yahoo! I’m Ramiris. Are you guys interested in working as my new assistants?”

“Um…”

Shinji was bereft of words, but he didn’t seem to realize who Ramiris was.

“Fantastic! Hey, Shinji! Fairies really exist?!”

Mark exclaimed in surprise. Was this the first time that they met a fairy? I had no idea how long they had been in this world, but his reaction to seeing a fairy proved that this guy was more genuine than I thought…

“I am looking for useful assistants. I’ll give you a good salary, so, what do you think? Rimuru also said that since we lack researchers, educated otherworlders are a great value!”

Ah, Ramiris had said too much.

That was true though. They were highly skilled, and their thinking was flexible. They were always ready for work, so they’d make a great addition to the team.

“…I agree. I think I’d be more at peace with research.”

Xin was straightforward with his opinion. Perhaps moved by this, Shinji quickly made up his mind.

“So then, please take us on!”

Hearing this reply, Ramiris fluttered around happily. “Fufu!” she giggled haughtily, puffing out her nonexistent chest. “Seems like you guys are gonna be useful. Very well, you all passed. However, you must obey my orders to the letter!” she declared to the trio.

I was shocked by how quickly she flipped. It felt like her modest approach a moment ago had been a ruse. To say that it was typical of Ramiris would be an understatement.

Ignoring the dumbfounded trio, Ramiris quickly came up with a list of conditions for them.

They would be paid three gold coins per month. Meaning their annual salary would be 36 gold coins, along with a bonus. It was better not to count on the bonus, though, because Ramiris paid it according to her mood, as did I.

However, it looked like she would be taking charge of their food, clothing, and shelter. They would probably mainly use our cafeteria, but that shouldn’t be an issue.

That wrapped up Shinji and his two friends’ speedy immigration.

A few days later:

It seemed that the trio got used to their job and were busy working as Ramiris’s assistants. That was all well and good, so my next worry was Gadra. We’d lost touch with Gadra ever since he returned to the Empire.

I’m sure that old man’s doing fine, he’s a tough guy…

I started to worry about him though and hoped to get in touch.

With that on my mind, I went to the Control Room to have a meeting with Benimaru.

The big surveillance screen showed footage from my Argos. It showed all of the surveilled locations, but I couldn’t spot anything out of the norm. I wanted to get information on Imperial territory as well, but I had to be satisfied with the military border for now. A lot of soldiers gathered there to guard the area around the base. That place was always busy.

“It doesn’t look like there’s going to be any movement today,” I remarked.

“Yeah,” Benimaru replied. “By the way, this magic is really nifty, isn’t it? It’s what you’ve been working on recently, right, Rimuru-sama?”

Since we were the only people here today, Benimaru engaged in a casual tone. I liked this more relaxed side of him. Unfortunately, as soon as someone else was around, he would go back to his rigid self. Well, except with Souei and Diablo.

I wanted to cherish the camaraderie we had, so every once in a while, I’d take the three of them to Ingracia for a night out and crack open a cold one with the boys.

“That’s right!” Diablo jumped in. “The greatness of this magic begins with its unconventional conception and out-of-the-box thinking. The cost-to-performance is incredible. Not to mention its convenience, and the complexity of the calculations needed for it to activate are as fine as a beautiful work of art. So—”

“Stoooop!!” I shouted. “Hold it right there. If you can’t stop gushing over it, just do it somewhere I can’t hear you, okay?”

This was what happened when I got careless. Diablo’s sudden gushing was something I just didn’t want to deal with.

This magic was indeed great, but the only reason I could do it was because I had Raphael-san. It was a bit awkward to hear such praise because I couldn’t take full credit for it.

“Yeah, Diablo. If you don’t pull yourself together a bit, you’ll bother Rimuru-sama.”

“That’s ridiculous. What are you saying, Benimaru. That’s not true, right, Rimuru-sama?”

“No, Benimaru is right. You’re overreacting too much. It’s always wonderful Rimuru this, incredible Rimuru that, it’s totally overblown!”

This was the perfect time to properly call Diablo out on it.

He deflated like a punctured balloon, utterly devastated. It wasn’t anything serious, though, just him being dramatic.



When I heard that Diablo was a powerful demon or something called primordial, I didn’t know what to do about it. But if you really thought about it, he was a weirdo from the start. He even made a fool out of Guy, so you’d just make a fool of yourself if you took him seriously. I had realized that, so I wanted to be alert.

“Kufufufufu, how incredible of Rimuru-sama, even your mere words inflicted excruciating mental damage to my soul…”

“Didn’t I just tell you to stop it!”

Right? This guy was incapable of self-reflection. Having a stern word with him was just fine.

Our heartwarming conversation was interrupted by a sudden report.

‹Rimuru, there has been a direct spatial transfer to the labyrinth! This feedback, it came from the old-timer that recently became our ally!›

‹Understood. I’ll go to the 70th floor right away.›

When I stood up, Benimaru and Diablo realized that something was up. I was impressed at how quick they were to react, so I let them know what was happening.

“Seems like that Gadra’s back, but something’s wrong. Let’s go check it out.”

“Understood. I will remain here as a guard.”

“Then I will escort Rimuru-sama.”

“I’ll rely on you.”

During important times like this, I could count on Diablo. If only he were always like this, then… Nope, never mind. Diablo was brilliant, but he seemed like two entirely different people at times.

On that somber note, we headed to the room we had assigned to Gadra.

As expected, we found him right there. Well, now I didn’t have to worry about him because he was right in front of me, alive and well.

“Oh dear, I could already see the other side,” Gadra murmured, all the while still looking as spry as ever.

The only people here, other than me and Diablo, were Adalmann and the others. Ramiris and Veldora got here late but got back to work once they found out that Gadra was safe and sound.

“So, what happened?”

“Well, during the Imperial conference, I suggested that we do not go to war, as Rimuru-sama ordered. In spite of this, they are intent on moving forward. I already expected that, so I wanted to make a direct appeal to His Imperial Majesty Rudra as my last service to him.”

And then he said he requested to meet with the emperor, which was accepted. Their meeting was meant to take place today. Gadra entered the emperor’s castle, only to be stabbed by someone. It had all gone down just moments ago, not even ten minutes had passed.

It would be dumb to ask him if he was okay.

“Oh right, we gave you the Resurrection Bracelet.”

“Yes sir, Ramiris-sama’s power is marvelous. This bracelet saved my life. I was expecting something like this would happen, so I prepared a teleportation spell in advance.”

Seeing him safe now, I figured that might indeed be the case. That was quite the clever idea. If you were to return to the labyrinth, no matter how injured you were, or how close you were to dying, the Resurrection Bracelet would bring you back to life.

Gadra’s return and resurrection reaffirmed how useful Ramiris’s power truly was. Even so, it was owed in part to Gadra’s finesse to set up magic in advance. It seemed like he also passed this technique on to Razen. I’d have to try this myself some other time.

In my case, I had ‘Thought Acceleration,’ so if I combined it with that, I might be able to create more amazing magic.

“So, who attacked you?”

I didn’t think there were that many people capable of beating Gadra, even in my country. He was always on guard, with thorough defensive magic, so I didn’t think he would be slow to react even if taken by surprise…

“The thing is, I was attacked without detecting the presence of the culprit, robbing me of my chance to confirm the identity. I do have an idea about who it was, but it’s very hard to believe…”

Gadra turned and showed us his back, where we could see a gash in his robes. His wounds were healed, but his equipment was not restored. His robes had traces of corrosion on it, which made it clear that it wasn’t your average physical attack.

“Stabbed in the heart from your back, huh?”

“The assailant even managed to break through the defensive magic. It looks like they have someone with an intriguing technique.”

Even Diablo was impressed. That was how you could tell this opponent was not one to be underestimated. There was likely someone powerful enough to kill me in the Empire. Maybe he was the one who stabbed Gadra, but it was better to assume that there were still others.

Gadra himself wasn’t certain about his attacker’s identity. He wanted to look further into it, so I decided to leave it to him. He didn’t seem to be lying because he looked seriously confused. It may still be too early to trust him, but I’m not one to burn a bridge like that.

“Well, I’m glad that you’re safe. This just shows us that the Empire is strong… We must double our efforts to be careful in the future.”

“Rimuru-sama is right,” Diablo added. “We can’t get any new information now, even if we pushed our luck further than this.”

We seemed to be on the same page.

For now, we should be content with the information Gadra had obtained, nearly paying the ultimate price for it. With that in mind, I decided to question him a little further and thanked him for his troubles.

From Gadra’s story, the Empire was headed for war. They wouldn’t publicly declare war against another country, though. To them, their emperor was the absolute authority, so they didn’t acknowledge the existence of other countries.

However, that was just a facade. In fact, they somehow had diplomatic ties with the Dwarven Kingdom, and had not interfered in their governance.

When the Empire invaded other countries, they always came fully prepared. That was why instead of a declaration of war, they would announce a recommendation to surrender. They would only do it once. If the country surrendered, then great. If they didn’t, then war would come. The Empire would give no mercy.

What a condescending and prideful country. You can’t become friends with other countries if you’re that annoying, you know? Worrying about that was useless, since the Empire never participated in any international affairs anyway.

That’s why they didn’t ratify the Western States Council’s international laws, so there was no use arguing when they started a war, as they were not bound by these laws. Agreements after defeat, handling of prisoners of war, a number of prohibitions in wartime—without any of those arrangements, the Western Nations were very much afraid of the Empire.

That was, indeed, scary. At worst, they would justify the slaughter of civilians. That meant that if we were to lose the war to the Empire, we would lose everything. And maybe, the word “reparations” wouldn’t even come into play. Everything would belong to the Empire, leaving the losing country with nothing, not even a single right, after unconditional surrender. In order to be able to negotiate with the Empire, it would have to end in at least a draw.

Then, my side wouldn’t have to go nice on them. All we had to do was to settle this once and for all and cut off the root of the problem.

Now that we were certain about the Empire’s movements, we also switched to “war mode.” First of all, I set up a joint operation headquarters in the Control Room. I did it on a whim; nevertheless, something like this was important.

Benimaru and Souei would always be on standby here.

Souei still stationed his ‘Clones’ in several places so we didn’t have to rely entirely on my ‘Argos’ for reconnaissance. With Moss’s help, we could get information with a high degree of accuracy.

At this point, our advantage was considerable. To put it bluntly, when it came to warfare in this world, the real action only started once the opposing armies clashed. We were trying to gather intel on the enemy’s troops with the use of scouts and long-range magic, but in this world, it was common practice to only do so when the clash was imminent.

The concept of information warfare existed here, but no country’s military conducted surveillance of enemy forces as thoroughly as ours. That’s what Hinata and Gadra told me, so it’s not me being presumptuous, ok? It’s a hard fact.

“This footage is from the sky…?” Gadra asked.

“Kufufu,” Diablo laughed. “This is created through Rimuru-sama’s magic. It only uses a small amount of magicules, and the reaction occurs outside the atmosphere. Only few could sense this magic reaction, such as those with danger precognition Skills like ‘Ultra Instinct.’”

“I-indeed. I’ve always been confident in my ability to sense magic, but this magic appears too natural for me to think it was being controlled by someone.”

“Of course! Even an archdemon, who may excel in magic but lacks experience, wouldn’t be able to appreciate this masterpiece. How brilliant, wouldn’t you agree?”

“That goes without saying! This is really quite astounding!”

For some reason, Diablo started showing off my creation to Gadra with a smug grin. They were both in awe and Gadra was getting visibly excited.

“Shion.”

“Understood!”

Since they were quickly becoming a nuisance, I ordered Shion to isolate them in a separate room.

Once I had peace and quiet again, I got down to business.

The bird’s-eye-view surveillance footage was a fantastic cheat. Think about it: Not long ago, I was worried about where we would be attacked from, but that couldn’t be simpler now. After all, we were not just monitoring the possible routes for invasion but also our shared border with the Empire, so we’d know it the moment they started moving.

Taking shogi as an example, it was like playing against a blindfolded opponent. That means your opponent could only be sure about the positions of their own pieces. Assuming you didn’t act like a total amateur, this was your game to lose, even against a master of the game. This wasn’t a minor handicap, but an absolute advantage. On top of that, there were no rules in this war. Victory was justice.

The prospect of a one-sided invasion was scarier than I thought. As long as nothing had been promised, we could do anything in this war. However, I did set one rule: “Do not attack civilians!” That was it. Of course, I strictly prohibited our side from striking first. Plus, once I declared that the war had ended, further attacks were forbidden. I believed that no one would disobey me and violate my orders.

So now, all of the country’s executives were gathered in the Control Room.

Benimaru was the general. Hakurou was the advisor. Souei was the intelligence officer. Rigurd and the chiefs of the three powers that support him: Rugurd, Regurd, Rogurd. Representing the women, we had Shuna and Lilina. There were also the unsung heroes, namely Rigur, Kaijin, and Kurobee. Vesta and Myourmiles served as consultants. Gobta and Gabil served as the commanders of their corps. Even Geld laid down his work and came over. I also called the three demonesses led by Testarossa. Diablo seemed to have done some self-reflection, so I let him join the meeting, too. He stood in his usual position, on good terms with Shion. Gadra and the trio also came to contribute their information about the Empire. And not to forget, Masayuki, now called the moral support of the people, of sorts, showed up late.

“Wait a minute. Why am I the moral support of the people?! Please don’t say stuff like that! Come on!” he shouted, giving me some serious side eye.

Oops, he really did just say that in front of everyone.

For some reason, Gadra was staring at the two of us during our little exchange. Something must’ve been on his mind, so I decided I would ask him after the conference.

And last but not least, our collaborators, Veldora and Ramiris. Beretta, Treyni-san, and Charys were also on stand-by in the corner of the room.

There we go, that’s everyone.

I gently stroked Ranga sitting next to me and looked around at everyone in their seats.

“I suppose it comes as no surprise why I gathered you all here today. We must discuss our strategy against the Empire. Benimaru and I came up with the outline of the plan, but I would also like to know what everyone else here thinks. Please express your thoughts freely!”

“ “ “Yes sir!” ” ” everyone answered in chorus, kicking off the conference.

Looking at the screen, you could see vast numbers of Imperial soldiers lining up one after another.

Visible beside them were also large hunks of steel, rolling with continuous tracks wrapped around their wheels as they sputtered in loud bursts. Those were tanks. Going off of what we saw from our bird’s eye view, they appeared to have 2,000 of them.

“Wai—oi! Why do they have tanks!” I called out, unable to believe my eyes.

I hurriedly asked Shinji and the others and found out that the Empire was pushing for the development of modern weapons using the otherworlders’ knowledge—science and technology.

Instead of gas, it had an internal-combustion engine running on magicules. These were supplied by the constant intake of outside air, which had the added benefit of not only harvesting magicules from the environment, but also served to cool the hot engine. This tank was highly versatile, and in terms of its performance alone, it easily outperformed the best tanks in my previous world.

Gadra said that they analyzed the magic-controlled power reactor they had excavated from ancient ruins and modernized it. Also, magic stones could be used to fuel it. During normal operation, it gathered magicules from its environment. But for combat, magic stones were used.

This was an all-terrain vehicle fit for even the roughest roads, reaching a top speed over 100 kilometers per hour. Although coming at a great energy cost, it even had the ability to float a short distance above the ground.

I felt like I was late to the party and frustrated about the fact that I didn’t make them myself. The idea of a tank in this world of knights never occurred to me. We had built a train, meaning we were this close to making tanks, too…

—But we didn’t have cars, either, so skipping straight to tanks would’ve been weird. I always thought that it would be a shame to popularize the use of cars, too. They were convenient, but equally dangerous, you know what I mean? Everyone would clamor to get one, but in the end, it would be impossible to ever meet demand. Resource scarcity was still a thing here, so the split between haves and have-nots was inevitable.

In my opinion, using trains in urban environments was more convenient than cars. Then once everything was up and running with the trains, I wanted to invent luxurious cars for the rich. They were meant to be something people could strive for, as the ultimate status symbol.

Well, that would have to wait until after the war. After all, their tanks weren’t the only thing of note.

They also had ships that flew in the sky. Are you for real?! I wanted to shout. Having that kind of thing would make transportation a piece of cake. They could single-handedly solve logistics problems when used for war.

At that point, I realized that maybe I was getting too cocky. Perhaps I was being a bit optimistic when I assumed our air superiority. I had thought about developing that sort of thing as well, but dismissed it as impossible. One does not simply develop flying ships overnight.

Given enough time, we maybe could’ve done it, but development wasn’t that straight-forward. It takes a lot of trial and error before a product is ready for practical use. So, we had to applaud the research and development team of the Empire; those guys were brilliant. But I must admit that I had a slight desire to capture at least one ship whole.

Had I tried to think more outside-the-box and been a tad more liberal in my demands, we could’ve been sitting here with our very own—you know what? Forget it. There was no use crying over spilled milk; it was something to think about for the future.

After the war ended, I would try and develop a lot more things on a whim.

The situation with the Empire was as I just saw.

It was nothing new to me, but for some of the people here, this was their first time seeing anything of the sort. They just stared at the screen dumbfounded, unable to hide their astonishment.

“As far as estimates go, we could be dealing with a million invaders in total! Well, it’s already evident as we can see. I know you may have been surprised by their weapons, but that doesn’t change the fact that we have the upper hand. Don’t worry.”

The most important part of war is to know how strong the opponent would be. At this point, we knew their abilities as if we’d proverbially stripped them naked.

Raphael-san counted that the enemy troops numbered a million soldiers in total. Now that may sound like a crazy number, but it was still unlikely for our side to lose. That was how strong our side was.

“Gadra told me that there are three major corps in the Empire,” I said. “One of them, which is called the ‘Armored Corps,’ has the tank troops that were shown on the screen. They call it the ‘Magic Tank Division’ and it is undoubtedly the main force of the enemy.”

Then, I went into further detail about the inside information I had on the tank division.

That’s not all the intel Gadra gave me. He also attended the strategy meeting and told me everything about it. They must have learned about Gadra’s escape, so it was likely that they made changes in the plan that they had initially laid out in the meeting, but it was safe to assume that they didn’t change the main gist of it.

After all, Yuuki was also there with the goal of starting a coup. He would definitely stir the other commanders up by insisting that they didn’t have to be on guard as Gadra was already dead.

Gadra also said that the Armored Corps commander Calgurio took the bait, hook, line, and sinker. He believed that the Dungeon held treasures and was planning to beat the other commanders to the punch.

If so, he would probably hate to make major changes to their plan, so he was likely to agree with Yuuki’s suggestion. It was dangerous to act on assumptions, but it was easy to guess the intent of their actions if you looked at how Calgurio was positioning his army.

Gobta was the first to speak after I finished explaining.

“Um, about my army that is on standby in the inn town, are we gonna fight against those tanks?”

Gobta brought up a good point. In fact, from the point of view of the corps commander, this question had to be asked. It was a matter of life and death. Gobta, who would always sleep during meetings, had matured. Indeed, it was because people take responsibility that they—

“Why are you asking such an obvious question?” Benimaru demanded, turning to Gobta while I was deeply moved. “The First Army will destroy their tank corps under your command!”

“I didn’t know about that…” Gobta murmured in a daze, somewhat shocked.

Well, I could totally understand where he was coming from.

“Are we going to have to defend the inn town to the death?” he asked, with dread in his eyes.

“Of course not!” I said with a smile. “From what I know about the tanks, you have a shot at beating them if you play your cards right. The only problem is that we don’t know how many people would be hurt during the battle. To begin with, it’s harder to defend than to attack, so the inexperienced Green Numbers will only serve as targets for the tanks. The plan isn’t for you to fight till the bitter end.”

I took my time explaining this to try and reassure him. Hakurou, who was in charge of supporting Gobta, could apparently sense what I was playing at from the onset. He just listened and agreed to what I said.

“Then, what should we do?”

“The commander’s role is to think about that, but it would be hard for a first-timer like you. Benimaru, explain it to him,” I said with an air of authority.

Actually, like Gobta, I was no better than an amateur when it came to army stuff. I didn’t know much about tactics, so I just let Benimaru do the finer details.

But my approach of taking it easy and delegating stuff had many upsides. If Gobta managed to step up and worked hard, I would have even more time to slack off.

We both listened to Benimaru’s explanation, hoping that Gobta would do his best on this one.

“Listen, Gobta. The inn town is important, but it doesn’t matter if you lose it. If it gets destroyed, then we can just re-build it. If it gets taken by the Empire, then we will just take it back. The problem is about the residents being hurt. However, Rimuru has already come up with a solution. We have issued an order to the residents there to evacuate to the capital Rimuru.”

Yep. The moment we knew the Empire would make its move, we started evacuating the civilians. It was taking time, but it should be finished before the Imperial Army arrived.

“Ah, come to think of it, there aren’t very many residents there.”

“Exactly. Your job is to safely evacuate the rest of them. Once you’re done, go here,” Benimaru pointed at the huge map spread across the table. Specifically, the central city of the Armed Nation of Dwargon.

“Huh?”

“Look at this video. From what we can see, the Imperial Army is planning to divide its forces and invade along several routes. While some of them have already entered the Great Jura Forest, there was no movement in their tank troops. If you look at the direction these troops will be going, it’s clear that they’re planning to move along the foot of the Canaat Mountains. There aren’t as many trees there, so it doesn’t affect the advance of their army.”

“I-I see…”

“You don’t get it, do you? Your goal is to defend the Dwarven Kingdom,” said Benimaru, as he placed a piece representing Gobta’s army in front of the Dwarven Kingdom. Next, he took out a piece for the dwarven army and placed it next to Gobta’s.

“It is a united front.”

“Ooh!” Gobta gasped with surprise and excitement as it finally clicked.

We had formed this military tactic based on Gadra’s information and had already talked to Gazel about it. In accordance with our alliance, we told him that the Empire’s aim was the Dwarven Kingdom. He also pledged to send reinforcements to our aid as he had promised.

Naturally, Gazel also knew that the Empire was on the warpath. He said that he was tired of turning down their repeated requests for permission to march. But sooner or later, the Empire would run out of patience, he predicted.

Gazel was happy with my offer, and it was of mutual benefit.

We would abandon the inn town and later rebuild it if it got destroyed. Though, if we didn’t bring the battle to its doorstep, the Empire would probably spare it. It didn’t really matter though, since we could always reconstruct it after the war ended.

“The Empire is passing through a conspicuous route because they want us to know where they will attack from. Anyone would notice an army of that size marching.”

“Um, is that what you call a tour de force?”

Gobta, you little smartass, when did you learn such fancy expressions? So this bastard did do his studies—I was somewhat impressed.

“Right,” Benimaru continued. “This route falls right on the border between Dwargon and Tempest. Both countries will definitely notice them, and it’s their way to easily gauge the other’s reaction. If we carelessly provoked them, they would use it as an excuse to start the war immediately. However, since it is strictly forbidden for us to attack them first, we will start with a warning. Do you follow?”

“Yes.”

“If we don’t make a move on them, the Imperial Army will cross the Ameld River and take the high ground outside of the entrance to the Dwarven Kingdom. It’s a great place for them to deploy their army since it’s flat and doesn’t have many trees.”

“I see…”

“If they end up doing this, Gazel won’t sit by and wait. He’s going to send his troops out and start negotiating with the other side. It’s the same for us, and the Empire will have both Tempest and Dwargon as their enemies.”

Benimaru moved the pieces on the map, complementing his explanation with a visual demonstration of the plan.

“According to Gadra-dono, the Empire was wary of a pincer attack from both our armies. As long as they hold that place, though, that’s not going to happen. After all, attempting to surprise an enemy who is waiting with open arms is tactical suicide.”

The point of a surprise attack was to catch the opponent with their pants down. But if they anticipated our plan, not only would our advantage be moot—we’d be walking into a trap.

“That’s why we’ll ‘let them’ attack us, and then crush their army head on!” Benimaru said, slamming Gobta’s piece into the Empire’s.

“Ooh!” Gobta was impressed.

The other officers didn’t seem to have any complaints, but I wonder what they thought about the difference in fighting power between Gobta’s army and the Empire’s.

“Gabil, the Third Army’s commander!”

“Yes!”

“Your duty is to guard the evacuating civilians. Watch them from the sky and look out for people who are falling behind or need help.”

“Understood!”

“Once everyone’s evacuated, move on to aid Gobta straight away. If the timing is right, you two can meet before the Imperial Army arrives.”

“My corps prides itself on being the fastest in Tempest. We will make it on time!” Gabil replied confidently to Benimaru.

But it wouldn’t be that easy. When the time came to evacuate our residents, we intended to run the trains at peak capacity. Even so, moving tens of thousands of people would still take a not insignificant amount of time.

Another chink in the plan was the unprecedented speed that the Imperial Army was moving at. When you factored in legion magic, we could estimate them to be marching at a surprising 80 kilometers per day. The Imperial Army was currently stationed near the border. The distance from their camp to the battlefield was about 1,500 kilometers. At this pace, they would reach the battlefield in about 20 days.

The reason they could keep up this pace was because each soldier had undergone some type of surgical augmentation. From what I heard, they could go without eating or drinking for a week, so their top speed was probably even higher still.

Gadra said that the tanks could move at about 10 kilometers per hour without refueling. Since they could absorb magicules even at night, the soldiers could rest while the tanks were replenishing their energy. Surely, they would be foolish to exhaust themselves before the war began.

Gadra’s explanation made sense, so Benimaru and I calculated accordingly.

“The Imperial Army might get here faster than expected! So don’t let your guard down!” Benimaru warned.

“The Imperial Army should deploy their main force here, but as Gobta said, what they are doing now is a tour de force. In other words, a diversion. Their main army is on a beeline towards this very position!”

Benimaru took out different colored pieces for the Imperial Army and scattered them in the Great Jura Forest.

They wanted us to think that the tank unit was their main force, while keeping the actual main unit separately from them, huh? Since all of the enemy’s moves were on full display for me, I honestly just had to sit back and stay sharp.

“Even if we may be overwhelmed,” Benimaru continued, “we still have Geld to defend this land! Geld, please call your men back as soon as possible.”

“Understood. I’ve already ordered them to return with ‘Thought Communication.’ It won’t be long before everyone gathers under me.”

Benimaru and Geld looked to be on the same wavelength, as they got their points across in a few words. That was Geld for you, reliable as ever.

After that, Benimaru turned his eyes back to the map. “Their main force will continue to hide from us. Unfortunately, Rimuru-sama’s surveillance magic ‘Argos’ can’t tell us what’s happening in the forest. That’s where Souei comes into play.”

At that, Souei nodded and stood up. “The forest is overgrown with thick trees, making it difficult to monitor from the sky. Even if my subordinates tried hiding throughout the forest, there’s too much ground to cover and there is a risk of being discovered. For this operation, I am counting on Moss. He has the ability to release a lot of tiny ‘Clones’ and use them to collect information. As such, we cannot expect them to fight, and either way, Moss has assured me that losing a clone wouldn’t set us back. As of now, the eastern part of the Great Jura Forest is under Moss’s surveillance. We know that the Imperial Army is divided into platoons and is currently advancing there, so it’s up to us to crush them individually,” Souei finished with a cruel smile.

He did kinda spook me, to be honest. I was glad he was on our side.

Taking each platoon out individually wasn’t the problem. The main force behind them was. So, Benimaru’s plan was to wait until they came together to a certain extent.

“If the Imperial Army’s aim is the Dungeon, then all we will have to do is lure them to its entrance and take them on from there. If there are still any Imperial troops left on the ground at that point, Geld’s Second Army and my main unit will take care of them! That’s all!”

The plan was straightforward and easy to understand.

But there was one big question still hanging in the air—that was addressing our comparable lack in military power. No one had said anything yet, leaving me wondering what everyone thought about the plan.

As I waited, hesitant about whether I should raise the question, the Control Room suddenly erupted with cheers.

“Understood! With Gabil-san backing me up, there’s nothing to be worried about. Victory will be ours!”

“I’m glad to hear you say that! I’m not one to be outdone by Gobta-dono; I will show you how to fight!”

“I was worried that we wouldn’t get an opportunity to prove ourselves, but General Benimaru-dono has, of course, not let us down. Indeed, bestowing us with the greatest honor of protecting our country, no less. We shall unleash all our might!”

The three commanders were overjoyed at Benimaru’s declaration.

It didn’t just stop there. The civil servants enthusiastically discussed their opinions amongst themselves, too. Excitement was in the air, and the three demon girls were enjoying a nice chat.

But like…the difference in military strength…

I too had confidence that we would win this war. Yes, I had a serene outlook on the matter myself, but that didn’t necessarily mean I wasn’t the least bit anxious. I was slightly put off by the utter lack of worry everyone else exhibited. Even Gobta was full of zeal, not a trace of his earlier unease left. I still had my qualms about leaving this big role in his hands, in spite of having Hakurou as his consultant.

“Are there any questions after hearing Benimaru’s explanation?”

I pushed the question into the room, with no response.

Instead, Benimaru said on behalf of everyone: “Don’t worry, Rimuru-sama,” Benimaru said with a brisk laugh. “We aren’t worried about losing. Not from an abundance of temerity, but because we are going all out. A battlefield awaits us with our chance at glory. If that is where we meet our fall, we can only lament our own shortcomings. We will be forced to face our reality, a world where you will eat or be eaten.”

I was met with many similar reactions from all monsters alike, including Shuna and the other girls. They didn’t fear losing the battle, they feared the idea of running from it. And in some sense… I kind of understood their feelings.

Then, I’d make sure to show them my full support.

“Testarossa, Ultima, Carrera!”

“ “ “Yes sir!” ” ”

The three demonesses stood up in unison and bowed to me.

Now was the time for me to assign each a mission.

“Accompany each corps commander and assist them!”

“Understood, Rimuru-sama. I will leave Cien as our representative on the council. I will personally see this war to the end!”

“It’s finally my time to shine!” Ultima shouted gleefully. “Please leave it to me, Rimuru-sama!”

“Fufufu,” Carrera giggled, “you can count on me, milord. I will show you every bit of my power!”

The three of them looked up and replied to my order eagerly.

I nodded and introduced them to their respective commanders.

“Testarossa, you’ll go with Gobta.”

“Yes, it’s my pleasure,” replied Testarossa. On the other hand, Gobta looked doubtful, asking: “Are you sure? A stranger to the battlefield, like this woman here, ain’t fit for the First Army, y’know?”

He was treading on some very thin ice.

Although pretty hypocritical of me—I had only recently found out that these girls were, in fact, these fiendish creatures known as primordials—Gobta’s lack of awareness was painful to watch. You’re a dead man if you keep this up, you know? I thought to myself, but kept my mouth shut. It would be more fun to watch this one unfold on its own.

“Ara, you’re so dependable,” Testarossa mused with a smile, but her eyes gave a chilling glare.

I think Testarossa will forgive you if you apologize, Gobta-kun. And so, I would look forward to the day when Gobta found out who Testarossa really was.

Gabil, on the other hand, had definitely matured.

“I have a lot of weaknesses, so I’m counting on you!” he said as he bowed his head to Ultima.

According to what I heard from Diablo and various others, Ultima was the most sadistic of the three demon girls. Carrera was the most likely to go on a rampage, but Ultima was the scariest. While she would dutifully follow my orders, she would also seek out loopholes that let her get back at her opponents. That’s the type of person she was.

Gabil had made the right call here. Ultima seemed to take a liking to him already and replied, “Yeah! I’m also counting on you!” cutely.

Gabil had always warned himself not to get carried away. It seems that it worked and had saved his life. After all, it’s important to be mindful of that every day.

Geld shook hands with Carrera just fine.

Somehow, I felt that they both shared this warrior spirit, which was why I thought that these two would go well together.

I was proud of the pairings I made. Had I swapped Gobta’s and Gabil’s partners, things would’ve been looking grim for our goblin friend already.

Feeling quite pleased with the outcome, I gave the three pairs words of encouragement. Barely anyone knew who these three ladies really were. This was because a gag order was in place on everyone who had been at the meeting when Guy showed up. I didn’t want anyone to end up frightened, so I had instructed the three ladies to keep it on the down low.

I told them to obey the orders from their corps commander and not to reveal their true identities, but I was quite concerned over what may happen if they ever snapped. And to think that I could’ve gone on in blissful ignorance…

Oh well, I shall trust them.

Unless I gave them orders, they would be standing by quietly.

Anyway, with all that said and done, the three pairs were formed. Whatever challenge came their way, I knew they could handle it. I could finally put my mind at ease.

“That’s all we planned to talk about, but is there anything anyone still wants to add?”

The rest would depend on the Empire’s reaction, so we’d have to stay flexible.

Working with King Gazel was also important, so I had to make some detailed plans with him in advance. However, that was the operation headquarters’ job. The corps commanders had their own work cut out for them, so if there were no other pressing matters, we could adjourn the meeting.

I was about to call it there, when suddenly a hand shot up. It was Masayuki.

“Um, could you give me a moment?”

“What is it, Masayuki-kun?”

“Err… I have a question—”

“Mm-hmm.”

“The fact that you made me a corps commander aside, you didn’t explain what the Volunteer Corps is supposed to do.”

Oh, I forgot about that. He must have quite a few questions. He was still a high schooler, so it made total sense for him to be nervous after being given a corps.

Had we been in ancient Japan, it would’ve been normal for someone his age to lead an army. For a youngster living in peaceful, modern-day Japan though, I could see how it would be overwhelming.

It was pretty hard for me too, you know. Before I knew it, I had become a demon lord without a boss to guide me. By contrast, Masayuki was a pretty lucky ducky.

“Don’t you think so?”

“So please explain!”

Ah, roger that. It was truly a shame I couldn’t relay the full extent of my internal monologue. No matter how I said it, it would sound like I was making excuses. It is what it is.

“Oh well. I do feel kinda bad about dropping this huge responsibility on your shoulders.”

“Eh, no, I…”

“However, you’re better suited to calm the town’s residents than I am.”

If it were just the monsters, then we wouldn’t have to worry as much if the war started. Morale was high among them, so no one would try to disturb public order.

The immigrants were different, though. They might disturb the peace and do not-so-good things because of their fear and anxiety.

“That’s why I need you to help alleviate everyone’s anxiety, especially now that we’re going to war.”

“I see… If that’s what you need, my power will be helpful,” said Masayuki, seemingly convinced.

“Ha-ha-ha, you’re being modest! I, Myourmiles, and everyone else know that you don’t want to be partial to one country due to your position as a Hero, Masayuki-sama! But please lend us your strength, for the sake of the powerless people!” said Myourmiles, gazing at Masayuki, eyes sparkling. He still had the wrong idea about Masayuki’s capabilities, but I wasn’t one to rain on his parade.

I mean, even Hinata seemed to have the wrong idea about Masayuki.

How fearsome you are, Masayuki! I’d make sure to keep a keen eye on how the legend of Masayuki would develop during the war.

“…You’re right,” Masayuki replied begrudgingly. Looking at his expression, I could tell that he was already sick and tired of it. I felt sorry for him, but I wanted him to do his best here.

“Then, I guess I will try to maintain public order with the Volunteer Corps that you’ve entrusted me with.”

“Please. I figure you already know about this, but thanks to Ramiris, I think the damage to the town will be minimal. When the war begins, the plan for the urban area on the ground is to isolate it within the labyrinth.”

Executives and other relevant parties should’ve already been in the know. There were probably some rumors floating about from the people who were late to the evacuation drill, since I hadn’t cracked down on them. The idea being that it would help alleviate some anxiety.

“Uh-huh! While my power is amazing, it’s all thanks to Mentor!”

“Yep, this great feat was achieved by lending Ramiris my super powerful magicules. You could call it a triumph of friendship.”

Thanks to Ramiris, we could isolate the town from the outside world, and this was also only possible with Veldora’s help. I honestly should thank them both.

“Thank you, you two. You really helped a lot.”

“Eh, really? Well, I guess so! You can praise us some more, you know?”

“Gah-ha-ha-ha, she’s right! You can praise us some more!”

“Yeah, yeah. Thank you guys very much!”

A bit of praise goes a long way. And this time I really owed them one.

Despite being isolated in the labyrinth, you could still see the sky, and some of the inhabitants didn’t even notice what had happened. They wouldn’t witness any of the Imperial Army’s violence, which I thought was absolutely wonderful.

“But Rimuru, just keep this in mind,” Ramiris warned.

“Hm?”

“In the unlikely event that Mentor is defeated and the 100th floor gets conquered, the town will be ejected out of the labyrinth. It’s an inevitable reaction to the strain it causes.”

“I see, we’ll need to consider that as well. But that’s if Veldora loses, right? If such a thing happened, the fate of the town would be the least of our worries.”

In that nightmare scenario, it means we had become engaged in a battle that called for all our strength. No way we could afford to care about the town then.

“Well, there’s no way I would lose, anyway.”

“Right. We even have the Dungeon’s Elite Ten, so we don’t have to worry about that!”

Indeed, just as Ramiris said, I didn’t anticipate Veldora partaking in any action, to begin with. Nevertheless, if push comes to shove…

“If that time comes, we’ll have Masayuki.”

“Huh?! W-wait a minute!” the person in question protested. “I have accepted your request of maintaining order because I think I might be able to do it, but for that situation, what is it that you think I could do?”

Masayuki exclaimed that he had never even led an army, a feeling we could all sympathize with. Even Myourmiles, who held Masayuki in very high regard, nodded in agreement.

“Don’t worry, Masayuki-kun,” I said. “I don’t expect you to be able to command an army right now. I’m currently discussing this with Hinata; I asked her to send us an aide from the Holy Knight Order. I’m sure she’ll grant my request, and if so, that person will help you as your second-in-command.”

“Oh, really? That’s a relief.”

“One other thing! I’m putting you in charge of guarding the kids, so you’ll be safe and sou—I mean you’ll keep them safe and sound!”

“Wahahaha! If it’s Hero-sama that will protect them, they couldn’t be in better hands!”

“O-of course,” Masayuki affirmed as he broke out in a cold sweat.

He also knew that the kids could hold their own, so he understood that this was for his own protection. Besides, Chloe was going to be there. If the situation turned dire, then she would be there to protect Masayuki and the others.

That concluded the important topics of this conference.

We prepared the best we could, but who knows what will happen once the chips are down.

And I wasn’t without worry, myself.

Chloe’s memories of my death.

Right now, there was someone in the Empire strong enough to kill me—there was no doubt about that. If that guy appeared, even the Dungeon’s Elite Ten wouldn’t be able to stop them. Wait, on the contrary…

«Report. The Dungeon’s Elite Ten are being used to expose the enemies’ cards.»

I figured. It seemed like Raphael-san’s first priority was my safety. While that did put a smile on my face, I was also determined. No matter what, I would protect my friends. I would never let anyone get hurt in this stupid act called war.

And on that note, I ended the meeting that day.

From the looks of it, Masayuki had successfully persuaded the townsfolk. The scenario became something like “He reasoned with the demon lord and made him promise to protect the town.”

“Well done, Hero!”

“Our savior!”

Masayuki had taken in the praise of the adventurers and immigrants, all with a perturbed look on his face.

But even with that expression—

“That worried crease Hero-sama’s brow is oh-so handsome!”

“Despite pressing a sizable concession from the demon lord, Hero-dono is still not satisfied.”

“Indeed. What a refined dignitary.”

“This town is protected by Hero-sama, and with Demon Lord Rimuru to back him up, I have nothing to fear from the Empire’s invasion!”

“Yeah! All will be well if we leave everything to him!”

These one-sided interpretations did nothing to slow Masayuki’s mounting popularity. All the while, his anguish went unnoticed in the public eye.

As the townsfolk were peacefully going about their days, that fateful day had finally come. The Imperial Army made its appearance. The time of peace had come to an end. Whisked away, like a midsummer night’s dream.

The war had finally begun…