

CHAPTER 3

DESPAIR AND HOPE

Ensuring the magical field was dispelled, I crept back outside, breathing a sigh of relief. I could feel my Replication-driven other half disappear.

Ranga half threw himself out of my shadow. “You are safe, my master!” Being cut off must have alarmed him beyond belief, his hair standing on end from all the nerves. I gave him a pet, trying to reassure him that everything was okay.

This time, though, it was like… Holy crap. That bit of insurance I took out at the start wound up saving my hide, but man , talk about a hairbreadth. When I was locked up in that Holy Field, that put me at one hell of a disadvantage. Trying to hold my own in combat there, with no idea who I was fighting or how strong they were, would’ve been idiotic.

Realizing that, I created a Replication and got my core slime self the hell out of there. My human-form Replication was a full magical corpus of sorts, created by slapping a whole bunch of magicules together; it couldn’t move too quickly, but it was a small price to pay if my “main” body could escape. Looking at it that way, it was a small miracle I kept that corpus going as long as I did. I wanted to pat myself on the back. That’s how rough that Holy Field was.

But hey, at least I made it. Now I was kinda glad I’d treated Hakuro’s training in the Formhide skill so seriously. If that lady Hinata had considered the possibility of a Replication in the mix, it would’ve been all over… But I guess she wasn’t that wary of me. Few people would be. And that wound up saving my life.

It sure taught me a lesson, though. I had to keep a closer eye on myself, no doubt. Oh, and I almost forgot: I was hiding my aura, since I was in combat until just now, but it might be seeping out by this point. I’m pretty sure I’m able to keep it perfectly hidden these days, but let’s just be doubly careful about buttoning that up.

With that in mind, I crafted a new mask within my Stomach. It was a copy of the first Mask of Magic Resistance I saw, but I got rid of all the traits I didn’t need and boosted its core magical resistance instead. Then I shape-shifted into human form and put it on. That should keep Hinata from picking up on my presence. I think.

Still—that Hinata lady was just way too powerful. Off the charts. If that Holy Field wasn’t there and she put her full force into it, what then? I had the creeping suspicion that, nine times outta ten, I would lose.

Such were the thoughts in my mind as I looked back at how the Glutton had fought for me back there.

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When I awaken the Glutton inside me, it is, to put it broadly, kind of like executing a program. A highly destructive virus of sorts, one that consumes everything within eyeshot. That was why her rapier caused no pain as it slashed into my body.

The Glutton had been transforming my own physical body, as Hinata looked on in astonishment. This was a freshly harnessed “complete” form of Universal Shapeshift in action. It let me transform my body such that it boasted only the most useful aspects of every monster I had consumed in the past, creating a well-oiled battle machine. The Glutton absorbed the grass, the earth, the air around me to rebuild myself into this new physical form.

Inside the Holy Field, I hadn’t even had the magicules to create a new magical corpus for myself. But the Glutton pretty much forced it to happen, taking in regular physical objects and using them to power myself up.

Hinata brought her rapier back a bit, no doubt sensing the danger. That wound up saving her life. As out of control as it had become, the Glutton was lunging upon both the rapier and Hinata herself, using sound, heat, and scent to track down her position. If she reacted any later than she did, she would’ve been torn apart by that ravenous appetite, maybe.

As Hinata looked on in fright, the Glutton completed the transformation. Standing there now was a beast in the shape of a person. The only signs of my former self were the golden pupils and the slightly bluish-silver hair. My body rippled with malice, looking every bit like a demon from hell.

“I can’t believe it,” Hinata whispered. But the surprise was already gone from her face. She was peering intently at me, like an excited scientist making a new discovery. Her Dead End Rainbow skill slashed right into people’s spirits—but since it didn’t kill me, she understood now that the Glutton had no spirit, no will of its own. It was a soul in its purest form, the origin of the power that lies at the root of man and monster.

A soul is a consciousness, by definition, but that alone didn’t provide the consciousness any way to express itself. It still needed an astral body to operate upon and begin the thought process—but that wasn’t enough, either, since any thoughts produced would just dissipate into the wind. That’s where the spiritual body came in, to record and keep those thoughts captive. Even that was still a virtual memory, though, not any kind of permanent storage—and so we come to the material body.

If one had enough mental fortitude, they could recover all their memories even if their brain was permanently damaged. The fact that you saw spiritual life-forms among the monsters was proof enough of that. But if the spirit is damaged, that likely wounds the astral body deeply, even if the brain is left intact. If that wound reaches the soul, resurrection is no longer possible.

That applied equally to every living thing in this world—from the weakest creatures all the way up to dragons and elemental monsters.

By this point, Hinata fully understood what the Glutton was capable of. A sweet smile crossed her face, her piercing eyes shining brightly as she considered her countermeasures. She had lost her rapier now, but not even that seemed to bother her much. And then she removed an amulet from her pocket and threw it at me.

“Astral Bind!”

A skill that restricted the astral body, the vessel of the soul, instead of the material one. It still couldn’t stop the Glutton.

Realizing this, Hinata gave me a scornful frown. Before the Glutton, its limbs morphing and transforming in unpredictable ways as it lurched toward her, she showed not a single moment of agitation. If anything, she was still calmly observing me. Through all the Glutton’s twists and turns, she kept dodging every attack by mere millimeters. She predicted every move.

“I see,” she whispered. “So you’re already dead.” She shook her head. “You’re going to be obstinate right up to the end, aren’t you? Why are you pestering me like this? Continuing to have it attack your foe, even after death… If someone doesn’t completely wipe this thing out, it’s gonna threaten the whole world someday.”

Hinata’s face remained taut as she summoned several non-elemental spirits from thin air. They followed her orders, mobbing the Glutton. The effort did little apart from sacrificing the spirits to stop it in its tracks temporarily.

The only magic that could be used within a Holy Field involves amulets, Battlewill, spirits, and the like. Among them, Hinata now chose one of the greatest of holy magics, a powerful attack that she usually kept as one of her last resorts. Tracing complex shapes with her outstretched hands, she crafted a geometrical design in the air, stretching it out into a layered, physically present magic circle. In the middle of it was the berserk, spirit-consuming Glutton, unconscious, unthinking, and pitiful.

“Let me provide you a prayer to the divine. I hope and desire for the power of the holy spirits. Listen to my appeal and overcome all in your way! Disintegration!!”

The request, delivered in Hinata’s beautiful voice, was granted. The resulting show of force was literally divine, enough to crush all physical and spiritual presences within its defined space. It was the ultimate in targeted, destructive magic, emitting flashes of white light as it poured from Hinata’s hands to the circle. It sped out at thousands of miles per hour, almost at light speed, as its holy power made cells and souls vanish without a trace. It was more than enough to make the Glutton disappear, not affecting the space around it at all.

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That’s what the battle record told me. I was watching from the side, as if it was on TV or something, and it was simply breathtaking.

One thing I earned from this battle was Hinata’s broken rapier. I was able to run it through the Stomach to take it for myself. More important than that, though, was the info I gleaned about her magic and skills. I had deliberately set the Glutton out of control, linking it to the Great Sage itself without going through my own spirit. I had no spiritual link to it myself; it was operating purely on its own volition. That was why, even when it took Hinata’s final Dead End Rainbow strike, it didn’t affect me at all.

I didn’t think I could win with it. Not from the start. That’s why I ordered it to gather data for me, so I could come up with a better solution—and that’s what I was poring over now.

That Disintegration, though… Wow. It was enough of a threat to send a chill up my spine. If I had taken that strike first thing, I would’ve been defenseless. It would’ve gone right through my Multilayer Barrier and made me vanish instantly. Its only weakness was the amount of time it required to cast, but with that kind of force, it was only a minor quibble. Hinata made excellent use of it.

It was definitely no joke. I wondered why Hinata even bothered with that magical barrier at all if she was that strong. I hate dealing with a foe who’s both powerful and careful. With my Replication, I couldn’t do more than slice a few hairs off her head. No wonder she was so confident, not even bothering with armor or anything. If that’s what she brought to the table, I was correct to focus on escaping that barrier from the very beginning.

Are all otherworlders and summoners that strong, the way Yuuki said? If so, I’ll have to assume that every one I encounter has a unique skill and prepare appropriately for that. I was under the impression that I was pretty strong myself, but after that experience with Hinata, my confidence was completely shattered. Maybe the wound to my pride was exactly what I needed.

Getting to experience Disintegration for myself was a windfall, too. The moment she deployed that layered magic circle, it was all over. There was simply no way to deal with it, apart from fleeing or interfering with her before the circle was complete. Would’ve been nice if I could have Analyzed and Assessed it, but I was too busy trying not to die to consider that. It can’t always be that easy. The moment I saw it, after all, my data link with the Sage cut right out and I (my non-Replicated self) got dizzy in the head. It’s impossible to avoid once you see it, and the layered barrier it emitted had a heat-seeking property as well—if you can’t get out of its trail, you can’t avoid a direct hit.

Could Milim have handled it? I’ll have to ask her next time.

I told Ranga about everything that happened as I checked up on my own body. I was physically fine, no longer affected by the Holy Field. What was up with Hinata, though? She refused to listen to me, breaking out the big guns with no provocation whatsoever. Maybe I shouldn’t have taken the bait, but I only did because I thought I could win. Sure proved me wrong. Not that I lost , exactly. Sometimes the best winning strategy you have is to run, you know? And that’s what I tried to do from the start, so if I made it out, I won.

You could, if you squinted hard enough, call this a tactical victory. Plus I gathered all this valuable data. It wouldn’t be going too far to call it a win. A tie, at least, if I wanted to be generous.

I’m definitely not being a sore loser, all right?

But enough joking around. I was worried about everyone in town, so I decided to head over at once.

Attempting to teleport myself to Tempest, I caught wind of something odd. I had tried to take a Warp Portal back to my own place, but the magic failed to activate.

Report. Impossible to specify a target location. The cause is believed to be some kind of barrier isolating the area.

Uh-oh. It sounds like someone’s trying to destroy Tempest, just as Hinata said. Better get back quick, or else I’ll have nothing to go back to.

Even as I thought that, the Great Sage was searching for places still available for teleportation. Soon, it tracked down the magic circle inside the cave that Gabil was guarding.

“Let’s go!” I shouted to Ranga as we hurriedly made the warp.

Gabil and the others were assembled at the Sealed Cave’s magic circle, waiting for us. The moment he saw us, Gabil ran up, looking visibly relieved.

“Ohhh! Sir Rimuru, you are safe!”

He then briefed me on events. “…And then, just after we received word that Lady Milim would wage war against the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania in a week’s time, I lost contact with Sir Benimaru. Concerned, I made contact with Soka, but apparently no one outside the cave could reach our leaders, either.”

“I told King Gazel as well,” Vester added, “but it was hard for us to make any concrete moves, given the lack of information at hand…”

Certainly, the king of dwarves would’ve had too little knowledge to provide any real support. He must have been terribly concerned. He had last made contact via communication crystal about an hour ago, but nothing beyond that, despite a second call being expected. Thought Communication didn’t work, either, and just as they were discussing among themselves what to do, I came back.

I guess the bad feeling I had about all this was right. No doubt about it; something terrible was taking place. But why couldn’t we even contact anyone in town?

As I thought about this, Soei leaped out of my shadow, just as Soka and his other men had jumped out of Gabil’s.

“Sir Rimuru, it is a tremendous relief to see you safe and sound.”

He had apparently lost contact with me just as I was using Replication to save myself from Hinata, causing him a great deal of consternation.

“Whoa, Soei, I’m a lot more worried about you than me at the moment!”

He was both wounded and exhausted. Vester jogged off to fetch him a Full Potion to drink.

“Forgive me for interrupting, but Sir Soei was injured attempting to escape the barrier deployed around Tempest.”

“Silence, Soka. I am fine. Sir Rimuru, I am afraid the situation does not bode well for us…”

The story he had for me was a shock. There was a military force from Farmus marching straight for Tempest. Soei, learning this, hurried back to tell Benimaru but was blocked by a barrier placed around town, preventing access. Bashing right into it, his “real” body got away with “just an injury” (he said in his oh-so-Soei-like way) and all his Replication copies were expended. Anyone else would’ve died in a hurry. Regardless, his men were just about to attempt to break through the barrier when they noticed I was back.

Soei’s apparent nervousness was entirely due to my disappearance, it seemed. A lot of things must’ve happened in the past half hour or so, Hinata’s attack on me being one of them.

“Well, sorry I made you worry, Soei.”

“Not at all, Sir Rimuru. As long as you are safe, there is nothing to complain about.”

I appreciated the thought, but if I had returned to Tempest faster, I might never have run into Hinata at all. I had left for my own selfish reasons, and I had better make up for it.

Before that, though:

“So if the Kingdom of Farmus is moving against us, was it them who built the barrier over town?”

“It is likely so, yes.”

“In that case, everyone in town is in danger?!”

The thought made my mind begin to race. Hinata had cost me a dear amount of time. We couldn’t sit here talking all day, I decided. I needed to head to town, fast.

“Gabil, you guys guard the cave. Keep Vester and the dwarven potion staff safe! If any intruders come in, try your best to capture them alive.”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Sir Rimuru, what should we do about contacting King Gazel?”

“Ah… Wait until I get a grasp of the situation. Right now, all we’d do is worry him further.”

“Very true. All right. Be safe!”

I could understand Vester’s concern, but there wasn’t much I could say to the king yet. He already had his preliminary report; he would have to wait a bit for more.

“I’ll go on ahead.”

“Yes, sir! We will follow soon behind.”

I attempted to use Shadow Motion to head for town, only to remember the skill had evolved into Spatial Motion.

“Hold on, Soei. Let’s go together, actually. All of you!”

“Huh?”

I launched Spatial Motion without further explanation, connecting our current location with a point just outside the barrier. There was a hole in the air, just large enough for a person to shimmy through, and our target point was on the other side. Talk about convenient.

“The cave’s in your hands, Gabil!”

“Yes, my lord! I will await further orders!”

He and his men nodded at me as I stepped through the portal. In another moment, we were outside of town, Soei and his team behind me. Soei seemed calm, but Soka and the others were pretty wary of traveling this way. I guess I couldn’t blame them. Wish I’d had the time to explain things in detail, but…you know.

Now I had an ominous-looking barrier in front of me. If someone as powerful and talented as Soei couldn’t bust through it, it must be a pretty damn strong one, too. I brought my left hand up to it, absorbing part of its surface, and ran Analyze and Assess.

Understood. The effects of Great Magic: Anti-Magic Area are detected, albeit with a reduction in magicule density. It runs on the same principle as Holy Field but is not uniform in composure, some areas being less dense than others. It is impure, likely an inferior version. Anyone inside it will be affected, but the effects can be resisted with Multilayer Barrier.

Well, if it’s inferior, then no worries. Let’s head on in. I had Benimaru and everyone else to worry about right now. Plus, the way the Great Sage put it, any “great magic” needed to have its caster in the middle of it, but this barrier was activated from the outside. It was a large-scale casting, likely requiring several people—more than one or two—taking care of it.

“Soei, track down the guys casting this barrier so I can take them out. Do not engage in combat with them. Just bring all your men to them and gauge their strength.”

“Yes, sir. How should we contact you?”

I produced a string of Sticky Steel Thread and wrapped it around his neck. “How about this? Run it through this strand, and we should be able to pick up on each other.”

“I see. That should work…”

Upon testing it out, we found that Thought Communication worked as long as you cast it through the Thread, inside and outside the barrier.

“Right. Get going! I’ll head over if you run into trouble. If you think you can beat them, neutralize them, but don’t kill anyone.”

“Yes, sir!”

Then all five of them—Soei, Soka, and their three trainees—disappeared without a sound. Man, they really were like ninjas. They’d easily hold their own against a high-level magic-born, no doubt, if Soei was leading them.

But right now, we had to be careful. A single mistake could kill us. Every possibility had to be addressed. Along those lines, I had the Sage continue its analysis, hoping it’d find a way to remove the barrier from the inside. Soei had his orders, and I had mine. It was time to break in.

There were magicules left in the air around town, although not as much as before. If it wasn’t for the Anti-Magic Area over it, you’d be able to cast magic to some extent. The Sage was right; my Multilayer Barrier made me feel no ill effects at all. This was far weaker than the Holy Field, which was a relief.

Running through town, I headed toward our main office off the central plaza. The space was filled with people, the atmosphere tense and panicked. Something definitely did happen. It worried me.

Realizing I was there, the crowd opened a path for me and fell to their knees. A few of them ran toward me. There was Rigurd, sprinting at top speed, with Rigur, Lilina, and the hobgoblin elders following behind.

“Sir Rimuru! It is wonderful to see you back. I am so glad you’re safe…”

He kneeled, practically clinging to my legs, looking about ready to burst into tears.

“Yeah. Sorry I made you worry.”

“Oh, not at all!!” he said in abject relief, before he did indeed burst into tears. The rest of them also knelt, keeping a polite distance away from Rigurd and me as they celebrated my return. I guess losing contact with me worried people a lot more than I thought it would.

Not everyone there was bawling over me, though.

“Nice to see you back, boss,” Kaijin said, his voice taut. It sounded like he was painfully trying to keep the worry from showing. I could feel emotions a lot more instinctively from the monsters, but I had a feeling he was hiding his at the moment as well. Garm and his two dwarven brothers were there, too, blocking the way to the plaza as if trying to prevent me from going there.

“Follow me to our meeting room, if you could,” Rigurd said as he calmed down from his crying jag and stood up. “There are things I wish to report and discuss with you.” Now he was back to his usual bold self—no time for sobbing here—and his voice was firm and unyielding. He was ready to do what needed to be done. The building he led me to was away from the plaza; I guess he didn’t want me in there, either. What was going on? It worried me a little.

“Here, Rigurd, you and Kaijin get out of the way. What’s going on?”

“Oh, um, just a small hiccup…”

“No talking your way out of it. Let me through.”

The Coercion skill I interlaced with my words made them all give up, opening the way for me. Just as they did, an explosion rumbled a little distance from the plaza. Even with the lowered magicule density, I could recognize the aura as Benimaru’s—and judging by the sounds of things, he was in battle.

“Is he fighting someone? Let’s go!”

I ran for the area. Rigurd and the others followed behind me, expressions of relief on their faces (not that they noticed).

As I expected, Benimaru was in battle—well, not a battle so much as him heaping one-sided torment upon his opponent. There was a team of high orcs surrounding him, all clad in black armor, led by Geld and watching the proceedings instead of helping Benimaru out. Geld was usually cool as a cucumber, but just like Benimaru, he was fired up right now.

His opponent was the beastman Gruecith. I wondered why someone serving Carillon was drawing Benimaru’s ire like that, but then I noticed Yohm behind him, lying limply on the ground, and a beautiful woman I had never seen before cradling him. It seemed like Gruecith was trying to protect them. Benimaru had yet to draw his sword, but his aura was practically gushing from his body, making it clear he was struggling to hold back his anger.

“ You seek to protect this woman, too?” he asked. “We don’t have time for this right now. Get out of here at once.”

“Heh-heh! Can’t do that. No way I’d hand her over when all of you are so worked up like this!”

“Oh, ‘worked up,’ you say? If I was ‘worked up,’ I would have turned you into a pile of ash long ago, trust me. Just give it up and—”

“Not gonna happen! I’m on her side, no matter what!”

Then Gruecith sprang into action, zooming toward the still- unarmed Benimaru. He transformed in an instant, turning into what looked like a gray-furred werewolf. His speed was far beyond what he showed in the fight with Yohm as he rushed ahead, confronting him with a dagger in each hand.

“I told you to give it up!”

The daggers instantly vaporized the moment they made contact with the aura protecting Benimaru. It made Gruecith freeze in his tracks, just enough to let Benimaru catch him, pick him up with a single left hand, and hurl him against the ground. There was a dull thudding sound as cracks appeared in the earth. Blood flowed from his head.

It was the first demonstration of Benimaru’s force I had seen in a while, and it was on a completely different level from his opponent. Without even really trying, he had victory in hand from the start. But Gruecith refused to give up, springing right back to his feet.

“Ngh… But I’m still…”

“Pfft. Enough of this nonsense. If you continue to resist me, I will be forced to kill you, you understand?”

He tried lifting Gruecith again, a look of resignation on his face.

“Benimaru, stop!”

It was then that I finally shouted and put an end to this.

Noticing me, Benimaru promptly let Gruecith go, and he fell to his knees, the aura flowing out of him coming to an instant stop, and the intensity in the air faded. Geld and the rest of the audience did the same, celebrating my return—but Yohm and Gruecith needed attending to first.

“Benimaru, what is going on here?”

“Well, my lord…”

He ran down the story for me as I had the two injured drink some potion. As he put it, a group of people disguised as merchants attempted to attack the town. They were quite a bit more powerful than expected, creating some serious chaos. “Then,” he said, “we were no longer able to use magic, and we could feel the strength ebb from us. Thanks to that, the people in town were—”

“Sir Benimaru!”

Rigurd shouted down Benimaru before he could finish. They exchanged glances with each other as Benimaru awkwardly nodded.

“Let us discuss that later… Regardless, however, we were weakened thanks to whatever magic that woman over there cast.”

Geld nodded deeply at this, telling me about how he tracked down this caster and attempted to capture her. Yohm got in his way, and they were forced to fight it out. The rest of Yohm’s force was not involved; they were still confined in their barracks for the time being. Things had definitely gotten a lot sourer than I thought.

Just then, a rejuvenated Yohm threw himself down at my feet.

“Rimuru, man, I’m sorry! I had no intention whatsoever of betraying you. All I wanted to do was protect Mjurran’s life!”

Mjurran, the mystery woman who had simply looked on dejectedly so far, stepped forward. “Enough, Yohm,” she said, looking a bit sad—somber and perhaps afraid of losing something dear to her. “Just go ahead and abandon me. There’s no need for you to be involved, too.”

“Please, Sir Rimuru,” Gruecith added, similarly prostrating himself before me. “I fully understand that, as your guest, I have no right to speak about this. But still… Please, could you at least hear her out?”

Benimaru and the others looked disgusted at this, but my return had at least calmed them somewhat. Geld was normally coolheaded; as freaked out he was, it must have been something pretty deep… But I couldn’t make any decisions on this until I heard the whole story. Best to get both sides of this , I thought as Mjurran quietly spoke once more.

“No, Yohm. No, Gruecith. I have no right to be protected by you. Who can say how much this town has lost, thanks to me…? I was the one who engineered this tragedy…”

Rigurd winced at this. Benimaru averted his eyes. Kaijin just closed his and stood there awkwardly. This tragedy…? It did seem like something was being hidden from me, yes…

“Um, what do you mean by ‘tragedy’?”

The silence my question conjured hung heavy until Mjurran stepped forward. Geld warily sized her up, requiring me to stop him.

“…Follow me,” she said as she boldly walked off, apparently ready to accept all responsibility for the crime she committed. There was something beautiful about it, in a way. She was headed for the plaza in the middle of town, the place they’d tried to keep me from reaching earlier.

There, before my eyes, was an untold number of monsters on the ground—men, women, even children. I approached them. Every single one of them laid down there—

—was dead.

…How the hell did this happen?!

I felt my legs go weak. What’s going on here? Damn, my mind’s racing on me. There was about a hundred of them on the ground. Huh…? And they’re all dead…?

You’re kidding me!!

I heard one of the hobgoblin elders speak as I tried to take it all in.

“We followed your wishes, Sir Rimuru, and treated the merchants with kindness and civility. We had no idea there was evil among their ranks—”

“S-silence!” Rigurd shouted. “You make it sound as if Sir Rimuru is at fault!”

It was too late. The words battered harshly against my mind.

“I—I apologize. I had no intention of that…”

I could hear the apology from afar, but my heart wasn’t open to it.

He was right. My orders, my words, were the cause.

I may be a monster…but I used to be a human being. I just wanted to be nice to people. Now, reality’s setting in.

So what the hell’s the right thing to do, then?!

…Who knows? That’s what I’m supposed to figure out.

My irresponsible mind attacked me incessantly, but I couldn’t let it dictate my actions. This was my fault, and it was up to me to shoulder the consequences. It felt like a torrent of regret, a wellspring of anger with no place to go, was gushing out of me. It was hard to think. I felt like I was breathing more rapidly, even though I didn’t need to breathe in the first place. I had no physical heart, but I could still sense it racing.

It just didn’t seem like reality. I almost splattered against the ground, unable to retain my human form. But that wasn’t allowed. All I could do was grasp the situation and make sure I didn’t pile mistake on top of mistake.

“What is…? What happened here?”

My voice was far away, cold and remote. It felt like all emotion in my mind had frozen.

“If I hadn’t cast a great magic,” Mjurran said as I attempted to stay on my feet, “I’m not sure any of this would have happened.”

So this woman’s…the cause of it? And that’s why Benimaru was so riled up…?

…I’ve got to clear my head!!

Report. Great Magic: Anti-Magic Area does not weaken its targets in and of itself. In terms of a cause, it is believed the people who the individual Soei was investigating are more relevant.

My mind echoed with the voice of my partner, someone never swayed by emotion.

No, but… Right. Calm down. This woman Mjurran was attempting to rile me up to the point that I’d kill her—and only her. She was diverting blame away from Yohm and Gruecith. I knew that, as long as I could keep my head cool…

Giving in to my rage and killing Mjurran wouldn’t solve anything. It’d just be venting my anger.

It was only thanks to the Great Sage that I didn’t make another mistake.

Thus we decided to get ourselves together and discuss matters somewhere else. On the way, I asked Rigurd if there were any other victims.

“No, my lord,” he said, “we assembled all of them here. There are other injured, but Lady Shuna is taking care of them.”

I was wondering why Shuna wasn’t around, actually. That explained it. Our potion storage was all concentrated in the cave, so she was probably using her own healing magic for the job.

“Should I give them some potion, then?”

“N-no, I don’t think that’s necessary. I hate to put it like this, but our attackers were rather formidable… And surprisingly few people emerged only with injuries.”

In other words, they were all killed off in one shot. I could feel my anger coming back. Can’t have that. I need to stay calm.

“All right. Let’s talk this over first.”

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Once we were all in the meeting hall and a bit more relaxed, I received my briefing. I put my mind to work, even as the shock made the whole thing feel like an out-of-body experience.

The first attackers were a trio who targeted Gobzo and got him into a conflict. That dopey face of his definitely made him look like an easy mark, and I bet it didn’t take much to shout him into submission. Not that it was his fault, but he sure was unlucky to have this riffraff notice him.

The conflict seemed to make Gobzo look like the bad guy, but Gobta stepped in to resolve it quickly. What happened next was the problem—that was when the attackers revealed their full strength and conflict began in earnest. They were astonishingly strong, it seems, enough so to even give Hakuro a run for his money when he stepped into the fray. From how it was described to me, at least, they were the real deal.

“…If he hadn’t been weakened,” grumbled Benimaru, “Hakuro would never have been defeated.”

He and Gobta were injured in the midst of all this, and now that made sense to me. They avoided death only because they gave their all in the fight. I’m sure neither of them was a fan of being told they lost, but if they survived, that was all that mattered. I was having Soei check out the energy-sapping barrier. He’d provide a report before long, no doubt, and all we’d have to do then was deal with that and take on the next fight fully prepared.

“After that,” Rigurd continued, “a group of one hundred regular knights from the Kingdom of Farmus visited town. The attackers requested help from them, and the knights agreed, stating they would take on the task under the laws of humanity and the name of divinity. They refused to listen to our words. It was all too one-sided.”

As he put it, the head of the knights shouted, “We came here to investigate reports of a nation of monsters, and what manner of chaos do I find?! In the name of humanity, we promise to provide aid to our defenseless comrades!” Then they all drew their swords and joined in the fracas, attacking both the monster soldiers and the residents looking on. This included children, indicating that they saw us as little more than animals.

I’d told them to try their best not to be aggressive against human beings, and I guess that put them at a big disadvantage. It took time for Benimaru, Geld, and the rest to tackle the threat in earnest. “We should have made them give up their weapons before entering town,” Benimaru commented—but there’s no way these guys would do something like that of their own volition and without an order from me.

I figured they would contact me via Thought Communication about anything like that, and I paid dearly for that error. In the end, the cause all goes back to me.

One of the Farmus knights left a message before leaving. It went like this:

“This town is contaminated by the presence of monsters! As protectors of the law of humanity and as faithful followers of the One God Luminus, we refuse to acknowledge the existence of a monster nation! We have therefore signed an official pact with the Western Holy Church to consider how to deal with this country! We will return one week from today, commanded by our leader himself, the wise and noble King Edmaris. If you surrender and agree to fall under our rule, then by the name of our god, we will guarantee your continued existence. Give up your pointless resistance and surrender at once. If you do not, then in the name of Luminus, we will eradicate all of you from the face of the Earth!”

It was clear they didn’t care at all about what we would do. Soei had already reported that the country was preparing for a military operation. All that stuff about “investigating” our nation was a big lie. Maybe they were doing that, but they had already decided that wiping us off the planet was the only option.

“What a charade.”

“It certainly is.” Rigurd nodded.

I recalled what Hinata had said: “Your town, you know… It’s a bother to us. So we’ve decided to crush it.” Farmus and the Western Holy Church must have been conspiring against us from the start. Instead of one taking advantage of the other, I imagined they teamed up because they shared a common interest.

So I told everyone about my battle with Hinata and the words we exchanged.

“…The head of the paladins?”

“Wow, boss. Nice job surviving that.”

Benimaru and Rigurd seemed unfamiliar with the woman, but Kaijin and the dwarven brothers were fully aware of her, and my story gave them a shock. Considering the dealings they’ve sustained with monsters, the Dwarven Kingdom and the Western Holy Church weren’t really on good terms—not bad enough that they were off to war tomorrow but more like each pretending that the other didn’t exist. They did keep some tabs on each other, though, as any nations would.

“Really,” Kaijin said, “even with the full might of the Dwargon military, it’d be a bad idea to make the Western Holy Church your enemy. But the Dwarven Kingdom is built kind of like a natural fortress, and they carefully check everyone who goes in and out of it. It’s that kind of protection that makes it hard for the Church to declare them an ‘enemy of god’ or whatnot. They both have a lot of history, though, and they’ve had hostilities in the past.”

I figured the Western Holy Church had it in for us because it saw monsters as these horrid things that could never be abided. But what about Farmus?

“Sir Rimuru,” a tentative voice said, “about that…”

This was Gard Mjöllmile, the merchant I met when he helped with our first large-scale potion sale; he had listened in silence up to now, seated alongside a few other merchants and adventurers. I had called in several people from the kingdom of Blumund so I could get a second opinion on all this; I just wanted to learn the truth, so I decided having them listen in wasn’t a big deal. It seemed to pay off, as nobody in the hall suspected us of being anything besides the victims here.

The rest of our visitors currently in town were being cared for in the guesthouse. The fact that none of them was hurt was the only silver lining, really. Rigurd suggested it, figuring that the ornateness of the place would calm their frayed nerves. I love how much I can count on him. It’s a far cry from his goblin days, definitely.

“Ah, Mjöllmile. Go ahead.”

I tried to address him as informally as possible. All of our other leaders—Benimaru, Rigurd, Geld—were still seething with anger, so the atmosphere in the hall was rather taut. I was pretty emotionally spent myself, making it hard to be my usual open-minded self. I knew it was a bad thing, but I couldn’t shake out of that cycle. It was no doubt rubbing off on Mjöllmile, making him oddly silent.

“I know this is heartbreaking for all of you, but with the situation being what it is, I felt the need to speak up.”

I appreciated the thought.

“At this point, we have a brand-new trade route that runs through Tempest. It has already begun to change the way merchants distribute their goods. It is still not broadly known about outside of Blumund and its neighboring nations, but once word begins to spread, it will become known across the Western Nations in the blink of an eye. As a result…”

“As a result?”

“…Well, I imagine it wouldn’t be out of the question for someone to think about conquering this nation before word gets out.”

As Mjöllmile put it, any perceptive leader wouldn’t fail to understand the importance of this trade route. The income from tariffs alone would be a likely fortune. That, and Farmus—the gateway to the Western Nations, as it were—was prospering in no small part thanks to just that kind of income. If a new trade route opened here, Farmus stood to lose the most from it.

To them, no doubt, they didn’t want any of this to exist; they’d have no effective way to stop people from coming here instead of there. You’d figure the best way to tackle that was to shore up their own infrastructure and make travel easier, but that required a vast amount of money. Building roads from scratch took time as well. There was no ready response they could take.

I didn’t intend to be the kind of leader who pursued only what was best for Tempest, ignoring how other countries profited or lost from it. If we were seeking to coexist with the rest of the world, I figured, I wanted everyone to profit from us. But I was still such an amateur at this. There’s no way I could perfectly understand how this world was connected, and I must have stepped on the tails of one too many tigers here.

“Indeed,” stated a merchant whose name I didn’t know, “the king of Farmus is notorious for his greediness. Even if he didn’t take a military solution, I could see him looking at the profits being made here and reaching out for a slice.”

“That’s a good point,” I replied. “I’m not a genius at this, but even I think this approach is a little strange.”

“It is. Taking action like this, without going through the Council…”

“As an adventurer, I can’t say how Blumund’s gonna respond to this, but this move on Farmus’s part makes no sense to me. Pulling such an obvious trick and attacking women and children, even…”

“Yeah. We like this place, you know? And if they’re gonna attack in a week, I’m willing to help if you’re fighting back.”

“But the Church called you all enemies of their god…? That’s not exactly good news.”

Mjöllmile’s observation opened the floodgates for more feedback from the merchants and adventurers. I appreciated all the helpful advice. It really felt like they were looking out for us—in other words, unlike the Farmus knights who dismissed us as monsters, these people really saw us as their friends. The fact that some of them were even willing to take up arms for us surprised me quite a bit. I thanked them for the sentiment but turned them down. The reason was simple: I didn’t want to get them caught up in this.

“I appreciate how all of you feel,” Rigurd said, “but this is a problem that we need to wrap up by ourselves. What I want you to do instead is return to your native lands and spread the word about this as quickly as possible.”

“Oh? We could just send out a wagon.”

“Staying here might not be a good idea for all of you, though…”

“How do you mean?”

I explained it to them. Maybe I was overthinking matters, but the worst-case scenario in my head seemed all too believable. The way I saw it, Farmus and the Western Holy Church no doubt wanted to declare to everyone in the Western Nations that Tempest was a den of evil. If and when they did, having our local residents advocating for us would be a hindrance to the propaganda effort.

If Blumund wasn’t siding with them, would Farmus consider residents like these just a hindrance? Because if they did spread the word, Farmus’s act would become notorious nationwide. The Council might even pursue the matter. How would Farmus prevent that? Well, they were the type of nation to make militaristic threats from the get-go instead of negotiating. To them, the hundred-ish Blumundian residents here meant nothing. They’d kill them, make sure they could never talk, and maybe even blame it on us. It’d help further the impression that we were a ferocious threat, and it’d provide the Holy Church just what it wanted. Two birds with one stone.

That’s why I wanted them all back in their native nations and pleading our case for us. They were the best character witnesses we could ask for.

“I see. So we’re lower than dogs in their eyes, eh…?”

“Killing us and pinning the blame on Tempest…”

“It does sound possible, yes.”

“Especially if it’s a human’s word against a monster’s, if you’ll pardon my rudeness.”

“But in that case,” Rigurd replied, “I’m not sure how we would transport everyone out of here. I would like to lend you guards, but in essence, we’re pinned to within our own borders for now.”

It was a valid question, and I already had an answer for it.

“That’s no problem. I’d like all of you to go back to your quarters and prepare to leave for now. I promise safe passage to the outskirts of Blumund.”

Then I began my own preparations. The Blumundians were con fused, I’m sure, but they followed my request without further questions and filed back to the guesthouse.

So. Time to switch gears. Rigurd and Benimaru briefed me on the attack; our Blumundian guests explained their position and opinions. Now it was time to speak to the woman herself: Mjurran, who had sat silently and watched up to now.

“All right,” I began. “Can you explain in detail, please, about the events that led to your meddling with our nation?”

She explained in a calm voice. “I am one of the ‘five fingers,’ the closest servants of the demon lord Clayman. As his nickname ‘Marionette Master’ hints, he uses his subordinates like puppets, making them do exactly what he wants. I am one of those puppets. He assigned me to spy on this nation, and I used Yohm to gain entry into it.”

She went on in detail. It sounded like the cold, hard truth to me, no lying or excuses mixed in. Clayman, it seemed, was the kind of boss who used and abused the crap out of those under him. Mjurran was the so-called “ring finger” of the group. She used to enjoy a position of favor, providing essential information to Clayman on a variety of subjects, but now he saw her as used up and not particularly worthy of attention, although he claimed he would free her upon completing this mission.

Milim told me that Clayman loved scheming behind the scenes, attempting to outwit his opponents. It sounded about right. I was sure nothing Clayman did would ever bother Milim very much, but to the magic-born who served him, every day must have been a life-and-death tightrope walk.

Magic-born like Mjurran served Clayman for a number of reasons, but most of them were either threatened by or magically bound to him. Her own mission in life was to complete her research and peer into the deepest depths of magic, and she had taken Clayman’s offer for immortality and an eternally young body. In exchange, she had lost herself, living purely to follow Clayman’s orders.

“I know it was stupid of me,” she added with a regretful look on her face, “but my heart was taken from me with a secret skill known as Marionette Heart. I no longer have control over my own destiny, and carrying out his bidding is the only thing I can do.”

So she was just following orders. Apparently, she learned from Gruecith that Milim had declared war on the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, and she surmised that Clayman sent her here to keep us from interfering. Now, though, she realized that a mission like that could be carried out simply by blocking magical communication; there wasn’t any need for this massive (and non-hidable) magic barrier.

He had said that doing this would guarantee her freedom, but she knew the chances of pulling the job off successfully were slim. She had to do it anyway, though, or else Clayman threatened to strike at Yohm and his team. So she decided to take him at his word, that this was his last command. She didn’t really have any intention of surviving, as she put it; her death would ensure that Yohm and friends wouldn’t have to face any consequences.

“Things are starting to grow interesting,” Clayman reportedly said to her in his last message. “There’s going to be an enormous war! Certain unexpected events have led to developments I did not anticipate, but who can say how it will turn out?”

Mjurran had thought—erroneously, as it happened—that he meant a war between the demon lords Milim and Carillon. Now it looked like he was talking about this conflict, the one between Tempest and Farmus. Which sounded right to me. Clayman’s part in this was to work alongside Farmus’s moves and block any outside contact from Tempest. It certainly would be difficult to avoid war that way—and Mjurran’s great magic pulled one hell of a job on us. This wasn’t just plain old jamming magic. It was position-based, and since it was meant to block all contact, it couldn’t be easily undone.

Killing Mjurran at this point wouldn’t release the magic. It took time to disappear—nearly a week. Even if we wanted help from other countries, magical communication didn’t work. It would take time to make contact with Blumund or the Dwarven Kingdom without magic. There was just too little time to address Farmus, which already had their boots on the ground.

We were behind the eight ball here, for sure. But ah well. I can get out from under the barrier, and there’s a communication crystal waiting for me in the cave. That’s where Clayman’s plan begins to fall apart.

All the same, I didn’t want to get Dwargon or Blumund involved in this. I just wanted people there to be on our side, so to speak. Really, if it wasn’t for the Western Holy Church’s involvement, I would’ve had both countries conduct some large-scale battle exercises or something to keep Farmus in check. With the Church backing them up now, I couldn’t get those nations involved for no reason.

In a war, each side has certain advantages and disadvantages, but each battle is also a test to see how long each side can hold out. If Farmus didn’t fall back under threat and continued with their military activity, it’d involve Dwargon, Blumund, and the Western Holy Church, turning the whole thing irreversibly into a major war. If the Church declared our allies and us to be their enemies and spread the word across the entire world, I couldn’t deny that it’d be a world war for all of us. That’s exactly what Clayman would want; he’d naturally use the chaos to carry out some nefarious secret plan of his.

Even if it was Milim against Carillon, I had no way of stopping it. If only my own nation wasn’t in so much trouble… Although, that’s thanks to Clayman, too. Throwing me into confusion, mixing things up… I suppose I’ll just have to trust in Milim and put my own priorities first.

It all made me realize, for the first time, that between what Milim and Mjurran told me, this demon lord Clayman was one dangerous enemy. It was a hunch, but it seemed to be a correct one. Mjurran told me that Gelmud was one of Clayman’s other agents, too—unlike what Milim said, she claimed that he was being fully controlled by the demon lord. Any of the other demon lords who worked with Clayman on that endeavor were being tricked. He had a knack for moving his pawns to the right place at the right time and never leaving any evidence behind. I couldn’t say how strong he actually was, but he was definitely a master at maneuvering under cover.

Mjurran also suspected that Clayman was behind the battle between Milim and Carillon…but I didn’t have any evidence of that. Someone as, um, straightforward-thinking as Milim could be easily goaded into something like that, it’s true…but between his misleading words, the careful way he never revealed his true intentions, and the slyness it took to break promises without a second thought, all signs showed that Clayman was a demon lord who could never be trusted.

And if you go even further down this rabbit hole—the Great Sage suggested that Clayman might have planned to leave that communication crystal in the cave the whole time. You know, just to make me think I outfoxed him and call for reinforcements from my allies. It wasn’t an unthinkable scenario, so I filed it away in my mind.

With Mjurran’s story all told, I now knew how we all wound up where we were. Her heart wasn’t given back, of course; she was seen entirely as a throwaway piece—a mere pawn.

Whether I would forgive her or not was another question.

“Look,” Yohm said, “I know you’re angry and everything, but I really hope you can let Mjurran off the hook for this!”

“I have the same request,” Gruecith added, eyes pleading with me. “There’s just no way she could defy Clayman, that’s all!”

Turning them down would make me look a bit like a villain, wouldn’t it? Now what do I do?

“I’ll think about your fate once all this is over. For now, I just want you to stay in your room. Don’t think about escaping.”

“All right—”

“Rimuru…”

“Sorry, Yohm. My mind’s all mixed up right now, too. If you’re worried, you can always stay with your men in their rooms.”

So I saved the question for later and ordered Yohm and his band to remain in their own quarters, asking Rigurd to appoint guards to watch them. I doubted they were going to betray me at this point, but you could never be too careful. I was doing this in part because, if they did try something funny, that would seal Mjurran’s fate for good. Yohm, realizing this, agreed to the order and returned to his quarters.

After all that briefing and interviewing, I went back outside. The visitors from Blumund were milling around, waiting for me.

“We’re ready to go, Sir Rimuru, but what should we do, exactly?”

I had them outfitted with all the extra wagons we had in town, so they finished up quicker than I thought. I nodded at them and guided them a little ways outside of town, all one hundred or so of them following me in orderly fashion.

“I wanted to provide guards for them,” a repentant-sounding Benimaru said, “but none of us can get past this barrier…”

“Not a problem. Now’s not the time to be stingy with my magic. It’s gonna take a lot of energy, but I’ll figure it out.”

So I left my monster cohorts within the barrier and guided the human visitors past it.

“We will hurry back home as quickly as we possibly can, Sir Rimuru.”

I raised a hand in response. “Before that, Mjöllmile… Can I have everybody here promise to keep what I’m about to do a secret?”

“Hmm?” Mjöllmile raised an eyebrow, already well aware of the kind of nonsense I occasionally pull off (much to my chagrin). “What are you planning to do this time…?”

“This time? You’re always expecting the worst from me, aren’t you?”

“Ha-ha-ha! No, no, you’ve provided me with so much, Sir Rimuru!”

“Heh. You said it.”

Mjöllmile and I slapped each other on the shoulder.

“I hope you will keep yourself safe.”

“Ah, I’ll be fine. I’m not a fan of fighting battles I can’t win.”

Then I activated Spatial Motion, deploying it across a wide swath of land. Everyone looked on in shock. Benimaru and Geld watched from within the barrier, both surprised and exasperated.

“The outskirts of Blumund’s about the best I can do for you all. It won’t last long, so hurry up and hop in there.”

The visitors nodded at me, faces still frozen in disbelief, as they filed on ahead. None of them asked any more questions, which I appreciated. Magic exists in this world—everyone knows that—so it takes more than a little pixie dust to really alarm these guys.

I made them promise to spread the word and provide as much support for our cause as they could. But would it have much effect? We were already at war. We couldn’t make any really brash moves—not against the Western Holy Church. They’d have to provide military support if I asked for it, as our pacts with them stipulated… But I didn’t want that, and there wasn’t much else they could do as a nation, I don’t think.

Better not expect much…and there’s no need to, really. This was our nation’s problem, and I intended to make the Kingdom of Farmus pay amply for it—by my own hand. If I didn’t, I knew, I’d never have a chance to make up for the anguish all those dead felt.

I watched our visitors go as I mentally pored over my situation. I had been delayed a bit longer than I thought, but now I decided to help out Shuna with the wounded. Rigurd mentioned an errand or something he wanted done, but I figured he could handle that without me.

Heading over to the building that served as our hospital, I found two people laid up in beds, Shuna providing nursing care and Kurobe helping her out.

“How are they looking?”

“Oh, Sir Rimuru!”

“Sir Rimuru, I don’t know what I can say to you…”

Shuna looked tired, and Kurobe was a lot more hesitant than usual. I told them to relax a bit as I examined the patients. These were Hakuro and Gobta, both sporting large and bloodied wounds.

“Whoa, these are some serious slash wounds! Why don’t we just use these…”

I whipped some potion out of my pocket and sprinkled it on both of them. Nothing in particular happened in the healing department.

“I apologize,” Rigurd said, lowering his head. “We have already made the attempt. I’m afraid we will have to rely on Shuna’s care…”

As leader of our nation, I had to decide on our future direction. I was also responsible for handling the remaining resident visitors from other countries. That’s why Rigurd didn’t want to worry me further.

Hakuro, despite looking like he stepped off a horror movie set, still gave me a smile. “Nh… Do not concern yourself about me, Sir Rimuru. I am fine. This injury was likely brought about by a skill invoked by the attackers. In time, the skill’s effects will fade, and I will heal up then. Gobta is a well-trained apprentice of mine; he won’t die like a dog over something like this.”

I should’ve expected nothing less from him. It almost made me cry, but I held it back and returned the smile. No way the master of all these monsters could show tears to anyone.

“Ha-ha! Well, glad to see your spirits are high, at least. Let me see this wound. Maybe I can do something about it.”

I checked over his body.

“Sir Rimuru,” Shuna said, “the wound is caused by an air-type attack. We need to keep him stable and full of stamina until it heals naturally over time.”

She had already used her Parser skill to figure out what was up with him. I was of the same opinion as her; it sounded like the right thing.

Air type, though? That sounded like something I might be able to harness for myself. I’ve already analyzed a high-level spirit. Let’s see if this works…

Understood. The effects of the air element have been confirmed. Use Glutton to acquire this effect?

Yes

No

The Great Sage followed through more than I expected. I thought YES and sprinkled some more potion on Hakuro’s wound.

“Oh… Ohhh! Amazing, Sir Rimuru…”

I left Hakuro to marvel by himself as I attended to Gobta.

“I should have known,” Shuna said with a light smile—one with just a twinge of gloominess to it. A sort of hmm? level of doubt. And that reminded me…

…Or it would have if Gobta didn’t choose that moment to leap right out of bed.

“Gobzo! You all right?!”

“Hey! Gobta!”

It took Rigurd yelling at him to make him realize where he was. He blinked once or twice.

“Oh wow, so…am I good?”

I scoped him out as I decided to ask Shuna about the thing that bothered me just now. Someone I expected to be here with her wasn’t present. If she was, I’m sure she would’ve been carrying on about me to no end.

“Hey, where’s Shion, by the way? I haven’t seen her lately…”

The question made everybody in the room—Rigurd, Shuna, Benimaru, even Hakuro—freeze. What’s with that reaction? Whoa, whoa, there’s no way…

“Don’t tell me,” I said, “that idiot’s gone to get revenge all by herself?”

“Oh man!” Gobta nodded warily at me. “And maybe Gobzo, too? He’s so absentminded; he’s probably running full-speed without realizing how badly outmatched he is…”

“N-no, it’s not that… Um…”

Huh? This was getting weird. Nobody was looking me in the eye.

“Okay, so where’d she go?”

No answer. I looked up to find Shuna turning her face away from me, eyes growing watery. I had a bad feeling. Gobta looked just as concerned. No way , I said to myself. That could never happen.

“…All right. I’m not going to be angry, so can you tell me where she is…?”

“…Very well,” Benimaru finally replied. “Over here. Follow me.”

I nodded, and we began to move…

Our destination was the central plaza.

And there she was, lying right in the middle of the neatly made rows. There was a white cloth covering her, ensuring she wouldn’t be easily spotted—by me or anyone else. Ha-ha. As if I’d just never wonder about where she went… It wasn’t funny.

Open your eyes—

I couldn’t believe it.

Open your eyes for me—

I didn’t want to believe it. Why? Why did it turn out like this…?

Next to me, I could hear Gobta sobbing and shouting, “Gobzooooooooo?!” as loudly as he could. I paid him no mind as my ears turned toward the voice providing what sounded like a faraway explanation.

Shion had been protecting a child targeted by one of the attackers.

With her own body, weakened by the plummeting magicule level.

She couldn’t move, and then an attacker came…

Gobzo had been trying to protect Lady Shuna.

He didn’t have anywhere near the strength for the job.

The attacker just laughed at him as he swung…

The words were meant for me, but I didn’t want to hear them. Each syllable gouged its way into my brain. Open your eyes, Shion… I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t. My heart felt like it was going to burst, but this body didn’t feel any need to shed tears.

Yeah , I thought. I guess I really am a monster. Somehow, it seemed so incredibly convincing now.

“I’m sorry. Leave me alone for a little while…”

Silence enveloped the plaza. I could feel everyone edging away from me. Shuna was the only one to give me a tearful hug before she joined them alongside Gobta, Hakuro placing a hand around his shoulders. Sorry, Gobta. I know you just want to say good-bye to Gobzo, but…

…Yeah. I wanted to be alone. I no longer had a grip on myself. I felt like I was going insane, but my mind was sharp as a tack. There were tempestuous levels of sadness, regret, and anger, all crashing against one another in a mad contest to find an exit.

—Why did all of this happen?

Report. Cannot calculate, comprehend, or reply.

—What would’ve been the right thing to do?

Report. Cannot calculate, comprehend, or reply.

—Was getting involved with human beings a mistake?

Report. Cannot calculate, comprehend, or reply.

—Come on… Was I wrong?

Report. Cannot calculate, comprehend, or reply.

That’s right. Even with the untold powers of the Great Sage, there were some problems that just didn’t have an answer.

—Goddamn it. If this wasn’t our town… If it wasn’t our town, I could’ve just flown into a rage, mowing down everything in my path. Goddamn it all. Taking so many people dear to me…

Looking back, this was the first time I was there to see someone close to me die. I had never gone through a loss like that, and now I understood the sadness involved. I felt it vividly, with a pain more intense than being slashed ear to ear. Cancel Pain wasn’t cutting it for this one—not against the all-too-strong currents of magic and emotion within me.

It was maybe too much for my new mask. A crack appeared on it, almost looking like a tear of sadness. I couldn’t cry, so it seemed like the mask was weeping for me.

Somewhere down the line, night fell. I gazed at the moon.

What should I do?

There was no answer. My mind was clear, but I couldn’t come up with a single thought. I looked up at the moon and kept asking myself, over and over, for an eternity. Even though I knew there was no way to find an answer. But I couldn’t stop. It was so foolish, but I couldn’t stop.

And I never noticed the small light, the reflection from the moon, that was upon me.

Three days passed. Shion didn’t wake up. She’s sleeping in way too late. I wish she’d knock that off.

…………

No, I know. I understood that she’d never open those eyes again. But I didn’t want to admit it. I wanted her back to her usual stupid antics, making her terrible meals. Gobzo, too. I didn’t know him well. We exchanged a few words on the way to the Dwarven Kingdom. But Gobta loved him as a valued sentry. He was his friend.

All the monsters who lay here had valuable relationships in their lives. No—it wasn’t like these monsters lacked any kinds of feelings. They were my most cherished companions. My family. I wanted to enjoy life with them again…but it just wasn’t going to happen.

There’s no way to resurrect the dead.

What do we do?

Do monsters not count as people? Does that mean we’ll be forced into subjugation without a passing thought as to our own feelings?

—That better mean they’re prepared to be subjugated, too.

Dark emotions began to get the better of me.

And just then:

Report. Analysis and Assessment of the compound barrier and Great Magic: Anti-Magic Area covering it is completed. Removing the compound barrier will be difficult, but the great magic can be canceled. Execute?

Yes

No

No, we don’t need to yet.

The Great Sage must’ve just wrapped up that request for me. As it did, I realized that Thought Communication messages had been coming in through the Sticky Steel Thread wrapped around my neck for a while now. I had been contacted almost constantly for the past three days. I made Soei worry for me, which I regretted.

“…Sorry. I didn’t notice.”

“Ah…! You are safe? I am so relieved.”

It was clear from Soei’s tone of voice. It also made me realize that everyone else must have been just as worried. I could whine and plead to myself later. We had a time limit, and I had things to do.

So I asked Soei how things were. Our enemies had set up battle encampments in the four cardinal directions around town, each one holding a company’s worth of knights. The magical machinations protecting each one were apparently projecting the same type of barrier that had weakened our townspeople. Sadly, the power of Soei and his team alone wouldn’t be enough to take down even one of these camps. He had also detected transportation magic at work; if we wasted time, they might call for reinforcements.

“All right. Don’t stretch yourself too thin. Join up with Gabil and rest.”

“But…”

“That’s an order. Rest.”

“…Yes, my lord.”

I wasn’t accepting any other reply. I couldn’t make Soei’s team do something reckless and get them killed as a result. I just couldn’t.

So, about that barrier.

Simply canceling out the magic wouldn’t do anything for us. What I really wanted to do was address the weakening effect it had somehow. Being a “compound barrier” or whatever it was made it a much thornier issue than I had expected.

But that could wait. What about the other search I had going?

Report. No search results found. Failed to find any magic related to complete resurrection of the dead.

…Ah. No, I suppose not. Nothing that handy can be found too easily. It makes sense. You never know for sure, though, until you check. As pointless as I thought it was, as useless a struggle as it must have looked, I couldn’t stop myself.

Shion didn’t open her eyes. Neither did Gobzo nor the rest of them. Of course they wouldn’t. They weren’t sleeping.

But I still put all my skills in motion to find some kind of measure I could take. All the bodies here, Shion’s included, were being preserved by my magical force—to keep them from decomposing, from reverting back into piles of magicules and disappearing. I knew it was pointless, but I was still betting on the possibility.

But nothing.

There were no resurrection spells in the magic books I scanned through back at that library. I guess there wouldn’t be. I had to stop grieving like this. Let’s just give them the rest they deserve in my body, as I pray they’ll wake up someday.

With that decided, I prepared to absorb them all—and that’s when my Magic Sense told me about several figures approaching.

It was the trio of Kabal and his friends. It made sense. With the order I gave, it’d have to be someone from out of town if anyone was coming near me right now. I guess they had been traveling night and day on the wagon I gave them to come here.

“…I’m sorry we’re late, boss.”

“Rimuru, um, I gotta admit I really don’t know what to say here…”

Kabal and Gido no doubt wanted to say, Hang on, you’ll get over this , that kind of thing. Elen stopped them before they could.

“Rimuru, I… I can’t say this has much of a chance of succeeding… or, like, any , really…but there are several fairy tales about coming back from the dead…”

Now was no time to be depressed. The statement made all the diverging thought processes in my mind snap back into place.

“Can you tell me more about them, Elen?”

I turned toward her. If there was any chance, I wasn’t about to refrain from betting on it. She nodded and began to speak.

………

……

…

A story about a girl and her pet dragon.

Through assorted events, the girl’s dragon was killed. She grieved over the loss of her only friend, and with her head full of anger, she destroyed the country that had carried out the killing—along with several hundred thousand people who lived there.

The girl evolved into a demon lord, and then a miracle occurred—the dragon connected to the girl evolved right alongside her, regardless of its death. But that was the end of the miracle. The dragon had lost its soul at the moment it died, and as a result, it revived in the form of a chaos dragon. It still followed its master’s orders but now brought nothing but death and destruction to everyone else.

Thus, no longer driven by anger, the demon lord shed tears for her pet, her best friend, as she sealed away the chaos dragon herself. That’s where the story ends.

Elen’s story was a fairy tale, but it had a suspicious amount of detail to it. There were also stories about vampires using a spell called Bloodraise, as well as necromancers using Raise Dead on the dead to make them their servants. The Great Sage picked up on those, too, but it wasn’t what I was looking for. It changed the target too much, making them into a different person from when they were alive.

In the realm of holy magic, there was something called Resurrection, the so-called miracle of the gods…but there were tons of restrictions on it. It was no panacea. And what’s more, all these magics (except for Bloodraise, which was species specific) were treated as “forbidden spells,” passed on strictly orally and never written into a book.

But that didn’t matter. The issue was that “evolve” thing. Monsters evolved all the time here, for reasons that were beyond me. Just giving them a name was a huge deal to them. Maybe there was some potential there? Maybe if I could just become a demon lord myself…

…just as that girl’s pet evolved and revived itself…

But I didn’t want creepy, soulless minions on my hands. And not even the Great Sage could use its analysis tools to determine whether their souls were still there or not.

But…hang on? Right now, this town was completely covered by a barrier that no monsters can go through. Maybe that’s keeping their souls in here, too, preventing them from flying to the four winds.

Understood. The chances of the souls of the individual Shion and the rest of the monsters being preserved within this space is … 3.14 percent.

Whoa! It’s pi!

Well, okay, maybe not quite. It felt like a low number to me, but I had to think about it the other way around. It needed to feel like a big one. I mean, over a 3 percent chance of literally being able to resurrect someone. Plus, there’s no way someone as tenacious as Shion or as dopey as Gobzo could die. I couldn’t let it happen. They had to be doggedly clinging to this world, waiting for my help.

Now I had some hope. Next, I just had to carry it out. Of course, that assumed I could even become a demon lord, of course…

Understood. You currently satisfy the requirements for evolving into the demon lord type. In order to carry out evolution into a “true demon lord,” the process must be nourished with the sacrifices of at least ten thousand humans.

Oh, that’s it? Well, easy, then. Demon lord? Oh, I’m totally becoming a demon lord. Way simpler process than I thought. Hopefully all those garbage troops around the outskirts of town number at least ten thousand. But hell, if there aren’t enough, I’ll just add some more. If it brings Shion and everyone else back, I have absolutely no reason to waver.

Then I came back to my senses.

“Thanks for telling me about that, Elen. Are you sure about what you’re saying, though? I mean, you’re basically telling me to become a demon lord.”

I looked at her. She stared down at the ground silently, but just for a moment as she made up her mind. She returned my gaze, face resolute.

“Well, you know, I come from the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, and… You know, I really looked up to adventurers and the freedom they had. But you know what? I’m done. I want to help out Shion, too, besides. I can’t let Farmus and the Western Holy Church get away with what they’ve done. I hate people who think monsters are evil just because they’re monsters. I know that telling you about this isn’t something I can ever go back on, buuut… I don’t know. It’s just terrible, I think, leaving things like this.”

And with that, she went on to explain that continuing to be adventurers would put undue strain on the Free Guild, so she wanted to change her band’s “home” to our nation. Live here, even, if possible.

Elen’s real name was Ellwyn, apparently, and she came from a noble family in Thalion. After being trained at the royal academy, she left the country in search of an adventuring career.

The confession made Kabal shake his head silently and Gido turn upward toward the sky, eyes closed. “Ah well,” Kabal said. “If that’s what the lady wants, you’ll see no complaints from me as her bodyguard.”

“Me neither. Guess it’ll be ‘Lady Elen’ from now on, huh?”

The other two, it turned out, weren’t exactly standard adventurers, either. Upon further questioning, Kabal and Gido revealed that they had followed Elen out of Thalion to serve as her personal guards. They were also good friends, obviously, given how they trusted her without question just now. Talk about a great trio. I was a little jealous of them.

“So, um, probably, when you become a demon lord, Rimuru, it’s gonna be totally obvious pretty quickly that I tipped you off. Thalion’s spy agency already knows that I’m involved with you, so it won’t take long for them to connect the dots. So…you know. Until then, I want to help you out as much as I can here. I want to see how it all works out in the end.”

She knew she wouldn’t be living a life of adventuring freedom for much longer. And she wanted to spend that last bit of freedom here.

All three of them looked at me, faces stern. If I allowed them to live here, it might force me to tangle with Thalion in the future. I didn’t know what kind of impact their reaction would have on us, but they couldn’t just ignore one of their nobility in the custody of a foreign nation. It didn’t seem like she was in any real danger, though, and all she wanted right now was to be around for this battle… I wasn’t exactly sure what I thought about it, but it was a question we could safely save for later.

“All right. Well, let’s leave that for the future. I’d kind of like to avoid making any more enemies than I need to…”

“Oh? Aw, but it’s all right if I stick around long enough to see if you can save Shion, isn’t it?”

“All right. You’re the one who tipped me off. You can stick around until it’s over. But you realize that my becoming a demon lord might change me. I may even wind up attacking you guys. I can’t take responsibility for it if I do, but are you okay with that?”

“Hmm… I wouldn’t like that too much, no, but a little too late to worry about that now! I’ll just have to believe in you, Rimuru!”

“Whoa! Is that how much we’re involved now? Hoo boy. A little too late, indeed!”

“That’s right, Gido. A little too late for that. That’s Lady Elen for you, isn’t it? It’s always like this with her.”

The two bodyguards sighed. It didn’t seem to harm their loyalty at all, though.

Thanks to all this, I finally had a plan. I could save Shion, and Gobzo, and all the rest! And if it meant becoming a demon lord, then I was all in. The enemy forces were attacking in four days. I had a firm grasp of the situation. Now it was time to take action.

With the decision made, things could proceed faster now.

Step one was keeping all these monsters’ souls from dissipating. For that, I adjusted the great magic I’d acquired with Analyze and Assess and used it to strengthen the barrier around town. It wasn’t clear exactly how much longer Mjurran’s magic would last, and I was afraid it’d flip off like a light switch and send their souls flying. It cost me a surprisingly vast among of magicules, but it was nothing I couldn’t deal with now.

If anything, compared to the utter despair up until yesterday, I was practically elated. Good thing I thought to analyze that barrier, even though I didn’t see much of a point. That connected everything together really well, opening up our big chance to get Shion and the rest back.

My casting that great magic sent Benimaru and the others running toward me in shock, of course.

“Sir Rimuru, what have you…?”

“Benimaru, get everybody together here! I’m gonna hold a conference to outline our future plans!”

“Wha…?! Yes, my lord!”

They ran right back off, my orders putting a spring in their step.

“Elen, Kabal, Gido… I’m sorry I made you guys worry. I’m a lot better now.”

“Rimuru…”

I smiled at Elen as I placed my cracked mask back in my pocket. The show seemed to relieve them a little, too.

“If there’s anything we can do to help,” Elen said, “just say it!”

“Heh-heh! Yeah, you’ve been a big help to us. Now it’s our turn to step up!”

“You said it, Kabal!”

It made me happy, hearing that. I appreciated it, but I didn’t want the trio actively participating in the war for me. I’d have them explain the situation one more time at the conference, though. I wanted all of us, not just me, working together.

“All right,” I said before leaving them. “Would you guys mind joining me in the conference, then? I’ve got something to handle in the meantime.”

I then walked directly toward the quarters being used by Yohm and his team. Yohm looked flustered to see me as I walked in the door.

“R-Rimuru?!”

“I’ve decided upon Mjurran’s punishment, Yohm. Where is she?”

“Um, resting upstairs, but…”

The word punishment disquieted him even further. I felt bad about it, but what I had in mind just wasn’t something I could tell him. Not yet.

The moment I was up the stairs, I faced Mjurran and spoke.

“Mjurran, you’re going to die for me.”

“Hey?!” I heard Yohm yelp. I ignored him. Mjurran looked at me, eyes full of surprise, but gave me a resigned nod. She was prepared for this eventuality.

“Sir Rimuru, that—”

Gruecith tried to cut me off, but I wasn’t about to let him. Then Yohm stood between her and me.

“Well, I’m sorry, pal, but I’m here to protect her!”

He knew he had no chance at all, but he still tried to resist me. He’s such a nice guy that way. I mean it.

So I bound both him and Gruecith in Sticky Steel Thread.

“Rimuru, please !!”

Mjurran gave them a light smile. “I loved you, Yohm. You’re the first person I’ve fallen for in all my life. If there’s such a thing as reincarnation, I hope I can live together with you in my next life, so… Good-bye, then. Try not to fall for a bad woman next time, all right?”

Another smile, and then she closed her eyes. I love that resolve. You don’t see women as good as her too often. To be honest, this act was making me feel tremendously guilty… But hey.

So, without hesitation, I plunged my hand right through Mjurran’s chest in a chopping motion. Her head lurched forward, powerless, as Yohm and Gruecith screamed their heads off. Then—with a look of utter confusion and puzzlement on her face—she opened her eyes again.

“Um… I’m not dying. That didn’t even hurt.”

Well, yeah. I know I said she’d die for me, but I wasn’t planning on killing her. You hear stories about people dying and coming back to life all the time, don’t you? I had a bunch of people I needed alive again, Shion included, and I figured I’d try my luck at padding the probabilities a little here.

“Oh, um, yeah. You were dead, for maybe, oh, three seconds?”

“…Huh?”

“Wha—?”

“What does that mean?”

Report. The individual Mjurran’s “pseudo-heart” has begun regular operation.

Nice. Came off without a hitch. With the Sage’s confirmation, I removed my hand from Mjurran’s chest.

“Well, the operation’s a success, I guess, so let me explain what I did. You don’t have to look at me like that , guys. Have a seat and kick back if you want.”

“Whoa, pal, what kinda crazy talk are you giving me?”

“There better be a good explanation for this,” Gruecith grumbled. Look at them! Crying just a moment ago and now whining and complaining. Mjurran, meanwhile, was just as calm as always.

“Shut up , guys! Mjurran’s gonna laugh at you if you keep carrying on like that. So the deal is, the temporary heart inside Mjurran was being used so Clayman could listen in on her. It’s a form of encrypted communication that runs on electric signals and natural magnetism, so it doesn’t use up any magicules at all.”

In essence, alongside providing a pulse and electrical signals for the body, her heart also emitted encrypted signals that ran across the Earth and made it all the way to Clayman. He was forcing her to file detailed reports with him anyway, just to make sure she never noticed.

It was an underhanded trick worthy of a demon lord. Those rumors about how he treated his staff were true. But you had to hand it to him, too. If he was pulling something similar with all his people, that’s a vast amount of encoded information he was receiving and unraveling in his head. No wonder they called him the Marionette Master. It’s that huge network of data he collected that served as the invisible “strings” on his puppets.

Funny coincidence that I managed to notice that. Or maybe not so much actually. You could call it proof that Shion’s still helping me out. When I cast that great magic to prevent all those souls from fading out, the Great Sage discovered an all-electronic signal that the barrier reacted to. It was easy for it to decipher the coded message, so I figured I could just use that device to fool Clayman into thinking I killed Mjurran.

“…And so it was all just a prank on my part! Sorry!”

“Just a prank?! God damn , pal!!”

“Whoa, Yohm! It wasn’t something he could deal with that easily! I mean, that’s the whole secret behind the demon lord Clayman’s power! Something nobody else knows about!”

And now they’re carrying on again. What a pain.

“But let’s not sweat the details, all right, guys? …So! Mjurran! Guess there is such a thing as reincarnation, huh?”

“…What?”

It was at that moment that Mjurran finally realized the curse upon her life had been lifted.

“You’re a free woman now, Mjurran. Well, sort of. Before that, I have one favor to ask.”

She turned toward me, still not fully cognizant of what was going on. “Say anything. If you wish me to swear my loyalty, I will, gladly.”

“Nah, that’s fine. Actually, it turns out there’s a possibility that we can resurrect Shion and all the others—just like how you died and came back, you see? And I want you to help me pull that off.”

“Huh?”

“Resurrect?”

“How?” Gruecith asked. “Raising the dead isn’t even possible for high-level magic-born like me.”

“It’s just a hypothetical for now. But I’m gonna make it happen.”

Yep. Just a chance. But I couldn’t ever allow myself to mess it up. I’d do everything I could to boost my chances, and to do that, I needed Mjurran.

“But,” I said, “if I do pull that off, what’ll you do after that?”

“Well… I may be free, but if I’m limited to an all-too-short human life from now on…maybe I don’t mind being a little confined after all.”

She gave Yohm a look that made him blush in the most darling fashion. Her own cheeks reddened a bit. I had to feel bad for Gruecith, though. He had been turned down, pure and simple.

“C’mon, cheer up!”

“Don’t give me that smile of yours!” he protested. “Besides, Yohm’s human, so he’ll live maybe a hundred years. After that, it’s my turn!”

“What the hell’re you talking about? Was that the dirty kinda crap you were thinking of, you deranged wolf man?!”

“Shut up! If you don’t like it, just try to outlive me!”

“You dog turd! You can howl all ya want, but would your master Carillon even allow that?!”

“Ha! Lord Carillon’s a generous leader. He’s asked me to broaden my horizons here. My loyalties are with him, but it’s not like I’m forced to stay in the Beast Kingdom, y’know!”

“How is something like that okay?!”

“Shut up !”

“…Actually, I take back what I said. I just lost my head for a moment there.”

“Oh, come on , Mjurran!”

It was a pretty chaotic scene, but it did make the smile return to my face a little, too. I’d offer more of a celebration if it was any other time, but right now wasn’t it. I braced myself and returned to my other main priority.

“By the way, Yohm, I’ve got a favor to ask of you, too…”

“Say it! I’ll do whatever you want, pal!”

Good. I figured he’d say that. I was kind of counting on it, and that was why I helped out Mjurran. I wasn’t usually as calculating as this, but ah well. I couldn’t afford to make any mistakes here. So:

“I need you to be a king for me.”

Yohm gave the offhand remark a puzzled look as I explained.

Basically, it was like this: We were going to kill the entire army attacking us. That was a must, and I wasn’t going to compromise on that. That led to the next question—what to do with Farmus. Should we kill all the people in that country? No, there was no reason for that. I mean, I wouldn’t hesitate to if I didn’t have enough sacrifices to become a demon lord yet, but let’s just concentrate on their military first.

Soei had reported that their total number likely did exceed ten thousand. That, honestly, was a huge relief. Kind of funny to be thanking the enemy for providing such a huge force. If it was a given that we’d kill ’em all, there was no reason to go easy on them. That made things simpler for me. I didn’t want to hurt any civilians, as much as I could, so having a nice big crowd of career soldiers to work with served my needs well.

So what would happen once this army was annihilated and I was a demon lord? That was the problem. If Farmus kept attacking me, I would have to kill them, but if possible, I would like to arrange an armistice somewhere along the line. Everyone in the Kingdom of Farmus’s executive levels of government would die, though. They had to take responsibility. Of course, that meant the central core of government would be wiped out—and that’d put the people in a bind.

“You see? And that’s where you come in.”

I gave Yohm a domineering look. His role, in essence, would be to clean up the rotten government. I’d kill anyone who came out of the country, and he’d take care of the garbage left inside it. He’d also lead the people and take on a role as the new king—and then we’d build formal relations with each other.

“Heh. You make it sound so easy. I mean, me, a king?”

“It is easy. I mean, hell, I’m a king. You oughtta try it out, too.”

King, demon lord, same thing.

“Yohm, Sir…Rimuru believes you can do it. I promise you’ll have my full backup, so why don’t you inject a little excitement in your life?”

Mjurran apparently wasn’t a fan of boring men. Her words pushed Yohm forward.

“I’ll help out, too, Yohm.”

“Uh, weren’t you busy waiting for me to die a moment ago, Gruecith?”

“Ha-ha! What’re you talkin’ about? Like I said, just outlive me and you’ll be fine.”

“Pfft. All right. You got me. I’m signin’ on to this thing!”

He nodded firmly at me as we shook hands over it. Something told me we were gonna get along just fine.

We could work out the details once this was all over. First, I had to become a demon lord. I had to get Shion and the others back alive. When a life’s lost, it never comes back, but they weren’t lost yet. There was a chance.

I’m an atheist. I don’t think there’s a God, or a god, out there. Right now, though, I was willing to pray. Pray to the figure that controlled all miracles. Before, I’d probably laugh at senseless stuff like that. And maybe it was senseless. But, you know, while I’m praying, I feel like I can believe in it. I can believe that Shion is all right.

That glint of moonlight illuminated me, flickering faintly in seeming approval of my prayer.

