

CHAPTER 4

THE BIRTH OF A DEMON LORD

I headed for the meeting hall, Yohm in tow, once I heard that all my people had quickly gathered there.

As I stepped inside, the entire Tempest government currently in town was waiting for me, strained looks on their faces. Gabil and Soei were still on standby in the cave, but Soei was connected to me via the Sticky Steel Thread trick, and I figured he was monitoring the audio.

“Sorry I left you guys in the lurch for so long. We’re here to convene a meeting over resurrecting Shion, Gobzo, and everybody else!”

The declaration made the hall stir. They were happy to see me back to my old charismatic self, and now they had hope that there was something to be done. It kindled a flame in each of their eyes. Not one of them expressed a single doubt. Shion and Gobzo were coming back, and it was time to move.

“Now, before I give you my own ideas, I would like to hear your opinions about the Kingdom of Farmus and about humans in general.”

I received a great deal of feedback very quickly. The majority of them were in agreement with me on one key point: There would be no forgiveness for the humans who had played that cowardly trick on us. They were right to feel that way, no doubt about it. Some of them, however, also said not to treat all humans the same, that there were a lot of good ones out there as well. I was happy to hear that. All this anger, fear, and hatred threatened to drive us away from the goal we needed to seek.

Even after all of this, they still faithfully adhered to the advice I had for them. These monsters considered very seriously the idea of living alongside mankind. I had to love these guys for it. They were precious to me, like family. I never really loved anyone before, so putting it that way sounds kind of fakey to me still, but…

I waited for everyone to settle back down before I continued.

“Right. Listen to me, all of you.”

I felt all eyes upon me as I began.

“I myself am a former human being. I was reincarnated, as it were.”

This caused a little commotion, but nobody spoke up. Shuna, Ranga, and probably Shion already knew, I believed. I didn’t take great pains to hide it, and I think I might’ve even mentioned it offhand to them at some point. Judging by the looks of surprise on many of my audience’s faces, though, word must not have gotten around.

“I lived as a human in the same world that the so-called otherworlders come from. I died over there, and then I was reborn here as a slime. It was pretty lonely at first and desolate, but even someone like me managed to make friends here. By ‘friends,’ I mean you. It’s possible that all of you became closer to human with your evolutions because of my own hopes, for all I know.”

I paused to gauge the response. Everyone was intently listening to me, nobody expressing any doubts. I kept going.

“I created that rule not to attack humans for that reason. I said I liked humans because I used to be one. And let me assure you, it was not my hope that my rule would cause any of you injury. I’m a monster, but I thought that my heart was still human. I wanted to interact with them, and I wound up spending a really long time in human towns and settlements. If only I could have saved those children and come back here sooner…”

Then, out of nowhere, I ran out of words. I felt like anything I could say would just sound like a trite excuse.

“No, you’re wrong. We were too dependent upon you, Sir Rimuru, assuming you would always be there to protect us. That’s what led to this tragedy,” said Shuna, her beautiful eyes fixed on me.

“It pains me,” Benimaru added, “to have my sister say it before I could. This has been an excruciating lesson for all of us, Sir Rimuru. When we lost our Thought Communication with you, that feeling of invincibility we had crumbled. It made us all feel helpless, deep in our hearts. We were forced to realize that this state of affairs was brought about by our…well, really, my dropping the ball.”

“Wait a moment, Benimaru,” Rigur replied. “If you put it that way, then I am responsible for the town’s security. I am the one most at fault!”

It sounded like both Rigur and the rest of them felt an intense responsibility for this. They all insisted it was their fault, refusing to budge. I quickly put a stop to it.

“Hang on, people. I was chilling out, I let my guard down, and that’s what led to this. Plus, as an ex-human, I put too much priority on my own thoughts. I was careless about my standing in this world, and then this happened. I think it’s all my fault. I’m sorry.”

Everyone fell silent, each of them taking my words in their own way. There was a moment’s pause before Hakuro finally responded.

“You may have put your own thoughts first, Sir Rimuru, but that is not a problem at all. As Sir Benimaru and Lady Shuna stated, all of us dropped the ball. It was our own weaknesses that caused this. We accepted this nation from you, and we let those brutes pillage it because of our negligence. Am I wrong, everyone?”

A streak of tension crossed the room. All of them immediately nodded their agreement to this. Um. Hmm. Wasn’t expecting that. I was worried that people would brand me a traitor, in the worst case, but they were all ignoring my whole coming out as an ex-human. Like, I seemed to be the only one to care at all. I couldn’t help but ask:

“Well, no, I mean… You don’t mind having an ex-human as your leader?”

“Huh? You are still you, aren’t you, Sir Rimuru?”

“Sir Rimuru, you are my only master. What you were in your past life seems not to matter much.”

“Yeah. What we know for sure is that you’re here for us, is all.”

I guess it wasn’t anything like a concern from the start.

“Sir Rimuru,” Rigurd boldly stated, “we all feel the same way about this. None of us cares a bit, so please, do whatever you like. We will follow you all the way!”

I nodded. This really was my home. I felt happy. As long as you were all of one heart, one mind, you could overcome any wall—even the one separating human from monster. That much was crystal clear now.

Kaijin, tearing up a bit as he watched this, steered the topic back to our main issue.

“So let me ask, then: How is Tempest going to deal with humans from now on?”

The room fell silent, eyes focused upon me again. Yeah. That was the problem, wasn’t it? The monsters were one thing, but to Kaijin, the other dwarves, Yohm, and Kabal and gang, this was the biggest issue on the table. If I declared myself to be the enemy of all mankind, that’d be a threat to them. I didn’t want that, of course.

“First,” I said, “before I give you my conclusion, let me give you a quick outline of my thoughts. In my old world, there are a couple of different beliefs. There’s one that says humans are inherently ‘good’ by nature and learn how to perform evil deeds as they grow older. Then there’s another that says humans are selfish and evil by default and learn how to do good over time. Basically, people can be good or bad, and humans tend to pick the easier of two options when they have the chance, so if that option leads to evil, they can become bad that way. Just like Farmus did, abandoning all negotiation and throwing around their power.”

I figured I was in the right here. After all, people could be good individually but lean more toward evil when they assembled together as a nation.

“…However, it would be a mistake to judge all of mankind as evil. It takes a human to do something as contradictory as working hard to make things easier for themselves. I was the same way, really. And I think that as long as you don’t mess up where you’re aiming your efforts at, you can make your existence a lot better for yourself. That’s why it’s so vital to have an environment you can learn in—and I want to create that environment. We can educate those who’ll befriend us, and we’ll do away with the barriers between people and monsters. That makes for better neighbors, after all, when you understand and help out one another. Doesn’t it? That’s the potential I want to believe in…”

That was what I thought about humanity. It wasn’t that I wanted to make mankind my enemy; I wanted us working hand in hand as a result. But:

“…But that’s just my hope for the future. If we trust in them unconditionally and run into this kind of situation again, we’re wasting our time. That’s why I’ve concluded that, for the time being, it’s too early to shake hands with humanity. The most important thing right now is to put on a show of force and make them recognize our presence. We need to build a position where they can no longer afford to ignore us. As it is, we’re probably being downplayed, treated as something they can use and exploit. We had been dealing with nations like Blumund and the Dwarven Kingdom, decent kingdoms that looked out for us, so we forgot about the darker side of being a nation. Even if individual people are good, the moment they form a nation, that’s when they expose their cruel fangs to us. Any nation is basically a bunch of weak people grouping together to become stronger, so I guess you can’t avoid that if you want to keep all the decent ones protected. That’s exactly why we need a show of force for people like that. My ruling this land as a demon lord will make them realize that trying to coerce us with military might will accomplish nothing for them. I can keep the other demon lords in check, too, serving as a shield for the other human nations. If we can make them think it’s better to be with us than against us, that’s all I could ask for.”

I took a breath and gauged the reaction. Even the normally clownish Gobta was listening intently instead of napping like he usually did. It was nice to see what I wanted to say get across to them.

“…If the Western Holy Church has judged us to be evil, then we must be firm in fighting against that. Not just with force but with words and economic policies. I want us to act like a mirror for these people—those who bare their fangs against us will themselves be punished; those who extend a hand will be amply rewarded for it. And then, over a very long time, we’ll try to build friendly relationships. That’s how I think about this.”

And with that, I wrapped it up.

Kaijin was the first to react. “I think that’s just too idealistic.” He sighed. “Like, what kind of guy trying to become a demon lord talks like that ? Come on. Gotta admit, though, I kinda like it.”

Shuna snickered. “Nothing wrong with being idealistic. I think Sir Rimuru has what it takes to build that kind of ideal.”

“Indeed,” Geld said, “there is no need to lose ourselves in thought. We have decided to follow in Sir Rimuru’s footsteps, and thus we can only believe in him.”

I wasn’t sure I liked that lack of critical thought on his part, but he meant it with the utmost sincerity.

“If you do manage to become a demon lord”—Benimaru laughed— “I hope there is a role for us in it all.”

“I am your faithful shadow, Sir Rimuru,” Soei said—I guess he was listening in. “There is no need to confirm our relationship. I will move according to your orders.”

“And I, my master,” Ranga added from my shadow, “am your faithful fangs. The one who will tear apart any foe who stands in your path.”

They all voiced their agreement in their own ways—Rigurd, Rigur, Gobta, Hakuro, and everyone else. Yohm, too. “Damn, pal,” he said, scratching his head. “And you want my crew to build a new nation and turn everyone there to your side? Well, you don’t need to lay it out for us. I know how your mind ticks. You’re a real slave driver to all of us, y’know that?”

“I’m so glad we have an understanding, Yohm.”

“Ah, shove it,” he pouted, his lips smiling. Mjurran was on his right, Gruecith on his left, and the rest of his followers behind him. I saw Kazhil, his aide, and Rommel, his main staff officer, among them. They were all humans, and they, too, voiced their agreement in a variety of ways.

“Hee-hee-hee! So let’s keep things friendly between us, okay, Rimuru?”

Everyone nodded at Elen. Her words had weight in my mind. I was pushing a lot of stupid ideals upon them; I didn’t have any excuse for that. I lived life the way I wanted to, and I had to take responsibility for my actions.

“Thanks, guys. Hope you’ll still put up with my selfishness in the future!”

They all shouted their agreement, harmonizing like a choir.

With that out of the way, it was time to switch gears and figure out a strategy against this invasion.

“Um, do we have any details on the enemy force?”

Soei quoted a figure of at least ten thousand men, but I didn’t hear about what types they were yet. We needed to let the rest of this meeting’s attendees know, too.

“Yes,” Benimaru stepped up to state. “According to Soei’s investigations…”

…We were being invaded by a tandem force, with soldiers from both Farmus and the Western Holy Church. The Church force were the Temple Knights, the minor leaguers—about three thousand of them, which consisted of the garrison that was already stationed in Farmus. In addition to that, essentially there were ten thousand Farmus knights, six thousand mercenary troops, and around a thousand magic-users.

So, around twenty thousand in all. Pretty big force. Larger than our country’s entire population. But if the Church’s Crusader groups and their legendary strength in battle weren’t part of the equation, I didn’t see any major problem. The sheer numbers were more than expected, but the only implication this had was that I’d have a larger sacrifice to snack on. I had no intention of offering any of them mercy, after all. The real question on my mind was how many otherworlders were among them.

“How should we allot our own forces?” Geld gingerly asked.

“I think,” Benimaru replied, “my force should address the main enemy presence.”

He was ready to go, definitely—apparently, he had formed a group of hobgoblin warriors on the sly, trained by Hakuro and pretty well honed. Rigur and Gobta were commanding the goblin rider teams, too, and ready to kick up one hell of a lot of dust. I wasn’t the only one to be enraged by what happened.

But:

“I’m sorry, guys, but I’m gonna be the one to take down these forces. Or, I mean, I hope you’ll let me.”

“…How do you mean?” Benimaru asked for the crowd.

My explanation was simple. “It turns out ten thousand sacrifices are all I really need to become a demon lord. Presumably, I’ll be evolving into a so-called ‘true demon lord,’ and that’s how the process works. Luckily, we have double that on our doorstep, so I got more than enough. After that, I just need to show off my force a bit. It’s part of the whole ceremony, or process, toward reaching demon lord–hood. I need to annihilate all the invaders by myself.”

I wasn’t being entirely honest here. There wasn’t any need to go it alone, according to the Great Sage—as long as the souls were connected to me, no worries. My own will needed to align with theirs, and that’s all it took. The exact conditions, however, were allegedly a little hard to engineer—it wasn’t just a matter of killing ten thousand and Bob’s your uncle. But I didn’t care.

A passing thought struck me that maybe Clayman had been aiming for this all along—to start a war for the express purpose of collecting ten thousand human beings together for reaping. Attacking villages singly only got you so far—maybe he aimed for a war that’d let him efficiently harvest those souls and become a true demon lord himself. He just didn’t know the exact conditions needed, so he had to satisfy himself with spreading evil around his domain instead. It almost seemed to me that he was taking advantage of the other demon lords so he could become a true one, even.

He would’ve been eliminated from the fray sooner or later, I suppose… But right now, the demon lord Clayman was my clear enemy. Once I took care of things with Farmus, he was coming up next.

So really, I had just one reason for handling this solo. It was because I had this well of intense anger deep in my chest, and I wanted to release all of it. I didn’t want to give people the impression that I’d kill at the drop of a hat. I wanted them to know I was pissed . And if it meant I’d make a mistake and get killed, then that’s just all I was capable of, really.

Plus…you know, I felt like I had to take responsibility for all this. I couldn’t allow myself to take it easy any longer. Even if Hinata was among the invaders, I intended to kill all of them by myself. I’d already seen her skills once. The same skill never worked twice on me, because the Great Sage always had the perfect remedy for it.

……

It felt like the Sage wanted to say something about that, but that assumption had never let me down before. Knowledge provides me the biggest advantage there is. If you use a skill meant to pick someone off on the first view, then you have to kill with it—otherwise, the survivors will pull their knowledge together and come up with countermeasures.

It didn’t matter who my foe was—I wouldn’t lose. I’d never be allowed to. And, perhaps sensing my resolve, Benimaru grudgingly accepted it with a nod.

“Very well. We leave this to you, Sir Rimuru…”

I nodded back. Although, of course, I didn’t intend for him and everyone else to just keep quiet and wait.

“…There is a job I would like to have all of you do for me, though. Right now, there are magical devices of some sort in all four cardinal directions around town, generating that weakening barrier over us. Each is being guarded by a company of knights. I’d guess they’re pretty powerful, but I’d like you to attack them and take them all down simultaneously.”

“Ohhh?”

“I see. So we do have a role in this?”

“Allow me, Rogurd, to accept this mission!”

“Yeah, I’m pretty darn mad right now, too!”

Everyone was raring to go, even before I’d finished my request. I raised a hand to silence them. “Hold on. I’ve already decided on my personnel. I want to ask as few people as needed to go through the town’s barrier. First, Benimaru will tackle the east. Hakuro, Rigur, Gobta, and Geld will handle the west. The south will be taken by Gabil and his team; the north by Soei and his. The enemy’s reportedly got teleportation circles in place, so we have to strike them before reinforcements can be sent in! If they do manage to send more troops, call Ranga over immediately, even if you think it won’t be enough to put up a resistance. Did you hear that, Soei?”

“Not a problem, Sir Rimuru. I thank you for providing us the opportunity. Gabil is ready to go as well, and I doubt any of us will fail.”

“Does it look like you can win, from your perspective?”

“It will be simple if we only handle one of the four.”

Great. Soei’s team consisted of a mere six people—himself, Soka, and four others. Their skills were honed for assassination missions, and they’d provide a good match even for an entire enemy unit if it wasn’t prepared for them. Plus, with their movement speed, they’d certainly be able to pull the wool over the enemy’s eyes and flee if needed.

Gabil and his men had grown far stronger during the evolution to dragonewt form. Each one ranked a good B-plus now, and I doubted they’d lose out to even the most well trained of knights. They all had ample potion, too, so as long as they weren’t one-shot killed, they could keep up a fight indefinitely.

So north and south were no problem, and to the east, I had Benimaru to count on.

“I have no concern about your chances, Benimaru, but it’ll be you operating solo against nearly a hundred knights. If you sense any danger—”

“Sir Rimuru, there is no need for worry. It is a given that I will—”

“You don’t have to go easy on them, keep in mind.”

“Heh. In that case, victory is assured.”

No worries about him, either. Among our group, only I was stronger than him, and he had the skills needed to handle large numbers at once.

That just left the west side, which did concern me.

“Okay. So: Hakuro, Rigur, Gobta, and Geld…”

“Sir Rimuru,” Rigur said, “you are safe in our hands. I have no intention of tasting defeat twice. But if you are that worried about us, is it because…you feel it’s likely they are among their numbers?”

Exactly. The west side connects to the shortest highway route to the kingdom of Blumund. If the enemy anticipated that our merchants would flee down that road, then the knights who attacked us earlier were probably stationed to the west so they could strike at our visitors.

“Can you win against them? There’s a very good chance those otherworlders are among them.”

“Sir Rimuru, we are not as weak as we used to be. We have the power to fight, not just to be protected by Sir Hakuro.”

“Yeah! Plus, I gotta get me some revenge for Gobzo!”

“I know we number just four,” Geld said, “but I want you to trust us. I promise you, Sir Rimuru, I will wield the powers you granted me as an orc king as much as I possibly can!”

Hakuro’s reputation preceded him. Geld was powerful, if not quite as much as Benimaru. Rigur, in his role as leader of our security forces, was just as capable in battle as Rigurd. Gobta… Okay, I was a little worried about him, but I figured not even that fool would try anything too rash.

“All right. Take those magical devices down, make this annoying barrier disappear, and give our people their full strength back!”

“““Yes, my lord!!”””

With them on the job, the barrier was as good as gone. That just left me to take on the invading forces by myself.

There was one other thing too important to forget.

“Now, Shuna…”

“Yes?”

“Like I just said, Benimaru and everyone will remove the barrier for us. However, it’s that very barrier, in all likelihood, that is helping keep the souls of Shion and everyone else within reach. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru. You want us to prepare a replacement barrier for you?”

“Exactly. Can you do that?”

“Oh, that goes without saying, my lord. I promise it will be done!”

Right now, as we spoke, I was casting a unique sort of great magic. I was also releasing a vast quantity of magicules into the air, filling it. That was what it took to maintain the barrier and supplement the magicule supply around here—and I wanted Shuna to make a new reinforcing barrier to help with that. The rest of the people in town would pitch in, too, of course—whatever it took to boost the chances of bringing them all back alive.

In the laws of magic, just like the laws of physics, there was the concept of going “high to low.” Basically, if the air was filled with energy, I figured that would help prevent the energy covering all those souls from dissipating. If they lost this protection, the souls could go right through the barrier and be vaporized. A soul is a pure, unadulterated collection of energy; there is nothing to fence it in. And with the astral bodies of monsters made of magicules, if we could keep this energy from dissipating, I figured that would pen up the souls well enough. That was the Great Sage’s take on things, and all I could do was count on that. (Humans, by the way, could pass through the barrier without resistance, since they had relatively few magicules inside their bodies. It was totally different from monsters, who were much more directly affected by that energy.)

“I would love to help with that if I could,” Mjurran said. Great magic, along with barriers, was an apparent specialty of hers. I appreciated the offer a ton.

“Hey, Shuna…”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru. Thank you for that, Mjurran.”

“Leave it to me. I promise I’ll devote my full energy to it.”

So Shuna and Mjurran would be working together to keep my great magic going strong. Now I could fight with a clear mind.

“Rigurd! I want everybody left to help keep these two safe in the meantime!”

“Yes, my lord!”

“I—I can do that, too?!”

“You got us here, too, pal!”

“Allow the noble Gruecith to see this through for you!”

“Yeah, my bodyguards and I will do our best!”

“You are in good hands, Rimuru.”

“Yeah, you heard ’em, boss!”

I had Kurobe, Yohm, Gruecith, Rigurd, and the Kabal trio in town. It couldn’t be a safer place if they were here.

“Right! I imagine our enemy assumes the final battle’s four days from now, but that doesn’t matter to us. Right now, from this very moment, it is time to do what must be done and annihilate our foes!”

And with that order, everyone began to move, working to the last man to bring Shion, Gobzo, and everyone else back.

Benimaru’s back was straight, shoulders high, as he strode directly for the magical device installed east of town. One of the Temple Knights there was the first to spot him.

“Someone approaching ahead! All troops, prepare for battle!”

It was this company of Temple Knights that established the Prison Field, the barrier weakening the monsters, at Archbishop Reyhiem’s order. There were a bit over a hundred of them, each ranking a B-plus threat individually. Three other companies were in each of the other directions, attending to the barrier devices. They boasted astonishing battle skills, geared more toward tackling monsters than your average knight, and all of them were more than amply trained for the job. And like any devout member of the Western Holy Church, none of them was complacent. They had guards on duty, tense and focused, and Benimaru was discovered in short order.



And yet—

“Sorry, man, but you’re gonna help me vent my anger a bit.”

It sounded almost haughty, the way he put it, but nobody was there to complain. In an instant, they were all dead. With his sword, encased in jet-black flame, he cut the knights neatly in half—armor and all—as easily as ripping a sheet of paper. Their fresh blood stained the ground red, like crimson fields of flowers blooming amid the black fire.

One of them held out just long enough to voice his final resentments.

“N-nobody said anything about this…this…monster…”

It was the captain of the knight company, and it was his last act on this world before the black flame consumed him. That single dance-like motion from Benimaru didn’t even need half a minute to knock them all out—and another offhand swipe of his sword slashed right through the magical device.

“Mission complete,” he whispered. “Now—are any of my allies pathetic enough to be having trouble with this?”

He sincerely doubted it, but he still set off to check out the scene in the other directions.

Over to the south, Gabil was busy rousing his men.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! I’ve finally been given a place in the sun! I was hoping my successes in putting our potions on the market would’ve merited my appointment to higher government by now… But then we had this distraction happen to us. It is simply outrageous that these minions should get in my way! Isn’t it?”

“It is exactly as you say, Sir Gabil!”

“Well put. I was hoping that our efforts would be rewarded by now and that Sir Gabil would be basking in the fruits of his success. But now…”

“Yes! Yes, precisely! But! If this battle can prove to Sir Rimuru that I can be of aid to him, I am all but guaranteed a lofty role in his hierarchy! I want to see the full extent of your force in action right now, people! Show them what a dragonewt riled is capable of!”

“““Raaahhh!!”””

Spirits were high, no doubt, although some of Gabil’s men might have questioned the way he phrased that speech. They knew Gabil didn’t need some fancy title in the Tempest government—he had already proven himself a capable leader in their eyes. That was why they had followed him when he was banished from his homeland, after all, and as petty as he could be about it sometimes, they knew he was seriously trying to boost their good name.

“Such words,” one of them whispered, “are exactly why Soka and the others make fun of him, you realize.”

“Shhh! You want him to hear you?”

“Yeah, well, that’s one of the good things about our general, after all, isn’t it?”

“No doubt. You said it.”

“Enough idle chitchat,” barked Gabil. “Put yourselves into this! Ah, you make life so difficult for me!”

“Oh, we do not, General!”

A quick laugh.

“Right! Forward!!”

They were roused and ready to fight as they took flight from the cave, cutting through the clouds as they went southward and attacking in tandem with the others.

The Temple Knights protecting the south were thrown into chaos upon witnessing the surprise attack from the skies. The ever-changing breath attacks—fire, ice, air—took out nearly a third of them in short order.

“Retain your positions!” a senior knight half ordered, half shouted as his men flew into a panic. “Go into our air-defense formation and prepare for magical impact!”

But he was already too late to avoid Gabil’s second wave of offense.

“Damn it! These aren’t lizardmen at all, are they? They don’t have anywhere near this level of force—much less wings to fly with!”

“Don’t panic! These are dragonewts! They’re not as common, but they’re nothing we can’t handle!”

“Dragonewts?! I can’t believe it! Such great numbers, and working as a team…”

Their confusion subsided before the third attack arrived, as they finally began to grasp the situation. But half of them were already down, and none of the survivors was free of injury.

“Curse them! Contact our headquarters and call for reinforcements!”

One of the knights prepared to follow his captain’s order. Then Gabil himself alighted next to him.

“Hngh!”

His spear plunged straight through the knight’s heart.

“May God damn you now!” the captain shouted as he engaged Gabil.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! You captain this force? My name is Gabil, but there is no need to remember it. Consider my telling you a final gift before your death!”

“What? A named monster?! Very well. You should prove a worthy opponent for me!”

Gabil was occupying the full attention of the company’s leader and commander, and it threw the rest of the knights into disarray. This was the moment the other dragonewt warriors were waiting for. They were an even match, pound for pound, but thanks to the gift of flight, Gabil’s fighters had the advantage. Even the injured among them had High Potions at the ready, rapidly returning them to the front line.

“God smite them all! We hit them and hit them, and the bastards keep coming back!”

“Stay strong! We have the protection of Luminus upon— Gehhh… ”

Their numbers were few now, and the shock of these monsters working in precise tandem had hardly worn off. The medicine these foes used to heal their wounds struck fear in their hearts. Even the most devout of the knights began to tremble—and as they did, the captain they so heavily relied upon was slain by Gabil.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! Victory is mine!!”

Now the fate of this battle was sealed. Without a commander, the rest of the knights were helpless, quickly tasting defeat at the claws of Gabil’s men.

Over to the north, Soei and his platoon were on the move, silently using Shadow Motion to sneak into the encampment.

Out of nowhere, there was a dull thud —the sound of someone’s head hitting the ground. Soei had decapitated the garrison’s commander. It was a signal to all that the battle was on.

“N-no! Where did they…?!”

“Grahhh!”

“Aaahhh!!”

The shapeless assassins had successfully thrown the northern encampment into fits of terror.

“…Sir Soei, these troops were weaker than I thought. I apologize,” Soka said as he took a knee before his leader.

“…Apologizing would be meaningless. I am the one who shall make the final judgment. Plus…”

Soei paused a moment to think. Soka was right. These were all weaklings. If this was what they were dealing with, Soei’s team could have easily destroyed the magical devices in all four directions. Killing all the men as well would pose a challenge, but completing the objectives and escaping alive would have been no sweat.

But the problem wasn’t here on the north side.

“I was hoping they would be here…but I suppose it is the west, after all, just as Sir Rimuru surmised.”

“Yes, my lord! I believe you are right.”

The otherworlders had to be in the west. By Soei’s estimation, if their team worked alone to strike all four bases at once, it might have failed entirely if Soka and the others ran into those guys. Soei had already reported back to Rimuru along those lines—and that was why Soka’s apology was pointless.

“…But who can say,” he whispered as a smile crept onto his lips, “who the unlucky ones really are here?”

Hakuro was on his mind—the Hakuro he saw just before they all moved out. The look on his face was nothing short of bloodcurdling. It made Soei happy he wasn’t the one facing him down. The otherworlders who struck in town conducted their killing like a pleasure hunt. Now things were quite different. They’d be taking on the Sword Ogre himself.

“It appears to be over,” Soka coldly stated. There were no survivors left among the Temple Knights of the north. Soei and his team were unhurt. It was a victory as total and complete as he had predicted.

The magic-producing device installed west of town had been placed atop a hill with a good view of the highway leading out. Unlike the other positions, the Temple Knights guarding it felt rather relaxed. Their encampment was the safest of all four, and it was loaded with forces—over two hundred troops in all.

There was, of course, a reason for this.

“Hey. Hasn’t anyone fled yet?”

“Oh, er, Shogo! No enemies sighted today, either, sir!”

The soldier who answered Shogo Taguchi’s question seemed terribly ill at ease around him.

“Pfft. How many days are they gonna waste planning their escape? Or did the merchants and adventurer bodyguards decide to share their fates with the town?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Oh, I wouldn’t be so impatient,” Kyoya said to soothe the clearly annoyed Shogo. “The other positions didn’t have any news, either. If they’re running, they’ll have to go down this road. It’s the only option.”

“Huh. Yeah, I hope,” Shogo resentfully replied. It had been three whole days, and nobody had fled town. It made him suspicious. He was here because of the merchants and adventurers who were supposed to be skipping town. Kyoya seemed content with just shutting down this highway, as ordered, but Shogo had other ideas. Razen, the head sorcerer of the Farmus court, had personally told him that he had free rein to massacre anyone on the highway.

Just as Rimuru thought, the Kingdom of Farmus had decided that anyone from Blumund trying to flee the region should be killed. Shogo was no homicidal maniac, but the order filled him with glee nonetheless. He had noticed something in this new world, and that was the way his skills could evolve.

Once, during training, he had failed to fine-tune his Berserker unique skill, and the results killed one of the knights. Somehow, it felt like he was just a bit more powerful after that event. Maybe killing more enemies with that skill would continue to boost the effect. He still couldn’t defy the locking curse Razen had put on him, but maybe, if he powered up enough, he could later.

That was Shogo’s thought, but defeating monsters didn’t provide that concrete feeling of strength he craved. It was a disappointment, but now, with carte blanche to kill the Blumundians who would no doubt be flooding this road shortly, he was doing a little dance in his mind.

But the people he had wanted to see so badly showed no sign of appearing, even after three days. For someone as quick-tempered as Shogo, it was sorely trying the limits of his patience.

Kyoya tried his best to keep him calm, even as he struggled to contain his own cravings for murder. The previous attack on the town opened his eyes to just how wonderful slashing up bodies could be. Especially that one elderly ogre. Those sword skills were the real thing; Kyoya could tell that much.

Ooh, I’ll never forget that surprised face! The way it was so confident in its own strength! It’s irresistible!

It made him lick his lips in anticipation. And even though his motivations were different from Shogo’s, he was just as ready for the fleeing crowds to appear.

Then they heard a messenger provide a report.

“Enemies up ahead! They number…four?!”

Tension and nervousness found their way into the western encampment. The knights immediately cast magic to boost their physical strength, preparing to engage this threat and going into a formation that guaranteed at least three troops could tackle each one. They might have slept on the job a little, but these were Western Holy Church monster hunters, each one an expert in the field. There was no panic, no agitation. They simply did what needed to be done before a battle began.

Hakuro, Rigur, Gobta, and Geld were coming their way.

“Let’s give ’em a show!” shouted Gobta as he drew his dagger and held its scabbard in his left hand. The starwolf he was on leaped forward, and then he jumped off his mount’s back, somersaulting once in the air. Steadying his aim with his scabbard, he launched a Case Cannon strike upon the head of the most important-looking knight in the crowd.

Easily surging past the speed of sound, the two-centimeter-wide iron balls landed a direct hit. There was a soft zwing! sound as the knights behind the targeted captain were bathed in blood…then a thud as he collapsed to the ground.

“Nice! Direct hit!”

The knights began to scream and shout as Gobta admired his efforts.

“Enemy of God! What sorcery is this?!”

The company fanned out, which was exactly what Gobta and the others were anticipating.

“Well done, Gobta. Keep diverting their attention, but don’t let them capture you.”

“Roger that, sir!”

“You’re just as nimble as always,” observed Rigur. “You always were good at sniping like that.”

“Heh-heh! Yeah, wasn’t I?”

“Don’t let it get to your head, you fool.”

It was rare for Rigur to compliment Gobta. The subsequent warning quickly silenced him.

“Keep your guard up! We need to work together to shoulder some of Hakuro’s and Geld’s load!”

“Got it!”

Rigur and Gobta climbed onto their starwolves, working to throw the knights’ teamwork out of whack. Geld was waiting for this. Even their breathing was fully aligned as he watched them send their wolves into the air—the signal for him to stomp his right foot against the ground. The impact shook the earth under the knights’ legs like an earth tremor. It was called Earthshatter Kick, one of the Arts Geld had learned, and it sent a shock wave of aura force below him to further extend its power and range.

“Whoa?!”

“Ngh!”

The quake lasted for just a moment, but that was enough. By the time Rigur and Gobta reached ground again, they were right in front of several unbalanced, teetering knights. They were left lethally wide open in the midst of battle, fated with nothing but broken windpipes at the fangs of the starwolves.

“Boy, that sure was something…”

“I can hardly believe it. We didn’t even practice that in training, but your timing was perfect, Geld…”

Rigur and Gobta looked at each other and grinned. Then the three of them sprang into action anew, maintaining their impeccable teamwork as they beat the knights at their own game. Before their overwhelming numbers, the trio couldn’t have looked less concerned.

But now there was a dark-haired young man standing before them.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Nice! I like it! But now you gotta take me on!”

“Ah, ahhh! Sir Shogo!”

“Please do something about these monsters!”

The smell of death surrounding Shogo intoxicated him, making his face twist villainously. He could feel force flowing through him like never before. Yes! This is it! Just as I thought—my power grows as people die around me!

His spirits soared as he began running toward the trio.

“Oh, there he is,” Gobta noted, eyes showing an uncommon (for him) anger as he sized Shogo up. “But he ain’t fightin’ me!”

It was Shogo who had kicked Gobzo to death back in town as he tried to cover for Shuna. The memory of the moment he heard the news made Gobta boil with fury at the figure running for him. But he was fully aware of the difference in strength between them both. No, Shogo would have to fight Geld, just as they planned originally.

“Do not worry, Sir Gobta,” the orc king declared. “It’s time to deliver the iron hammer of justice!”

“Hee-hee! Just Gobta is fine, Geld!”

“Understood. Allow me to handle the rest, Gobta!”

“I hope you do, Sir Geld,” Rigur said as he nodded. “Gobzo had his faults, but he was a good man to all of us.”

And in another moment, Geld and Shogo were locked in battle.

Amid this fury, there was another confrontation taking place—between Hakuro and Kyoya.

“Wow, old man, you survived? If you were lucky enough to live, you should’ve tucked your tail and fled when you could. It woulda been easy for someone as strong as you to make it out.”

“Ho-ho-ho! I may not look it, but I happen to be a very sore loser. Besides, something about some youngster getting a swollen head with me when I haven’t even revealed my full strength just doesn’t seem right.”

“Oh? You aren’t talking about me, are you?”

“Does it not seem that way to you? Well, my apologies. I suppose your brain’s just as empty as your morals.”

“Ha-ha! So getting slashed once didn’t bring the message across, huh? Or are you growing feeble in the head?”

Just then, a sharp ting! echoed across the field. It was the sound of Hakuro’s hidden sword deflecting the blow Kyoya unleashed in the blink of an eye. The otherworlder had lunged upon Hakuro in the middle of their chat. Anticipating the strike, he drew his sword against it as if he had all the time in the world.

“Impatient, I see. But I suppose we both are. I can hardly contain my anger any longer.”

Kyoya suddenly felt a chill down his spine. He took a step back. Hakuro’s ghastly visage mentally overwhelmed him, as much as he didn’t want to admit it.

“Don’t make me laugh,” he spat back, eyes squinted and blurred with the desire to kill. “Quit acting like my boss, old man! You couldn’t do a damn thing against my sword!”

“Not your sword. Your power, yes. As Rimuru put it, your force is based on the spatial element. Not even I had an answer for it—but now that I know the trick, I can avoid it.”

“Yeah? Well, great. So let’s have a sword fight, all right? Fair and square.”

Kyoya brought his sword before his eyes—those eyes blazing with a fearsomely evil light—as a distressing grin crossed his face.

“Very well. Allow me to show you the true essence of swordplay.”

Hakuro held his own blade down low. Kyoya’s grin widened.

“You ready?”

The otherworlder lifted his sword higher and then swung it down. He was far too out of range to hit Hakuro with it, but his aim was elsewhere. The blade itself launched out, away from the sword’s grip, transforming into millions of tiny shards, each one too small to see but packing lethal force as they hurtled toward Hakuro. Kyoya’s sword was a fake, a dummy created by his Severer unique skill. Switching between it and his actual sword allowed him to trick his enemy, stymieing them in battle.

“Ha-ha-ha! That fool got tricked again!”

Kyoya held his stomach as he laughed—but a cold, penetrating voice stopped him.

“Hmm. So such tiresome little deceits are part of your arsenal, eh? It seems I overestimated you.”

“No way?!”

Kyoya looked around, searching for Hakuro’s frigid, lecturing voice. He found the ogre exactly where he had been standing, completely unhurt.

“What… What did you just do , old man?!”

“Hmm. Interesting. You weren’t able to see it? Then I suppose you’re just a second-rate fighter or worse.”

“…What?”

“‘Second-rate or worse’ is what I said. I can fully keep up with your sword style, and frankly, I couldn’t find it more childish.”

“Don’t mess with me, you senile piece of shit!”

Kyoya lost his cool, eyes wide open. That was why he couldn’t notice. His Severer blade, capable of ripping through anything, had been fully deflected by Hakuro—and now, he had to accept that.

He hadn’t even noticed that the third eye on Hakuro’s head was now open. Aura, all-powerful and overwhelming, flowed from him. It was enough energy to easily propel him into the A ranks of monsterdom.

“Right. I said I would show you the true essence of swordplay. Pay close attention to this!”

“Shut up! Shitty little monsters, acting all tough and crap…!”

Kyoya, still enraged, created a new blade and slashed at Hakuro. Hakuro paid it no mind. He just stood there, quietly transforming the intense rage inside him into power. Not even the sight of Kyoya bringing down his sword at point-blank range fazed him. He just kept his third eye open—the extra skill Heavengaze—and dodged his opponent’s unseeable blade by a hairbreadth.

“You talk big,” Kyoya shouted as he laughed loudly, “but you can’t do a thing against me! Can you?! There’s nothing you can do! Just sit there and watch my invisible blade rip you apart!”

“The time has come, I see. Perhaps your ‘eye’ is not so all-seeing after all…”

“Huh? What did you—?”

Kyoya didn’t understand. But he could tell it meant trouble. He took a step back, but it was already too late.

—A flash.

The resulting sword move—Crestwater Slash—was clearly visible to Kyoya’s All-Seeing Eye…and then Kyoya realized something was wrong. He was frozen. Not “frozen,” exactly, but moving at an impossibly slow speed. The sword flowed its way toward him. His All-Seeing Eye picked up on that; it should have been evadable enough. But the sword kept coming. It touched against his neck. And then it went all the way down into his torso.

“…Uh?”

Then the sword came back out, gouging Kyoya’s heart along the way, as Hakuro just barely grabbed his head before his body hit the ground. In less than a second, it was all over.



“…And there we go. I hope you will use the remaining time you’ve extended a thousandfold for yourself to figure out where you went wrong.”

Those words, via Thought Communication, were the last thing Kyoya ever heard.

Hakuro could have killed Kyoya at any time. Even in town, he wouldn’t have fallen behind if he had any intention of killing him then. It was a loss with its cause squarely upon Rimuru and his order to drive away their foes alive.

Now, though, his good name was restored. He had waited for the moment when Kyoya’s All-Seeing Eye was at its maximum level of activation. Then he showed his own skills—and the sheer difference in talent between them.

It would be just a few seconds before Kyoya’s oxygen-starved brain would expire, and even less than that before his consciousness grew cloudy. But thanks to Mind Accelerate, he had extended his perception speed to a thousand times normal. Hakuro’s taunting goaded him into it, although Kyoya had no idea.

Now, all he could do was taste the pain, the bitterness, for a small eternity until the moment he finally, mercifully passed. Such was the end of Kyoya Tachibana, the otherworlder who attempted to con his way through life and met his doom over it.

Shogo was intensely irritated. Geld, the warrior looming in front of him, seemed invincible to his powers. Nothing of the sort had ever happened to him in this world. Everyone always groveled before him, begging for mercy. And now look.

“Goddammit…!”

He poured every ounce of strength he had into Berserker and launched a kick at Geld’s frame. It helplessly clanged against the orc’s Scale Shield, the unique piece of equipment Garm forged out of Charybdis scales for him.

“That’s cheating! If you’re a man, fight me with your bare hands!”

Geld raised a quizzical eyebrow at Shogo’s absurd command.

“I don’t know what you mean. This is war. Cheating or not, it is only polite to bring out everything you have against your foe.”

“Don’t give me that shit! I don’t have any weapons, and you’re fully outfitted! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

This bewildered Geld. His opponent was making less and less sense. The word patience wasn’t in Shogo’s dictionary; it seemed like he expected his selfish, childlike whining to work against grown men. That was why failing to even put a dent in Geld was filling him with a passionate rage. But that wasn’t Geld’s problem. All he could do with Shogo’s nonsensical ramblings was ignore them.

“All right. I’m sorry; I’m sorry,” Shogo backpedaled. “I thought I’d just ask, y’know, if you could put down that annoying shield for me. I’m all warmed up now, so I guess it’s about time I put everything I got into this.”

To Geld, someone whose mind was configured to follow his warrior code, it was impossible for him to follow the thoughts of the oblivious Shogo. But this was a battlefield. Just because his foe threw him for a loop didn’t mean he’d abandon the fight.

“…Everything you’ve got? Very well. I will do the same as—”

“Haaah!!”

Not listening to Geld’s words, Shogo focused his spirit just below his navel and shouted out loud. Then, like a tiger, he planted a foot on the ground and sped off, unleashing a flying kick in Geld’s direction.

“Eeeeee yaaah !!”

With a scream, the kick unleashed itself. It put a crack in Geld’s shield.

“One more! Hraaah!!”

He landed on the ground, away from the shield, and used his momentum to launch another back kick. That was enough to shatter Geld’s shield for good.

His Berserker unique skill had the special effect of breaking the weapons of his opponents. Of course, a unique piece of equipment was hard to break with one or two strikes—that was why Shogo was acting like he had no strategy but was actually attacking the same spot over and over again. He might have looked like a simpleton, but Shogo had a uniquely honed talent for battle—and that skill was perfectly suited for his martial-arts approach.

“Ha-ha! Lookit that! You ain’t gonna block the next one without that shield!”

Shogo was proud of his victory. But it didn’t move Geld at all.

“I see… So you acted short-tempered and mindless for that reason?”

He was impressed. But ever so casually, he took out a brand-new shield from his Stomach.

“Huh? What the…?! That’s dirty !”

“What is dirty about this? I told you—this is war. It is only common courtesy to use every weapon at my disposal. No matter what kind of cowardly move you may attempt, I am willing to forgive it.”

Right from the start, Geld had been consistently and doggedly sticking to his own principles as he tackled Shogo. He had only one motivation. Shogo was the man behind Gobzo’s death, and the iron hammer had to fall upon him.

“Cowardly? You callin’ me cowardly? Don’t give me that shit, you pig!”

“I am not a pig…but fine.”

“Shut up!”

Shogo let out a deep breath as Geld readied his shield. Composing himself, he observed his enemy, finally recognizing him as a worthy challenger. With that shield, Geld had no opening to exploit—but Shogo decided to force him to the ground anyway. Taking the sanchin stance (a standard position unique to karate), he breathed in and let out all his tension with a “Kaaahhh!!” Muscles tightened up and down his body, boosting his focus.

It was a basic breathing move, but it was also a harrowing finisher—and, repeating it three times as he took in the air and its magicules, it transformed his flesh and blood, adding the Adamantine Body effect of Berserker to his already well-built frame to make it hard as rock. His body was remade into a living weapon of battle.

“Now I’m ready. This is how I really fight, and I’m ready for you. Try to make this fun for me, all right?”

“That goes without saying. Come at me!”

With a light exhale, Shogo lunged at Geld. With his bodily strength much enhanced, all limiters restricting his powers were gone. The difference was like night and day, and he even moved faster than before.

“Shyahhh!!”

Quickly closing the distance, Shogo launched a frontal punch. The power from his toes upward ran through his navel and focused itself upon a single point in his fist. He called it the Tornado Punch, and it mixed Berserker’s weapon-breaking and Adamantine Body properties to unleash a torrent of force—and as it smashed through Geld’s shield, Shogo felt assured of victory.

Heh! The moment I get serious, this— Wait, what?

The next moment, he realized something felt off. Pain erupted from his limbs, forming together in intense agony in an instant.

“Whoa—what’s…?! Goddammit!!”

It was Chaos Eater, a yellow aura that snaked its way around him. Now Geld was on the attack.

“Your physical strength is commendable. I can certainly tell that much from what I have seen in this short battle. But it seems rather weak against rot .”

“R-rot? Shit! Get—get this off me!”

The intense pain made Shogo writhe on the ground. Looking on from above, pity in his eyes, Geld prepared his Meat Cleaver blade.

“Let me end the pain.”

“Ahhh! W-wait! Wait a second!”

Geld’s slow approach made the orc look like a man-eating demon in Shogo’s eyes. He was strong of will when attacking, but now that it was his turn to take a shot, he was defenseless. It was always a sad sight to see, someone experiencing this helplessness for the first time, but that was Shogo now, edging away as best as he could. But that only added to the pain. Shogo had nothing to undo the Chaos Eater around him. The yellow aura drilled further into his body, making the flesh on his hands and legs rot into nothing—but still he tried to get away from his foe.

Geld didn’t care. He had other things on his mind—such as Hakuro, whom he could see casually walking up to him.

“You still aren’t done, Geld?”

“Ah, Sir Hakuro. You are finished? I was just about to strike the final blow.”

Now, even Shogo could see that the knights around them were strewn across the battlefield.

“You—you assholes! What the hell did you do to Kyoya?!”

“Him? He’s dead,” came the matter-of-fact reply as Hakuro tossed something at him. It was Kyoya’s head, rolling along the ground there, and it provided all the evidence necessary.

“Ah, aaahhhhhhhhhh !!”

Shogo attempted to flee at full speed, no longer caring about the pain in his limbs. Deep down, he knew he’d be meeting the same fate, and it terrorized him.

Goddamn it! God… Why did this happen to me?!

The pain was as intense as the terror and confusion.

Shit… If this keeps up, I’m dead…

His mind raced, trying to figure out a way to survive this. Then, out of nowhere, he had a brilliant idea. He recalled that there, in the tent in front of him, was another otherworlder. So he ran, placing all hopes upon this new plan.

Raising the tent flap, he found Kirara relaxing inside.

“Hey, you done? ’Cause you sure took your sweet time with—”

“Shut up! Kirara,” Shogo said as he ran up to her, “I’m sorry, but you’re gonna have to die for me!”

“Huhhh? What’re you talking about, you dumbass? Why’re you picking a fight with me—?”

Kirara took it as a joke. It had the effect of greatly shortening her life span.

Clench—

“Nh… Wha…? You’re choking me…”

She had left herself wide open, and now Shogo’s hands were fully engaged with her. She struggled mightily, even as Shogo’s tremendous power shattered her neck—but in another moment, her resistance grew weaker.

Memories of her life in Japan flashed before her eyes. The boyfriend she liked. The friends she got along with. The parents who put up with her selfishness. All Kirara wanted to do was go home. Razen had told her himself: “Do what I say, and I’ll develop a spell to whisk you back someday.” To her, this world wasn’t reality, and that meant she could do whatever she wanted—otherwise, she’d have to seriously contemplate all the crimes she’d committed. All the murders. She just wasn’t mentally mature enough to deal with that. She had run from her crimes, from the killings she did after a moment of emotion—and now time was running out for her.

The world went white. The pain was already gone as a cavalcade of familiar faces greeted her…

“…Mom…!”

And this was the end of Kirara Mizutani, the otherworlder who turned her back on her weaknesses and blamed everyone else for them but herself.

Hakuro and Geld had given chase, only to find Shogo in the midst of killing his ally Kirara.

“…An abominable deed. You have fallen that far?”

“No need for pity now. You are no warrior.”

And then a transformation occurred.

Confirmed. Unique skill Survivor … successfully obtained.

Shogo’s desire to live was the trigger for a new power within him, snagged at the expense of Kirara’s soul. The yellow aura eating into Shogo’s body dissipated as he rapidly healed himself. This was Ultraspeed Regeneration in action, one of Survivor’s subskills.

“The World Language… So that’s what he was after?”

“Sir Rimuru described killing your allies as the greatest crime there is. Your deeds are the work of a soulless minion, lower than a monster himself.”

“Shut up, you worthless maggots! Winning’s what matters, isn’t it? It’s easy! I got the power for it!”

Shogo screamed as he unleashed both his unique skills—Berserker for the attack and Survivor for the defense. It fooled him into believing he was invincible. The sheer force—and the Ultraspeed Regeneration and the resistance to all types of elements. As long as a blow didn’t kill him instantly, he had invincible force and the ability to regenerate himself at any time.

Yes. Even if Hakuro used one of his sword strikes to lop his head off, he’d be right back to normal in an instant. Even if Geld used his superhuman strength to smash both his arms, they’d grow right back and be even stronger.

“How d’you like that, you piece-of-shit monsters?! This is it! This is my full power!!”

And he couldn’t be blamed for bragging to the skies about it. As a combination, his powers were like none seen before.

But there was one thing Shogo didn’t realize: No matter how lofty the heights you achieved in the world, there was always someone above you.

“Shall I lend a hand?”

“No need, Sir Hakuro. Please go and support Sir Rigur and the others.”

“Assuming such support is necessary,” Hakuro said as he stepped back and gave Geld the right of way. The orc strode forward and prepared to strike.

“Huhhh? You’re gonna take me on by yourself? ’Cause right now, I’d be more than happy to whip both your asses at once!”

“You seem to have confidence in your martial arts. So be it. I will fight you with my bare hands as well.”

“Oh, quit acting like you’re so much better than me. You’re just lookin’ for an excuse for when you lose!”

Such was the way Shogo’s mind worked. It made him go immediately on the offensive. His face was brimming with confidence, testing out his new powers—but that ease of mind didn’t last long. It was a bit harder for him to die now, and he was ever so slightly powered up, but that still didn’t make him a foe for Geld to concern himself with.

“Orgggh!”

Geld had more than ample strength to tear off one of Shogo’s arms and use his free hand to drive a fist into his stomach.

“Ah. Yes, you can heal yourself faster than I can. Now let’s see how much you can stand at once.”

As he said it, he wrapped twin curls of Chaos Eater around his fists and beat them into Shogo. Over and over again, before he could recover, Geld pummeled him into oblivion. Thanks to the Survivor skill, Shogo was enjoying Cancel Pain privileges, preventing him from feeling any of the anguish these injuries provided him. But Geld just kept on punching, doing away with all weapons.

By its very nature, Chaos Eater bit its way through everything—damaging not only Shogo’s material body but his spiritual one as well. The unique skill Survivor was capable of regenerating all bodily systems, but a life-form’s spiritual needs were beyond its feature set. Indeed, before Geld’s unrelenting attack, it was only a matter of time before Shogo’s frail spirit was against the ropes.

“S-stop, stop! Pleathe, thtop!”

It hadn’t even been ten minutes, but to Shogo, it felt like an hours-long torture session. Selfish words fell out of his mouth, seeking salvation for him and him alone. Geld and Hakuro were almost too disgusted to watch.

And that was the exact moment Shogo’s heart and soul broke.

“I suppose it is over.”

“It is. Now to finally ease his pain for—”

“N-no! Wait a thecond! I—I was jutht kidding! I didn’t really want to; I—I—I jutht got carried away… Help me…”

Shogo, faced with this cruel reality, fell into confused terror. In this world, simply being an otherworlder gave you overwhelmingly preferential treatment. That only fed his arrogance, twisting his personality beyond repair. And even more importantly, he and the others summoned into the Kingdom of Farmus all suffered from the same affliction: a terminal case of egotism.



And it had led to this.

“I came over to see what all this commotion was about…and Shogo is the last man standing, is he? My, my, look at that! Perhaps I misestimated the power of these monsters after all.” Now another older man stepped in front of Shogo.

He had on his robe, woven with magical fibers, a staff with untold stores of magical force in one hand. This was Razen, court sorcerer and the greatest magician in all of Farmus. With a hand in the air, he used his aspectual magic to cast a Magic Barrier in front of Geld, nullifying his attack. This spell was normally used to build a shield over the caster, but Razen could adapt it to block his enemies’ moves as well.

“Nh…! R-Ratthen, you came to thave me…?!”

Shogo clung to the sorcerer’s back. Razen replied with a nod before returning his eyes to Geld and Hakuro.

“Well, well, well. No wonder our otherworlders weren’t enough to secure victory. I find it hard to believe, but you are both A-ranked and a calamity-level threat. I do not like our prospects. Time to fall back for now.”

Then, with the Magic Barrier still in effect, he began to chant a high-level teleportation spell. Unlike Warp Portal, which required a magic circle to base itself on, this allowed the caster to define any point they liked to serve as the jump site. You had to be at least wizard-level to use this forbidden spell, and Razen’s ease in completing it indicated the full extent of his power and experience.

Geld attempted to give chase. Hakuro stopped him.

“No rash moves, Geld. This is no also-ran.”

“…What?!”

Geld faithfully followed Hakuro’s advice—and, before him, the very air tore itself open. Razen had installed a trap in the Magic Barrier, setting it to explode after a given time delay.

“Kah-ha-ha! Very shrewd of you to notice that. I should have paid you all much more caution than I did. Perhaps we should not be so optimistic about this battle after all…”

He had been wary of Geld’s magical energy, but now, he acted like he noticed the threat of Hakuro for the first time.

“You sly fox. You’ve been cautious of me from the very start…”

“Oh, not at all, my dear ogre mage. It is only natural, after all, to spot this orc lord first in terms of brute strength. But now it is time. I would love to speak with you further, but my spell seems to be completed, so I had best take my leave. We may meet again in battle, assuming you survive…”

“I rather doubt that,” Hakuro shot back, “because the battlefield you are headed for will be attended to by our master. You have all gone too far this time. You have enraged the one creature in this world you should never have riled. I pity you. Your death will not be an easy one.”

“Kah-ha-ha! Enough of your silly bluffing—but if you mean it as a warning, I will keep it in mind. Farewell!”

With that, Razen disappeared, carrying Shogo with him. Silence returned to the scene, although the sounds of battle could still be heard from outside the tent.

“Are you sure it was best,” Geld said, “to leave that sorcerer Razen be…?”

“I imagine not, but if we fought him, then either you, I, or at worst both of us might have died. He had another hidden magic queued up for us, one set to trigger in the event of his death.”

“He did…? And the magic was that much of a threat?”

“Likely nuclear in nature,” he muttered bitterly. “The ultimate in aspectual magic. Rigur and Gobta are here as well, and we cannot have them caught up in it. Now is not the time for ill-advised gambles.”

Heavengaze gave him a better sense of the magic around him, from the flow of magicules to the extent of its force, than even Magic Sense could allow. It told him that the area beneath Razen’s rib cage was packed with highly dense magic—enough to set off a dangerous, forbidden spell, by Hakuro’s estimation.

“I see…”

“It would not be an issue for Sir Rimuru, but we will still need to prepare for this. We must tell everyone about this dangerous figure before us.”

Geld nodded. “I understand. I will relay the news to my own forces.”

Then they both went outside to assist in the final mopping-up of the western troops.

With Shogo in tow, Razen safely made it back to Folgen’s side at their headquarters. Triggering several powerful magics consecutively in a short time filled him with a sense of fatigue like none he’d experienced in recent years, but now was no time to rest. He had work to do.

“Th-thanks, Razen. I’m sorry.”

“Forget about it, Shogo. You are one of my most valuable tools. One of our kingdom’s most precious pieces of war machinery.”

“Y-yeah… I lost this time, but not in the next round. I’ll show ’em!”

“Very good,” Razen gently replied—even as his eyes shone coldly, something Shogo failed to notice. “Your injuries seem to have taken care of themselves, but let me cast some magic to help you rest better. You need to recover your stamina first.”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

He accepted Razen’s offer without question—and, without hesitation, Razen cast his spell. It was the illusory magic Mental Strike, a move that shattered the target’s spiritual and astral bodies. Shogo’s spiritual corpus was already heavily damaged by Geld’s attack; this was nothing he could withstand, and he trusted Razen too much to have any of his own resistances up.

So the otherworlder Shogo Taguchi saw his end—doomed to die either way, between his weakness and his egotism. But this death was not one of the body but one of the heart.

With the still Shogo in front of him, Razen prepared his final great magic of the day.

“Rather earlier than planned, isn’t it, Sir Razen?”

“My hands are tied, Folgen. The monsters unnerved him so much that he’d hardly be useful to us any longer. The time had come.”

“Heh-heh-heh… Still a pitiful sight, though. He really believed he was the strongest man in the world, didn’t he?”

“It appears that way. And look at Kyoya. He honestly believed he could defeat Hinata Sakaguchi, head of the paladins. With his strength.”

“Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don’t make me laugh. Not even I could take her, and that little upstart expected victory?”

Folgen could at least put up a fight against her thanks to the fact that he himself was an otherworlder, summoned by a younger Razen decades ago. He had no locking curse restricting his soul; in terms of their relationship, he was both friends and cooperative partners with Razen. Even to someone like that, Hinata’s strength was in its own realm, enough to convince him without trying that he had no chance.

“It is a pity, though,” stated Razen. “Kyoya’s Severer skill slipped through our fingers before I could pass it on to you.”

“That’s fine. There’s always next time.”

Folgen’s own unique skill was called Spearhead. It gave him special insight into the strength of the forces he led, letting him select from and obtain the skills of any dead member of his force within eyeshot. He could earn only a limited number of skills this way, however, which annoyed him to no end.

“Indeed there is,” Razen agreed. “The stronger among our forces always seem to foster powerful skills within them, but look at how selfish they all are! The one fly in the ointment. Summoning at random is much easier, but it never results in anyone strong enough—not that their personalities matter then, since we can always sacrifice them and seize their powers.”

“No doubt. We’ve constantly spoiled them, treating them like the linchpins of our armies they are. I see no reason for them to complain about it.”

The two shared a laugh.

And this, right here, was the whole crux of Farmus’s problem. It wasn’t just the otherworlders—the summoners who called the kingdom home were just as egotistical, assuming by birthright they were the strongest out there.

Razen smiled as he continued his work. “But this may be a blessing in disguise,” he said. “At the very end, Shogo did help me out a great deal. I’m not sure what happened, exactly, but he seems to have obtained another unique skill. Now, then…”

The job was almost done. He was resetting Shogo’s brain, overwriting it with his own memory. Once he transported the soul over, he was good to go.

“You sure you’re all right? There’s no chance of it failing?”

“Don’t worry. This isn’t the first time. My teacher, Lord Gadora, reincarnated himself by literally birthing his soul all over again. No greater secret magic out there. Compared to that , casting Possession couldn’t be simpler.”

Razen had completely destroyed Shogo’s astral body in order to take over his physical one. He then destroyed his brain and rebuilt it again with Survivor. It was a total blank, with none of its soul’s memories restored, and now Razen’s own memories were burned into it. All he had to do now was implant his soul into Shogo’s body.

The Possession spell was a simplified version of Reincarnation, the mysterious, esoteric skill first woven by Razen’s master, the great sorcerer Gadora. It was an original skill of Razen’s, and now it was activated. This was how the head sorcerer of Farmus managed to serve his nation over all these many years, transferring himself from powerful body to powerful body. With Shogo’s, he was now reborn as the perfect combination of indomitable spirit and undefeatable muscle, the strongest magic-born in all of Farmus’s history.

“Ahhh… It does feel so nice to be in a younger body again.”

“Heh-heh-heh! You’re sounding much older than you look right now.”

“Enough of that. Now to report to His Highness and show him what I am reborn as.”

He slipped back into the robe he had discarded earlier, staff in hand. There was a new spring in his step as he boldly sauntered off, brimming with confidence and aspiration over the new strength he had. It was enough to amaze even Folgen, reinforcing his confidence in his friend and partner.

Losing three otherworlders, a hefty chunk of their nation’s fighting force, stung badly. But Razen’s strength put him beyond the realm of special A rank at this point, so it was hardly worth lamenting. Right now, Razen was confident he could take Hakuro and Geld, those two enemy monsters he’d run into earlier, and easily trounce them.

Deep inside, he even had a suspicion that he could challenge a demon lord, the so-called S ranks. Then he recalled the words of warning Hakuro left him with.

Have I enraged the one creature in this world I shouldn’t have? That witch dispatched the monsters’ so-called master long ago, no? He’s…actually alive?

The suspicion made him stop in his tracks.

“What?”

“Oh, ah, nothing.”

He immediately started walking again.

…I’m letting my mind paralyze me. Perhaps he is more of a menace than I thought, but I’m overthinking matters. And even if he did survive that witch, I can just dispatch him myself.

He smiled boldly as he approached the pavilion where his king awaited.

On the third day, with the sun hanging in the middle of the sky, the nightmare finally began for the Kingdom of Farmus.

A legion of troops was marching below me—but in my view, they were nothing but sacrifices to feed upon for my evolution.

These were the ones who got Shion and the rest. Normally, I suppose I should give some kind of warning or indication that I would attack. But I already knew these guys had declared war on us, and if they were marching for town, I imagined they were ready to die for the cause. Besides, this wasn’t even a war. I was planning to consume every single one of them. Fair and square kind of lost its meaning if I intended for there to be no survivors.

This human garbage wrecked my territory. The least they could do now was enjoy the honor of helping with my evolution before dying.

I was hovering in midair, in human form with my mask on and my wings out. Control Gravity let me unconsciously maintain this position as I peered downward, gauging the situation.

As I did, Benimaru sent a Thought Communication reporting that the magical devices running the barrier were destroyed. Hakuro also informed me of a dangerous sorcerer he’d encountered, but I didn’t see the fuss. I’d just take care of him alongside the rest. Everyone else was back in town, staying on the lookout to make sure there weren’t any detached forces. It was my turn.

It had taken a little time, but Analyze and Assess had wrapped up its work on the forces below. I now had an accurate picture of their strength and numbers, and I had also finished calculations on a new magical spell. Everything was ready.

…Shall we, then?

I deployed a large-scale magic circle, big enough to cover the entire Farmus force. It was powered by Anti-Magic Area, a great magic I’d picked up from Mjurran. It was about thirty miles in diameter, and it couldn’t have been more perfectly positioned. It covered the entire atmosphere up to ten feet above the ground, cutting the area off from the sky and the earth. Now the enemy could cast no magic.

All of this was just to prevent the force from fleeing. I didn’t want to let a single one of them go, so I blocked any chance of their magically teleporting away. Now it was time to deploy the main course—a vast killing magic, the perfect weapon to seal the deal with. It was called:

“Die! May the anger of the gods sear through your very souls! …Megiddo!!”

Dancing, swirling rays of light rained down from the heavens, repeatedly reflecting and refracting near the ground and plunging through the knights before they could react.

There would be no opening bell to signal the beginning of the quiet massacre.

Usually, a military force in this world would deploy underneath a protective barrier established by the magical platoon attached to it. This was known as legion magic, and it put the force on notice against any type of magical element. The right kind of so-called “nuclear magic” from long range could change the tide of battle even if there was a lopsided difference in force involved, so most military marches in this world were done while keeping a close eye on magic from any number of distances.

Farmus, of course, had made thorough preparations along those lines, keeping up a stiff guard against all magic it could think of. Considering they were marching for a nation of monsters (including some that ranked even beyond A), they’d be deranged not to.

But none of that prep work had any meaning against my new magic.

Barriers in this world primarily worked on the principle of blocking the flow of magicules. It required a different approach from resisting the laws of physics, something I discovered when I analyzed the barrier.

It was simple, if you thought about it. If a barrier could block a heat blast of thousands of degrees, then what exactly was the barrier doing to resist it?

The aspectual magic of this world worked by intervening into the laws of physics, through the careful control of magicules. If you wanted to block such magic, you could just erect a barrier to keep those magicules from streaming in. Any offense against that barrier would have to outclass it in strength, or else it couldn’t apply any of its effects beyond the barrier. The magic would simply fail to set off. Things like Charybdis’s Magic Interference were applications of this principle.

Elemental magic, on the other hand, rewrote the laws of physics with the powers of spiritual intervention. It didn’t work on such large scales of force and distance, and the barrier had been built to block that type of magic as well. It was a pure test of strength between elementals, which made it easy to block your opponent if need be. As long as you were prepared for ambushes, it’d just devolve into an arm-wrestling match.

Really, with any type of magic, it all came down to figuring out the principle and going beyond it to neutralize the threat. That was why barriers like these were prepared to deal with just about anything, usually stacking at least two types of protective layers above each other.

To deal with this, I thought outside the box a little and used magic to create a pure form of physical energy. Between my experience with Charybdis and my analysis of Control Magic, I had a general understanding of how the triggering of magic worked. Getting to see Hinata’s Disintegration in action was also an inspiration for the final concept. It all allowed me to have the Great Sage develop a magic effective enough to poke a hole through every type of defensive magic. I had just finished the final adjustments on it, and now it was deployed.

Over a thousand or so droplets of water were floating around me. I had deployed a dozen-ish large ones up above, shaped like convex lenses. These droplets gathered the sunlight overhead, honing it into thin rays of light and refracting it against the mirrorlike droplets below. This focused all the light upon a single point, where it was then further condensed by the convex-lens droplets down below me before being channeled toward its target. The temperature of these thin rays, no more than a pencil’s width in diameter, was several thousand degrees—more than enough heat to take a person’s life.

The droplets were water elementals I summoned and transformed for my needs. With my magic, each one of them took in the sun’s energy, refracted it, and collected it. And that was how Megiddo, my new physically driven magic spell, worked.

The first wild blast of light led to a helpless death for over one thou sand knights. Their ranks began to fall apart below me—Megiddo was terrorizing them, or so I hoped. But that wasn’t the end. Optimizing my calculations, I automatically adjusted the positions of the relevant droplets and set off the second blast. Another thousand or so fell, unable to resist the searing heat.

That was the really scary thing about this magic, actually—how little energy it cost me to orchestrate. The convex lens that served as the final launching point was vaporized every time by the heat, but I could instantly provide another one. That was what the water elementals were for. And gathering water vapor from the air didn’t take much work.

Rebuilding a lens took less than half a minute, so it was even possible to launch a volley of air strikes. All I had to do was gather more water and adjust my aim. It cost me nothing more than whatever it took to summon elementals and keep the machine purring—this spell, for the most part, ran on sunlight, the purest symbol of natural energy. It meant I could use it only during the daytime, but these forces were kind enough to march upon Tempest close to high noon. All potential issues had been addressed. Now I just had to clean up the garbage below me.

The soundless bolts of light-speed force offered the knights no chance to react as they toasted them. The massacre went on. Magic Sense gave me a perfect picture of their locations, letting me strike them right where they were most vulnerable. The only thing their barrier obstructed was magicules, so I luckily had a clear view of them all.

Whether a mercenary clad in crude leather armor or a knight in government-issue metal plate, death came to all equally. Occasionally, I would deliberately aim a beam at someone’s arm or leg or torso, making them scream in despair to add to the chaos. It only made the scene more gruesome. Terror was everywhere now.

What I did not aim for were the fancier wagons and tents. I didn’t know where the king was. If I killed him, I’d never be able to make him confess his sins. I wasn’t that compassionate. Anyone stupid enough to incur my wrath needed to be amply rewarded for it.

A mere five minutes or so after this one-sided strike began, two-thirds of the advancing force were out of commission. That meant over ten thousand lives had been snuffed out by me, their souls harvested.

Now ought to be a good time…

With a flutter of my wings, I descended to Earth, ready to deliver yet more despair to the fools before me.

When Razen spotted the Anti-Magic Area deployed by the enemy, he was amazed at the sheer size of it. But he paid it no further mind, instantly recognizing that it didn’t matter much to them.

Unlike in the Dwarven Kingdom, whose magical forces were the star player in their offense, Farmus’s magicians were tasked strictly with handling defense first, followed by strengthening and support spells. Magic that enhanced the bodies of targets was largely impervious to jamming, which meant having offensive magic robbed of them was not a major problem. Plus, they already had assorted legion magic in effect, and dispulsion magic would be the only way to get rid of that. An Anti-Magic Area made it impossible to cast any new magic within its range; it had no effect on things already cast.

Razen checked one more time to make sure all their defensive magic was still operational. It was.

“Hmm. Looks all right. Our enemy is rather confident in their close-range combat skills, then?”

“Sounds like a job for me. Let me drum up my knights’ morale for a—”

Just when Folgen was replying to the sorcerer’s question, a beam of light slammed down. Razen could barely comprehend what had happened—not just him but everyone in the area. There was a dull ting of impact, and the guard sentry behind them fell, a tiny round hole right between his eyebrows.

“Ah…?! What was that?”

Razen found himself shouting out in surprise.

“Stand strong! Protect His Highness!!”

Immediately heeding Folgen’s orders, the knights sprang into action, trying to bottle up their trepidation inside. But it was pointless. That first beam was just a test firing; what followed was a brilliant, dazzling array of light.

In the blink of an eye, soldiers began to fall anew. There was no time to heal them. The beams ran right through their vitals, killing them instantly.

“Gahhh!! My arm—my arm’s…!!”

“Help! Help meeeee!”

“Aaaaaahhh! Where—where’s it coming from?!”

Those unlucky enough to be caught up in firing range cried and begged for mercy—or fell into panic at the sight of their unresponsive squad mates. In a single moment, it was pandemonium across the battlefield. Their spirits were once high, their minds confident in victory—but that was all long gone.

The leader of the Farmus Mercenary Brigades bitterly clucked his tongue.

His old soldiers, all veterans of more than a few intense battles in their time, were being run through by these beams of light out of nowhere, killed instantly. The new, younger recruits were running for their lives, driven by terror and barely in control of their senses. It happened in an instant—the blinding light dancing around them, everything within range of it dying all too easily.

Resistance was futile, and after a few moments, the second wave arrived. He saw his right-hand man, the vice captain of the force, fall before him—and that finally made the leader realize this was an enemy attack. Immediately, from the bottom of his heart, he regretted ever joining this expedition.

Goddamn them all! What the hell is behind this?!

There was nothing he could do to counter this thing that went well beyond his understanding. But the mercenary leader had luck on his side. The third merciless wave that visited the squad killed him painlessly. He was a famed fighter, lauded as an A-ranked champion to the world, and he lost his life before he even knew what had happened.

In response to this emergency, the anti-monster Temple Knights affiliated with the Western Holy Church stuck to their guns.

“All troops, fall into rows! Every group, stand in close defensive formation and launch your Multilayer Barriers! Show the enemy that no attack can faze our holy might!!”

They were trained to move like this, instantly reacting despite all the friends they’d lost. It was a kind of dedication that amazed anyone who saw it. But just as they built their barriers, firm and confident, they all had their heads shot through and died.

It was as if someone was ridiculing them from up high, showing them how useless their defenses were. And staying in close formation wound up being suicidal. Having so many troops in a tight space allowed one beam to kill several knights at once.

No faith in the gods above would be strong enough to have any meaning in the face of Megiddo. By the time the fifth wave subsided, the Temple Knights were annihilated.

The strong and the weak trembled in unison. There was nothing they could do. Even the Farmus Noble Knight Federation, that group of hardy young Farmus noble-born, had collapsed, seeking any kind of escape they could. They were even attacking one another in a crazed, ugly display—but it was that ugliness that allowed them to survive the longest. Whether that was lucky for them or not is a topic for debate.

The magicians among the Noble Knight Federation—Razen’s personal apprentices—were forced to wallow in their helplessness as they died. They were unable to cast magic, and instead it was magic being endlessly thrown upon them. Or was it even magic at all, really? They just didn’t know, and it pained them.

Even at the very end of their lives, on the brink of death, they were students. All they wanted to do was know. And they couldn’t.

At the end of light wave number seven, half of them were dead. Razen and Folgen stared blankly at the scene for a single moment, then resolved to regroup with their king and leader.

There was no longer any way to maintain order among the ranks. Everyone was too busy trying to save their own hides. Their best bet right now was to hasten over to their king and keep him safe. They still had no idea what these beams of light were. Even with their intellectual senses turned up to maximum, it was beyond their grasp. The moment something bright passed by, someone else was fallen. Even the afterglow took precious time to be perceived in their minds. The speed of it all was simply unimaginable.

But Razen had another theory about this. By his observation, a single beam could kill at most a few knights at once. He could tell there was some set of laws behind this light. If there was a wall, something he could use to cut off the light, that’s all he would need. Even if it was—worst-case scenario—a wall of humanity, the king would still be protected. And as for himself? He was willing to bet he could withstand this light.

So he and Folgen pushed toward the king’s tent, shouting the whole way:

“Where is King Edmaris? Is His Highness safe?!”

King Edmaris was doing everything he could to quell the wellspring of terror robbing him of his very breath. He had to save his dignity as a monarch at all costs. His mind raced, his thoughts chaotic.

There was now no denying it: This campaign was a failure. Even if he wanted to escape alive, developments no longer allowed for that. He just wanted to scream, How did this happen?! but there was no time for that.

“Reyhiem, what will…? What should we do?”

“We—we must remain calm. We must remain calm!”

The king and the archbishop hugged each other inside their ornate tent, shivering. An attendant who had stepped outside to gauge the situation—literally just a moment ago—had already been incinerated.

It wasn’t so long ago that he had seen off the advance forces, waiting for the knights who would march forth from behind them. They all seemed so confident, so reliable. He was sure this campaign would end in victory, part of the path to glorious honor for him. But a few minutes were all it took to turn the tables. All it took to fill the fields with the dead.

The sight was so detached from reality that King Edmaris couldn’t even comprehend how it had happened. All he could do was sit in his tent and quiver. And Archbishop Reyhiem was exactly the same. He had no interest in protecting the king—he stayed here simply because he imagined it was safest for him. He had no proof of that, but he wound up being correct. None of that merciless light had shone upon them yet.

“Your Highness! Are you all right?”

“Knight Captain Folgen is here for you, my lord!”

“Ah, Folgen! How great it is to see you! And you too, Shogo. Please, please let us get out of here at once. We must return home and regroup our forces!”

“Indeed. I have no idea what has occurred. We must leave at once, or we may be caught up in the carnage as well!”

With two of Farmus’s greatest fighters on hand, King Edmaris could breathe at least a slight sigh of relief. He ran up to Folgen, practically clinging to him.

“Now, please, hurry! Where is Razen? We need his teleportation magic if we want to—”

The ninth wave of light struck.

“Aaaah!!”

The king squatted down, arms covering his head, as his good archbishop sank to the floor.

“Please, Your Highness, stay calm. Your sorcerer stands right before you.”

“…Shogo? No, is that…Razen?”

“That is correct, sire.”

“Ah… Ahhh! Oh, Razen, Razen, thank you for coming! Now, please, we must go home at once!”

“One moment, sire. There are a number of things I wish to report to you, but for now, I will keep it brief. To put it succinctly, right now, we are unable to cast magic within this area. We will need to somehow assemble our knights and use them as shields as we fight our way back to safety.”

“What?!”

“Um, are you sure about this?” Reyhiem ventured. “We have, um, our current force numbers…”

“Do not worry, Archbishop,” chimed Folgen. “Thanks to my Spearhead unique skill, I can force our surviving troops to group together. They will form a wall of humanity to keep yourself and His Highness safe.”

“Ah, ah, ahhhh, I knew I could count on you, Folgen!”

“Indeed, I would rather rely on no one else right now, Sir Folgen!”

“Very good. I will relay our status to my men. Prepare to retreat!”

“It shall be done!”

“Yes! Godspeed to you, Sir Folgen!”

Folgen nodded back and ran outside, King Edmaris looking expectantly on.

“So how should we prepare?” he asked the man who looked for all the world like Shogo next to him.

Razen nodded and provided the king and Reyhiem two pairs of shoes—Winged Shoes, magical in nature, which boosted the wearer’s running speed and reduced their fatigue. Someone well trained in their usage could almost look like they were flying through the air, but the not-so-battle-hardened king could not expect that. He would need to run during this retreat, though, so anything that could make his flight more efficient was a godsend. Even within the Anti-Magic Area, magic that had already been activated would continue undisturbed. Razen had confirmed long ago that magic items weren’t affected at all in one.

“Now, sire—the next time a wave of light strikes, we will make a break for the exit outside. Are you all right with this, Sir Reyhiem?”

“Yes. I am ready.”

“Understood, Sir Razen!”

They packed only what they needed with them and waited. Soon, the tenth—and final—bout of dancing light dazzled the battlefield anew.

“Now!”

Under Razen’s signal, the three of them ran off. Outside, the first thing they saw was Folgen’s broad, burly back. When King Edmaris caught sight of it, he shouted at his knight captain:

“How is it going?!”

He was ranked beyond A as an otherworlder, a battle-hardened veteran and the pride of all Farmus. As strongest in the nation, the proud Folgen was one of King Edmaris’s closest confidants and a man he knew he could always trust. But Folgen offered him no answer.

“Folgen? Folgen, what is wrong? Answer me!”

Fear, confusion, and anger intermixed in his voice as the king slapped the knight captain on the shoulder. Then, in a single motion, the large, monolithic frame tilted and fell to the ground. A closer look revealed a hole in both his temples, running in a straight line from right to left. It was burned through, instantly cauterizing the wound and preventing much in the way of blood loss.

“Ee, ee, eeaaahhhhhhhh !!”

The king let out a loud yelp of terror, lost his footing, and practically crawled back into the tent. His choice of stance meant his Winged Shoes went to waste, as he demonstrated not even a shade of regal dignity. A warm liquid dripped out from his crotch as he sobbed, eyes and nose dripping like a faucet. And as they did, he knew: He was going to die. If he stayed here, he was dead.

Even as he tried to flee in terror, he kept falling down, his legs failing him. But there was no one there to notice. The knights who Folgen had called together had been wiped out with the tenth wave. Anyone still surviving had lost their sense of reason, too focused on saving themselves. Order and discipline were a thing of the past. The knights could easily boast of being the mightiest military power of the Western Nations, but now they were powerless, lowlier than a disorderly mob.

All of them now tasted their powerlessness in equal measure. The terror should only have been expected. In a single instant, the absolute superiority over monsters they enjoyed had collapsed into a heap.

The feel of the battle had now changed.

The soldiers, running amok in all directions, stopped moving, their eyes turning toward a single point in the sky. King Edmaris was among them.

The cause of this scourge was there, a human figure flying down from above with its bat-like black wings. It was not that tall, and the mask it wore had a clear crack that made it almost look like it was crying. It had on a kimono of pure black, giving it a beautiful, almost divine look. The only obvious weapon was a straight blade slung at its waist—shockingly light gear for a battle like this—but the drive and ambition that oozed from its every pore provided all the explanation needed to overturn common sense. It proved that even the most elite of Farmus’s forces were worthy of a fate no better than a bug’s, crushed under the heel of this figure as if it took a leisurely stroll across the park.

The instincts of every witness on the scene told them all the same thing. Is that a demon…? No, it…

…It’s a demon lord!

Now, finally, King Edmaris realized the greatest mistake he had made. He should never have prodded this wasp’s nest. He should have forged formal relations with them, the way the kingdom of Blumund had. That outfit—and that beautiful, fetching cloth it was made from. And that appearance—that presence. This was surely the leader of the nation.

So Hinata, that witch from the Holy Church, failed after all?!

The conclusion made King Edmaris’s face turn pale. But perhaps, the terror had gone so far past its limits that he had cycled back into calmness. He had the capacity to think now. That witch was lauded as the most powerful in the Western Nations. She was tasked with defeating the master of the monster kingdom, and that master was now flitting in the air above him. He had never heard of that cold, calculating witch ever failing to execute her orders before.

The voice of a dumbfounded Razen echoed in his ears.

“The master…of the monster nation?! You…you were truly alive all this time…?”

Realizing that his chief sorcerer was of the same mind convinced the king once and for all. The witch had failed. And, he saw now, the monster before them had more than enough strength to make that happen.

But that could wait. This monster bore the appearance, the air of a demon lord. Which meant, perhaps…

What do I do? How can I survive this?!

King Edmaris racked his brain. Then, like a flash of light, an idea appeared.

This might be our best chance! I am a king, a monarch. If I can phrase this to sound like I’ve come to negotiate, I’m sure he will listen to me. The report said he was soft, an easy mark!

It seemed like a brilliant idea. It was not. It was the opposite of that, and it made his thoughts veer in ever more terrifying directions.

If he’s willing to happily negotiate with a tiny little speck like Blumund, why, he’ll prostrate himself before me when he hears the king of the great land of Farmus speaking to him!

He was failing to read the situation, reasoning with himself strictly based on what he hoped would happen…but that didn’t matter to him. He simply clung to the shallow desire to return home and prepare a counterattack. And it made him take action, instead of realizing how full of wishful thinking his head was.

Once I was ten feet above the ground, I realized how utterly razed the whole area was. It was exactly what I had pictured and calculated out with the Great Sage, mind you, but even I wondered a bit if I’d gone too far.

…Wait. No. Can’t let my mind waver over something like this.

The survivors who spotted me sank to the ground in fear.

“Aaah, help, help me!”

I could hear what sounded like people pleading for their lives. I gave each of them a shot between their eyes for their trouble.

It did take some time to get used to things, but now I could control the beams of light like second nature. The key was in the angle of refraction. You could fire all you wanted for the barest minimum of energy. Focusing your heat source on a single point cooked it up to several thousand degrees, and that was more than enough to take down a man or two.

Once I grasped the concept, I could always strike from the most optimal angle whenever I wanted. There’s a slight time lag to deal with, but we’re essentially talking the speed of light, so you can’t dodge it once you see it. I could fire it from six thousand miles away, and it’d still take about 0.034 seconds to find its target. Far faster than a human being could obtain the visual information and transmit it via the nervous system to their brain.

I couldn’t control and aim it with any accuracy without the computations of the Great Sage. Gotta give the guy a hand. It made me realize all over again how amazing it was. If someone fired this on me at close range, I’d have trouble evading it even with the Sage’s help. I could comprehend what it was the moment I caught sight of it, so maybe I could just barely get out of the way in time…but it’d probably come down to luck.

For humans, there was just no chance. And when the tenth wave was launched, I heard a certain voice for the first time in a while.

Confirmed. The unique skill Merciless is … successfully obtained.

It wasn’t the Great Sage but the World Language, popping in after a long hiatus.

Uh, dude, I really don’t need that skill. I know I have it and all now, but still. But just as I was about to check what it did, someone down there started shouting at me.

“W-wait! Wait! Are you the master of this domain? I am Edmaris, supreme ruler of the Kingdom of Farmus! Bow before me, for we have matters to discuss!”

It was some scruffy-looking old man.

Addressing me at a time like this, he was either brave or just a reckless fool. His crotch was all wet, which made me assume he had pissed himself at some point. Between all the tears, snot, and spittle on his face, he probably had seen better days. And this was a king? What a joke.

“Oh? You a body double or something? Don’t worry. I won’t lay a hand on the real thing.”

I was just about to open fire on him, not wanting to waste my time on idiots like this, but something stopped me. What if he is the real thing?

“That—-that is no body double!”

Huh? Someone else now, just as old and even seedier-looking.

“It is not! I swear it by my name as Reyhiem, archbishop of the Western Holy Church!”

Taking a closer look, neither of this pair appeared to be knights. Their clothing was too ornate for that. Whew! That was close. They were more “real” than I thought—but let’s check, just in case.

“All right. Well, I’m gonna kill everybody except for you—you’re definitely sure there’s not some other real king around here?”

“I am the one and true ruler of my realm! But…but everyone ?”

“Eep! W-wait, wait! At—at least spare my life as well, please! I wield great power within the Holy Church bureaucracy. I will gladly testify before all of them that not one of you is an enemy to mankind!”

The seedy-looking guy who called himself Archbishop Reyhiem was practically praying to me. It’s not like sparing him would change matters much, but maybe I could use him somehow… And he definitely seemed important, for sure. Let’s keep him alive for now.

Which left the other one…

I gave him a quick glance. The man who called himself the king instantly noticed. “W-wait!” he prattled. “I told you—we have matters to discuss!”

Well, all right. I have a positive ID now. Let’s hear him out.

“What matters are those, old man? I’ll listen to what you got.”

It was a nice show of generosity on my part, I thought. But the guy took it as an invitation to shout his head off at me.

“H-how dare you! Such rudeness! I am the leader of the great Kingdom of Farmus! Normally, I would never even deign to speak to the likes of you. Now I’ve granted you that right, and that is how you treat me? …But very well. This time, I shall—”

Then I shot his arm off.

I dunno—I guess the scope of his utter delusion grated on my nerves. I really had no reason to be courteous to him. I save the politeness only for people who sincerely return the favor to me. That much applied whether this guy was a king or not. Plus, was now really the time for him to act all high and mighty?

I guess he didn’t get the situation he was in, so I just wanted to open his eyes without killing him in the process. I took pains to avoid that, really—I even used Dark Flame to sear the wound and prevent excessive blood loss. Like, he was probably gonna die a painful death anyway…but that wasn’t my job. I was kind of hoping Shion could handle that for me. She’d be the one with the real grudge.

“Now, will you look at me when you’re talking? Don’t get all carried away just because I’m being nice. You are allowed to speak. Get to it.”

All he did at first was blankly stare at the stump where his right forearm used to be. He realized what it meant at the same time the pain struck home.

“Gaaahhhhhhhhh!!”

He started rolling around on the ground, screaming. Um, what did they call him again? A national hero, the ever-proud something or other? I was finding it hard to equate that great-sounding guy with the old dude in front of me. I still wasn’t sure he was truly a king, but nobody else in the area looked like they’d fit the bill. I told him I was going to kill everybody besides the king, and there were no other claimants to the title stepping up, soooo…

Guess I’ll just go with this guy as the king for now. As I settled on this, it began to seem like the man’s pained screaming was starting to make the anger within me subside. But if this dude died on me, the potential rebound in my anger level honestly scared me a bit. I had to be very careful not to kill him.

“Look, did you have something to say or not? If you just wanted to show me your interpretive dance, that’s great, but I’ve had enough.”

The statement made him open and close his mouth like a fish, desperately struggling to say something. I guess the terror and pain made it impossible to find his voice. This was getting really troublesome. Ah well. Just for a bit, let’s make him forget the pain. I grabbed the man by the hair, lifted his head upward, and peered into his eyes.

“You get one chance,” I threatened through the mask. “There’s no next time, got it?”

That was enough to make the guy freeze in place, nodding furiously. Enough to make him regain his wits, I guess. Or maybe I just scared him so badly that it paralyzed all his senses. He was still having trouble with articulation, but now the words were coming out freely.

“This…this is all a misunderstanding! It all began with a misunderstanding. I only came here to form friendly relations with this land. Did you find the force I brought along with me n-not to your tastes? They were here to guarantee my safety, and I merely brought them along out of hopes that I may gain an…an audience with you!”

“Huh? You declare war on us out of nowhere,” I coldly spat out at this pile of bullshit, “and that’s the nonsense you conjure up for me? The moment I lost friends in that battle, you all became my enemy.”

But the guy didn’t give up. “W-wait!” he shouted, talking even faster than before. “You’re wrong. That’s where the misunderstanding lies. The Western Holy Church saw all monsters as enemies, so I wanted to see for myself if it was worth attempting to make peace with you! And then the otherworlders we deployed here went out of control on us. I—I was tricked as well! I had no idea those miscreants were as dangerous as they proved to be. But what a stroke of luck! Now I know for a fact that your nation houses brave fighters capable of defeating those menaces. A country with such wonderful heroes at its disposal certainly passes muster with me! I, er, my nation would be glad to forge formal relations with yours! Wouldn’t that be wonderful? A great honor, if I say so myself! Farmus is a mighty power, unlike Blumund and the other small fry. Wouldn’t aligning with us put you in a much more prominent position? It would put our government at ease, and you would gain powerful backup from our forces. I could even introduce you to the Council at some point. We could both stand to profit greatly from this, no? I mean, I will need to ask for fair reparations to cover for the military losses we’ve incurred, but I truly think this has been a powerful lesson for the both of us. So how about it? You will accept, will you not?”

Uh… Wow, is this guy a genius or what? How much does he need to talk down at me, making me as uncomfortable as possible, until he’s happy? And why’s he working under the assumption that I’d gladly pay him anything? Does he really want to piss me off that much, just so he can taste more pain during his inevitable death? Is he one of those?

Unaware of my confusion, the old man just kept on talking, up to the end. Right. Let’s take off his right leg to shut him up.

He started screaming, but I had taken pains to keep him alive again, so I let him be. No need to cauterize the wound or anything; I just cast Dark Flame to burn off the relevant blood vessels, so nothing came out. A pretty useful way to keep someone alive, I thought.

I then realized things had grown awfully quiet around us. I scanned the field, only to find the remaining soldiers kowtowing before me, too awed by the horror to do anything else. They had watched this whole exchange with bated breath, and seeing our talks get (literally) cut off filled them with despair. Some of them were half praying, half pleading for their lives, giving the proceedings a suddenly tragic air.

Sadly, there was no point in pleading now. My normally generous heart had been fully drawn over by the scrawls of rage. And I had just happened to finish analyzing that Merciless skill I got. Turned out it allowed me to seize the souls of anyone begging for their lives or seeking help from me. In other words, if they ever lost the will to fight, it meant death for them. It didn’t seem to have a vast range of uses, really, but something told me it’d help out a bunch right now.

Question. Use the unique skill Merciless?

Yes

No

If I had accumulated the necessary number of souls to evolve into a true demon lord, I could have always left these guys alive. But, sadly, it looked like I still didn’t have quite enough.

YES , I thought. My heart was calm. There was no pain, no real sense of guilt I could find lurking in some corner. And an instant later, everyone except for Reyhiem and that guy with him (whom I had specifically defined as out of range) was exposed to the tyranny of Merciless. The knights all fell, unable to pose any resistance, and with that, the nearly ten thousand soldiers still alive all breathed their last.

Merciless, huh…? You’re damn right it is. It was safe to merely fear me, I guess, but the moment I fully broke their hearts, I could launch it. It was like they just handed their souls to me on a silver platter. I was free to choose whether I let them live or die—and if I let them off the hook, they came back home, and then they started plotting revenge against me, I could flip the switch on their lives any time I wanted.

Plus, the real surprise when I used this was that it worked even on the soldiers already fleeing me. It applied to everyone I had identified as an enemy at the beginning—in other words, everybody I watched over, up there in the sky. I know I talked a big game about “killing everybody,” but even I expected to lose some of the more prudent ones who decided to ditch this scene early. They were fleeing in all directions, too much of a hassle to track down one by one—but the moment I launched Merciless, the survivor count reached zero.

Just crush an opponent’s heart, and the fight’s over. Whoa. Maybe this is more useful than I thought. I have a feeling I’ll be tapping it again in the future.

The waves of chaos and terror that permeated the battlefield neatly dissipated. I had made all the pain and fear go away, which I suppose was one way of showing a little mercy—even if it meant my two survivors were about to experience even more pain and fear.

Then the World Language echoed anew.

Report. Checking the number of souls required for evolution … Confirmed. The required conditions have been met. The Harvest Festival will now begin.

As the voice rang through my mind, I could feel vast amounts of power suddenly flow away from my body. Whether I wanted it to or not, my body was transforming, rebuilding itself. I was becoming a true demon lord—one recognized as such not just by me but by the very world itself.

My body fell lifelessly to the ground, reverting to slime form.

Oh crap. I could barely keep my eyes open. Like, this wasn’t gonna just be a nap or anything. I was freakin’ exhausted .

My vision was starting to fade around me, which I assumed was because Magic Sense was starting to falter. I was even getting dizzy. I mean, yeah, they said I’d have to go through evolution and stuff, but I was seriously worried that my consciousness would fly away from me. I sure as hell didn’t want to sleep in this field full of stinking corpses.

Let’s get back to town. I still have my two conspirator friends safely captured here. My mission was accomplished. There was no harm in returning to Tempest.

As I tried to console myself with that thought, Magic Sense picked up something. A single person. If they were still alive, it meant I hadn’t broken their heart yet. Better be careful. God, as tired as I am, and there’s still someone left…? I gotta do something about this fatigue—

Report. Once triggered, the Harvest Festival cannot be halted.

Well, shit. I’m, like, in real trouble, aren’t I?!

Hurriedly, I called for Ranga. Lucky thing I had him in my shadow, just in case.

“Ranga, you there?”

“Yes, my master.”

He was! Nice. He appeared smoothly out from his hiding place. Seeing him offered so much new promise for me. I sighed contentedly.

“Ranga, this is a top-priority order. Keep me safe and carry me back to town! And bring these two people along, too. Tell everyone there they are not to be touched, and definitely make sure nobody tries to kill them. You can ask Kabal’s crew or whoever to take care of them until I wake up.”

Oop. Here we go. I was now having serious trouble keeping my mind together. Spatial Motion would’ve gotten me there faster, but I was afraid I’d blow myself up if I tried it now.

“Yes, Master. What should I do with the surviving enemy?”

Oh. He must’ve noticed, too. I had to think about it. There was someone there, pretending to be dead. Merciless told me after I used it that there were no survivors. So did this guy die then come back to life? It meant his soul was still safe in there. I couldn’t treat this lightly.

Ranga would probably win, I imagined, but I opted for a more careful approach. Safety first and all that. But just turning tail and fleeing didn’t seem right, and it’d be a pain if this foe decided to give chase.

So I chose to summon some demons, who’d hopefully at least delay my foe for a while. It’d really suck if word about Megiddo got out—it worked best only if the adversary wasn’t aware of it—but my safety had to take priority.

“I will leave that to the others. They will bring the foe to you if they can capture them. Meet up with them for me.”

“I shall, Master!”

I pooled together what little mental power I had left. Dispelling the Anti-Magic Area, I worked to summon a demon, offering the piles of corpses spread before me. I thought about using Glutton to eat them, but it wasn’t like they’d have any useful skills or anything.

There was no telling what kind of demon would result, but hopefully it wouldn’t be a waste of twenty thousand bodies. It was exactly the kind of thing a selfish demon lord would do, I suppose, but it was the thought that counted. I hope.

“Come to me, demon! I have something for you to eat, so…come on up and serve me now!”

I sounded like I was trying to call my dog back from the yard. It was such a hassle to stay conscious that I could barely even pull off the summon correctly. Any demon willing to get summoned with something like that must be one damn curious idiot.

But maybe I shouldn’t have let such passing thoughts bother me. In a moment, three demons were there on the field. Just three? And here I thought thirty or so bodies were enough to summon a Greater Demon. Thousands of times that, and three is all I get. Ugh.

Well, at least they’re Greater Demons, ranked A-minus. Certainly no trio of monsters to sniff at. Plus, I did kind of pluck the souls out of all these corpses.

Ugh. Daaamn. I had never felt so wasted since I came to this world. My head barely even worked now. I wasn’t so sure these guys could find this enemy, this needle in a haystack. But whatever.

“Hey. Guys. There’s someone hiding here, pretending to be dead. Capture them alive and bring ’em to Ranga here.”

Three Greater Demons, bossed around by a slime. To an outsider, it must’ve been a surreal sight. I couldn’t help but marvel at it. I was getting deliriously loopy as the dizziness grew. Simply keeping my body together was getting tough.

I needed to get somewhere safe…

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. The birth of a new demon lord! Quite an old sensation but a familiar one. What a truly wonderful day! Such an offering—and the very first order from our lord, no less. This is such an honor; I couldn’t possibly be more enthusiastic about this. Would it be all right to continue serving you in the future?”



I suppose one of the demons was greeting me, but I was so out of it that I didn’t even recognize half of it.

“We’ll talk later. Just prove you can be helpful to me first. Go.”

That was all I could sputter out.

“It shall surely be done. Do not worry for a moment, O great Master…”

I ignored the trio as they kindly saluted me, my mind being enfolded in the darkness. This was my first bout of full unconsciousness in this world—the Initiation, if you will; the sleep that predated the evolution…

…and the birth of a new demon lord.

