

CHAPTER 5

THE UNLEASHED

After Rimuru set off for battle, the residents of the town assembled in the central plaza and began to pray. It wasn’t out of sentiment, but for real work reasons. Shuna was commanding them, as part of her efforts to keep the barrier up.

The stronger ones were set in place so they could better protect the fringes of town, out of concern for intruders. At the same time, Shuna released a stream of magical force within the barrier, boosting the number of magicules in the air.

All of them had a firm grasp of their role—and all were deadly serious about carrying it out.

In the middle of the plaza, the bodies of Shion and the other victims were laid to rest, kept in good condition by Shuna’s magic. There was a throne in the middle for Rimuru, an enshrinement site for his demon lord–evolution ceremony. The hope was that performing the evolution as close to the victims as possible would make it that much more likely they’d be resurrected.

The townspeople surrounded the whole site—Shuna among them, standing next to Mjurran. And as she stood there, Shuna couldn’t help but think: Rimuru seemed to care a great deal about being a former human…but that’s such a trivial issue. To Shuna and everyone else, soul-to-soul connections mattered the most, and the connection she shared with him gave her an absolute sense of security. She wished Rimuru would realize that as well. The eternal euphoria he provided filled her soul, nourishing it. If that went away and Rimuru disappeared, she thought it might drive her crazy. Just imagining it produced such a profound sense of loss that she shivered.

“Sir Rimuru,” she whispered. “As long as we have him, that’s all that matters. But even missing one of us could upset his mental balance greatly.”

Benimaru, just back to the plaza, nodded at this. It made sense to him. The transformation that the usually gregarious Rimuru made, he was convinced, might impact that balance heavily. To him, he wanted to believe that life would go back to what it was someday.

“I just hope he doesn’t turn into a different person as a demon lord. Going berserk on us…”

With the barrier destruction work done, all of them—Benimaru, Soei, Hakuro, Geld, Rigur, Gobzo, even Gabil—were now surrounding the throne. That was on Rimuru’s orders; he’d asked them to kill him at once, should he lose all sense of reason and turn into an uncontrollable beast up there. No matter what, they wanted to keep that from happening—all of them.

“It’s because you keep on sleeping there, Shion,” Benimaru whispered before returning to his prayers. “Just wake up already…”

His faith wasn’t in some god up above. It was in a single slime. That faith had never betrayed him before, and it shouldn’t this time. Everyone believed that; no one doubted it.

Just then:

Report. The individual Rimuru Tempest’s Harvest Festival is about to begin. Upon its completion, all monsters in his genealogy will receive their due gifts.

The World Language echoing in the hearts of every monster gathered in town sent a shock wave of tension across the land. Everything had gone as planned; Rimuru had successfully crushed the invading force and begun his evolution. Now it was everyone else’s turn to pitch in.

“Brace yourselves! Our master is victorious. Now is the time for us to wield our own powers!”

Everyone on hand voiced their approval of Benimaru’s words. Things had begun to move. Losing Shion and the rest could very well destroy Rimuru’s heart forever. They all needed to do everything they could right now to prevent that.

After some time, Rimuru returned, carefully ferried over on Ranga’s back. As directed, he was taken to the throne and laid to rest.

Benimaru took this moment to think about what he would ask Rimuru when he awoke, to ensure he was still in full grasp of his reason.

“All right,” he’d suggested at the conference earlier, “I will ask you, ‘What do you think of Shion’s cooking?’”

“Sure,” Rimuru had muttered. “And then I’ll say it’s shitty, right? How’d you come up with that question? Is that really the best thing to ask…?”

It had been Benimaru’s idea, of course. He hadn’t forgotten about how he was always having her latest creations tested out on him—and the boundless pain and suffering that resulted. But now…if Shion could listen to that conversation and it enraged her enough to wake her up…they could hope for nothing more. Beyond that, all they had to do was carry out the duties they’d discussed earlier.

And that was why Benimaru missed it. He was too worked up with performing the procedure exactly as planned to think at all about what these “gifts” might be. But even that was quietly beginning its preparations, ready to manifest itself in reflection of his subconscious thoughts…

Rimuru was in a deep sleep. His consciousness was gone; he was an irregular, unresolved blob, not even able to retain his usual streamlined form. And there, in the deep, deep darkness beyond the reaches of Rimuru’s consciousness:

Report. The Harvest Festival has begun. Your bodily structure will be reconstructed in order to evolve you into a new species.

Confirmed. Super-evolution from type “slime” to type “demon slime” … successful. All bodily attributes have been greatly enhanced. The material and spiritual bodies are now freely transformable. Intrinsic skills Infinite Regeneration, Control Magic, Multilayer Barrier, Universal Detect, Universal Shapeshift, Lord’s Ambition, Enhanced Replication, Spatial Motion, Darkflame Lightning, and Universal Thread acquired. Reacquiring resistances…completed. Cancel Pain, Resist Melee Attack, Cancel Natural Elements, Cancel Ailments, Resist Spiritual Attack, and Resist Holy Attack acquired. Evolution is now complete.

Then, as if responding to its master’s command, the unique skill Great Sage—which never demonstrated having a sense of self before—requested its own evolution.

Report. Re-executing skill acquisition requested earlier. Unique skill Great Sage attempting evolution… Failed.

Failed.

… Re-executing.

Failed.

… Re-executing.

Failed.

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—ENDLESS—

Report. Unique skill Great Sage attempting evolution, using Deviant as a sacrifice … Successful. Unique skill Great Sage has evolved into Raphael, Lord of Wisdom.

The Great Sage attempted it without sacrificing anything several hundred million times—and then, after a trial-and-error process that seemed like it would last for all of time…

…it obtained its Harvest Festival gift—conquering, and evolving, into an ultimate skill , the loftiest height possible in the world.

The chances of this working were thought to be so small that it wasn’t even worth considering. It almost seemed like a reward provided for the infinite effort involved with the attempt. Succeeding made it more likely that it could carry out its master’s request, but the supposedly soulless conceptual intelligence bore no happiness. It could never understand emotion.

But—despite the lack of emotion, the lack of happiness—somehow, it felt fulfilled. And then, with its evolved skill, it carried out its master’s request once more. The way it acted, working incessantly to make its master’s dreams come true, could even be…

The evolution continued.

Glutton consumed Merciless to become Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, perfectly honed to more effectively handle its master’s desires. There, deep in an abyss beyond what Rimuru’s soul could detect, the skill softly, deeply evolved itself—all to make his own dreams come true.

But the Harvest Festival still wasn’t over.

The gifts meant to celebrate Rimuru’s evolution were passed out to everyone who had been named by or evolved from him. A raucous festival, indeed—a gift for the one who had evolved from demon lord seedling to true demon lord. And the party was just getting started.

Razen lay in hiding, concealing himself with all his might.

He was lucky to have died once back there. Having fully commandeered Shogo’s skills, he was brought back to life over time by Survivor. Before his brain could even comprehend the unbelievable events taking place before him, his instincts understood and made the right call. They told him: Here was a foe who no one in human form could ever beat. Folgen, his sworn friend, was rendered helpless and killed—not even able to stand before the monster, much less shield King Edmaris.

He wanted to go and rescue his king but stopped himself, knowing that going right now would be a waste of life. So he kept his breath low, playing possum until the masked magic-born left the scene, looking for all the world like a demon lord. He had no access to magic and was facing an attack he couldn’t identify, so fleeing would be difficult in itself.

Just as he came up with this idea, several thousand soldiers died around him. If he moved right now, he’d just be targeted and shot down. It wouldn’t kill him, but attracting that monster’s interest wasn’t a good idea. So he chose to wait and see what unfolded, hoping it’d boost his survival chances at least a little bit.

Then he saw—and felt—it. The fear. Even Razen, with his intrinsic resistance to the emotion, was stricken with terror at the sight. Nearly ten thousand surviving soldiers had their lives snuffed out in a single instant.

He had never seen anything like that in his long life. This was beyond anything a champion or otherworlder could pull off. Even if he had a cornucopia of unique skills to choose from, he could never beat that monster. Calamity-class, indeed. Razen had thought of himself as equivalent to a demon lord in strength, but now he knew that was just wishful thinking.

What is that monster? he asked himself. I’ve never heard of such a thing… Isn’t the leader of the monster nation a slime?

His own heart didn’t break, for the simple fact that he was so driven to save the king he was loyal to. But Razen’s sole desire was not to be fulfilled. His presence had already been detected.

Had he resigned himself to death and attempted a kamikaze charge, maybe he could’ve defeated that monster if he was lucky. He wouldn’t have killed the thing, but he might’ve been able to save his king from the jaws of death. But Razen was too careful. And there were already plans for him.

A large wolflike monster was summoned to the scene, gingerly carrying the monster (which had turned from a human form into a slime) in its mouth. Using a pair of forked tails, it snatched up King Edmaris and Archbishop Reyhiem, placing them on its back before running off at extraordinary speed. All that remained were three Greater Demons.

Seeing the fearsome masked magic-born turn into a slime, Razen was both surprised and oddly convinced. I knew it. That really was their master. And deploying such great magic spells, one after the other, would easily exhaust his magical energies. If he summoned those demons to serve as bodyguards, then perhaps I will have a chance at rescuing the king…

He was half-right. The demons—in particular, that demon—had been summoned. To that one, Razen was nothing more than prey. A poor, forlorn piece of prey, left to live only so this demon could carry out his summoner’s request and be amply rewarded for it.

Figuring he could beat these three demons, Razen rose up from the shadows cast by the dead. Fortunately for him, the masked magic-born canceled the Anti-Magic Area as it cast the demon summon. Now Razen could fight with his full force. Whether they were ranked A or not, there was no way he could lose to only three Greater Demons.

Stretching out his body, he attempted to silently sneak up from behind one of them—only to find that the other two were already standing before him.

“…Oh? Spatial Motion, eh? I suppose you’ve all been serving as Greater Demons for quite a long time.”

The two demons didn’t answer him. They showed no signs of movement—they were ordered only to confine him for the demon who was leisurely walking up to the wizard.

Now that demon was alone, in front of Razen.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Done with your stretching? In that case, it is time to capture you. If you wish to resist, go right ahead. I will not kill you, but I am not prohibited from tormenting you…”

The demon flashed a twisted, beautiful smile, its gender unclear as it addressed Razen.

“Oh? You’re here to take me on?”

“Take you on? Hee-hee-hee. Quite an amusing joke.”

“What are you calling a joke, you putrid demon?!”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Very good,” the demon whispered, its expression still twisted. “This should be quite a bit of fun. Allow me to join you in a bit of post-meal calisthenics.”

Its smile was terror itself for anyone witnessing it—terror welling up from the root of the soul.

It looked toward the sky. Razen snorted at the creature. It thinks it’s so clever, trying to feint me with its eyes.

“Enough of your lip! Nuclear Cannon!”

Utilizing a spell he had precast earlier to save time, he used a simple trigger to set off his last resort. This method, however, ran the risk of an accidental discharge, meaning only wizards and similarly powerful magicians could execute it. The effect, however, was massive. Avoiding the casting time that was the central weakness of any magic-user was huge. From the get-go, Razen was doing what he needed for victory.

The magic he chose was of the nuclear-attack type, the greatest and most sinister of the aspectual magics. Against people, it was the strongest magic in the world. Demons required physical bodies in order to manifest themselves; destroy theirs and Razen was in the clear. They wouldn’t be gone for good, but they’d no longer be able to interact with this world. And before the intense heat this cannon produced, no demon could long continue to exist.

As far as Razen was concerned, victory was his at this point. But the white-hot rays from his surefire magic were bent away before they could reach the raised left hand of the demon, zooming straight toward a certain point in the sky.

“It…misfired? Dah, not now, of all…?!”

With magic prepared in advance like this, there was a very slim chance that the spell would lose its force and fail upon casting. Razen assumed this was what happened, at the worst time possible for him. He sulkily glared at the demon as he jumped backward and away.

“Hmm? That was an impressive piece of magic.”

“What did you say?! It’s pointless if the effect of it doesn’t work.”

“Ah. I see. If by ‘effect’ you mean you intended it to defeat me, I would advise you that relying upon magic will not achieve this for you.”

The demon seemed almost eerily confident as it addressed Razen. It got on his nerves greatly, but not even Razen could shake off the faint sense of impending doom in his mind.

“Oh, now you’ve said it! In that case, how about this one? Summon Spirit: War Gnome! Come to me, great spirit of the earth’s foundations!”

This was Razen’s trump card, the most powerful summon magic he had on hand, and he was ready to fight with it. He had summoned a high-level spirit, one ranked well beyond A. Only a Champion-level opponent would give this all-powerful creature any difficulty. A Greater Demon was no problem at all.

Replying to Razen’s call, the earth began to well up, forming the shape of a knight in solid-looking armor. Sensing the terrific force behind it, Razen finally began to feel confident and relieved. With a spirit of this caliber, he could even take on Arch Demons, the legendary creatures that ranked even above Greater Demons.

If that magic hadn’t failed to activate, I wouldn’t have had to break this out… But this demon irks me. I have a bad feeling about this. Best not to let my guard down here…

With this , Razen thought, no matter how much this opponent unnerved him, he’d be just fine. He intended this magic to mow down not just the demon before him but the other two behind him. Then he could finally set off to rescue King Edmaris.

But:

“I see; I see. Certainly, demons are strong against angels, angels against spirits, and spirits against demons. If selecting based on this three-way relationship, calling for a high-level spirit was the correct response. However…”

Even before the War Gnome Razen summoned, the demon was completely unfazed.

“…it is too young.”

When did it even move? Even with his senses turned up to maximum, Razen couldn’t trace the demon’s actions fast enough. A large hole opened up in the knight’s strong crystalline armor as a beautiful hand sliced through the spirit’s core, grabbed it, tossed it in its mouth, and chomped down upon it with a frightful crunch.

“There, you see?” The demon snickered at Razen. “It lacks experience that can only be accumulated over years. A puppet like that, nothing but pure strength, is a pushover for me.”

“You’re kidding! That was a spirit! A greater spirit!!”

Having his trump card killed instantly put Razen in a state of near panic. Every fiber of his brain told him this was impossible. It just made no sense. A spirit easily the equal of a Greater Demon, not only facing difficulty but being wiped out in one shot.

“Enough magic,” the demon said kindly as Razen stewed. “I would like to test out more this body my summoner provided me, so let’s use a different tactic this time.”

The demon snapped its fingers, triggering a magic spell. For over a mile in radius around him, an Anti-Magic Area appeared.

“Now magic is no longer available to you. Feel free to attack me with your preferred physical strikes.”

Razen struggled to understand this. Huh? Why did it shut off the magic? Magic is any demon’s most powerful weapon… And it cast a great magic with no ritual? No spell chanting?! …Ah, but now’s not the time to think about that!

Shaking off the cobwebs, Razen stood on his toes, steeling himself. With Shogo’s body in hand, all of the otherworlder’s karate skills were his.

“Hnh!!”

With a light exhale, he focused himself and fired a fist at the demon, backing it up with a flurry of kicks. The Berserker unique skill let him pack the greatest punch possible, firing away at the demon with speed impossible to catch with the naked eye. It was a torrent of punches, a rain of kicks that could chop a large tree in two, and soon, they did their damaging work on the defenseless demon—

…Wait! No!

Every attack was neatly and cleanly dodged, as if all this was a pre-orchestrated karate demonstration. The demon wasn’t defenseless at all. It was weaving its way through every strike, using skills far beyond what Razen had access to.

Now, for the first time, Razen understood. He was too afraid to notice it at first, but now he was forced to accept it. The demon standing before him. The golden eyes and crimson pupils. The pale skin. The beautiful black hair, the streaks of red and gold within. The way it looked, unlike most demons, so close to a human being.

This was a higher class of demon—and, if anything, Razen’s blind pursuit of ultimate strength was his undoing. He had peered into the dark reaches of the world, pursuing the deepest recesses of magic. His eyes could coldly perceive his own strength, and even among the small clutch of superpowered fighters in the A ranks, he stood head and shoulders above them all. If he didn’t, the waves of terror the demon emitted would alone be enough to make him lose all will to fight—although perhaps that would’ve been a happier fate for him.

That demon’s knowledge, its strength, only worsened Razen’s mood. If he didn’t know—know that this was an Arch Demon at the very least, easily capable of destroying Greater Demons—he wouldn’t be this terrorized. The way the demon cast a great magic without a ritual or casting time—proof that it had reached an abyss even further below what Razen had descended to. That Nuclear Cannon strike wasn’t a misfire at all, and nothing else Razen threw at it worked because this foe was simply that far above Razen in strength.

If he didn’t have the kind of knowledge he did, Razen might never have noticed how unusual this demon’s strength was. But he had it.

Wait. Is this…a—a Primal…?

With his magic shut off, Razen had no means of escape. Despair painted his heart a deep shade of black.

What…what kind of horrifying beast did that monster grant a body to and unleash upon this world?!

If it didn’t have a physical body, at least, it would’ve returned to the demon realms sooner or later. But it was too late—mankind was now exposed to an unprecedented threat.

As Razen was struck by this terror, a sweet yet terrifying voice reached his ears.

“Have you had enough yet? In that case, it’s my turn.”

The moment he heard it, his legs shook like jelly as he lost control of his bladder. Now he understood everything, and he could no longer even think of resisting. His steel will was shattered, and in a single instant, his heart broke.

“Keff…keff… Ah, ah, ahhhhh…”

His terror was impossible to articulate. An Arch Demon was a calamity-level monster, a leadership role in their native realm. They were half-legendary, with only a small handful known to recorded history. Their power was said to rank A-plus, alongside that of higher-level spirits, and they were dangerous enough to even be considered sub–demon lords.

Even against such a dangerous presence, Razen would have been confident in the past that he could win. Over the past few centuries he’d spent protecting the great nation of Farmus, he had defeated an Arch Demon at least once, with the help of several companions. But this demon was different.

If…if this is one of the Primal Demons…

…then there was just no chance. Even escape was impossible.

Faced with despair, Razen crumpled to the ground, wailing at the reality this demon had unleashed upon him.

The demon looked disappointed as he watched him. “Oh? It’s over already?” he whispered.

The other two demons under his command scooped Razen up, resigned looks on their faces, and took him to the designated town. Their first job was done, and they wanted their master to praise them.

Before the eyes of Benimaru and the rest, Rimuru’s body repeatedly transformed itself from a slime to all kinds of irregular shapes. After a while, it calmed down, settling into its usual droplet form—but then it began to glow, eerily flickering on and off. Red, blue, yellow, green, purple, white, black, all kinds of colors.

This went on for a while. Everyone there was starting to lose all sense of time. And after who knows how much of it had passed, the echoes of the World Language resonated in their worried hearts.

Report. The individual Rimuru Tempest’s Harvest Festival is now complete. Monsters in his genealogy will now begin to receive their gifts.

Then they, too, were greeted with intense exhaustion.

“Ngh! What is going on?”

“Ah…?! Is this our gift? I feel more connected to Sir Rimuru than ever!”

Benimaru, Shuna, and the other monsters couldn’t hide their surprise. Now Benimaru realized that Rimuru’s evolution was successfully completed—and it was their turn. Nobody expected this kind of fatigue to arise. The less resistant among them began to fall into a deep sleep. But Benimaru had a promise with Rimuru. He couldn’t afford to fall that easily.

He did his best to fight off the tiredness. And as he did, Rimuru’s body began to shine brightly before him. When the light faded, there stood a fetching figure with long, smooth silver hair flowing in the wind.

It was Rimuru, with his mask off, looking a little taller than before. He still didn’t have any physical gender, sadly, but Benimaru couldn’t help but feel a little smitten anyway.

Report. Leave the rest to me and enjoy your slumber.

The soft voice whispered against his mind. It gave Benimaru inner peace; he had nothing with which to defy it. So he let the voice guide him into an irresistible sleep.

As he watched this unfold, the figure with Rimuru’s form checked to see if anyone else was awake.

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Mjurran looked quizzically at all the people falling asleep around her. One by one, they fell like flies—and now, there was nobody else awake.

The humans and dwarves left in town had all been moved into buildings away from the central plaza. The amount of magicules in the vicinity had grown beyond what most humans could withstand, so they were forced to evacuate the scene. Elen would build a barrier over them, no doubt, as she monitored the proceedings. Yohm and his friends stayed there until the end to protect Mjurran, but they were gone over to Kabal and his gang now, carrying the king of Farmus and the Holy Church archbishop Ranga had brought over. By now they should be fully in Kabal’s custody, unable to escape.

It was a good excuse for Yohm to leave, Mjurran thought, given that he could hardly take being in that magicule field any longer. If it wasn’t for that, he probably would’ve stayed right next to her until he died. It gladdened her to know that, even though she knew it was stupid of him. Of course, she wouldn’t actually say that to the man. If she did, Yohm would no doubt let it go to his head and do something even stupider.

It was, in other words, evidence that Mjurran wanted Yohm to be safe above all. But it also meant Mjurran was the last person standing in the plaza.

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The Rimuru-like figure gauged this situation, eyes emotionless. Then, seeing Mjurran and assuming there were no issues, he opened his arms wide, the long silver hair pushed back and emitting a light that shone like angel’s wings.

Report. By the name of Raphael, Lord of Wisdom, I command Belzebuth to consume all the magicules within this barrier. Do not leave even a single soul fragment behind.

With those words, Belzebuth was activated, a villainous force unleashed upon the world—but one used for a certain goal, tracing each of the results Raphael calculated. Every magicule within the barrier covering the town was absorbed, converting the atmosphere back into pure air. Then the barrier itself was neatly eaten up, and then Belzebuth was halted. It was as if nothing had ever happened to this space at all.

This was Raphael, the figure that took the form of Rimuru, the apparently soulless master. And even now, the Lord of Wisdom was edging his way closer to Shion. Bringing his hands forward, he began to cast Analyze and Assess—carefully, with every intention of making his master’s hopes come true.

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Mjurran watched slack-jawed as all this unfolded. The barrier they had all built over the town was devoured instantly, which was a threat in itself, but beyond that:

…This just can’t be!!

The skill had engaged in its own actions, without the will of its master. She could understand if it had been ordered to do so beforehand, but it didn’t seem that way here. This figure seemed closer to a spirit than a monster.

It was crazy, but she sensed that it was nothing she could laugh at. All she could do was stay out of the way and watch.

Once he handed over the king of Farmus and the archbishop, Ranga returned to the town entrance and stood guard. Rimuru had ordered him to meet up with the demons, and while he wanted more than anything to be at his master’s side, he had to prioritize his orders before he fell asleep. Deciding between his concerns for Rimuru and his vital orders, he ultimately sided with the latter.

The magic-born Gruecith looked on, bemused, as Ranga waited.

He had been asked by Benimaru—or, really, Shuna, more like—to stay with Ranga just in case something happened. If intruders showed up, he was to call for Benimaru and the others while Ranga engaged them. But there was clearly nobody coming, so Gruecith chatted with Ranga to kill the time.

“That ogre princess Shuna’s quite the magic-user, isn’t she? Fortifying that barrier like it was the easiest thing in the world.”

That barrier kept them from leaving town right now. Them and every other monster in the place, unless Rimuru was with them. Gruecith was no exception to that—the powerful barrier kept him efficiently penned in. It needed to if they wanted to resurrect Shion and all the other victims of that assault earlier.

Benimaru and the others were able to return to town thanks to the intricate workings of Shuna, who had analyzed Mjurran’s great magic and took further measures to improve upon it. It was now set up to keep all magicules inside but also allow anyone to enter the barrier without an issue. A one-way street, in other words.

Theoretically, it was certainly possible, but actually developing the magic was quite a creative feat. But Gruecith was even more preoccupied with how surprised Mjurran looked when she learned about it. He found it cute, that expression of hers, although he would never ever tell anyone else that. Discussing romance with Ranga wouldn’t accomplish much, he figured. Gruecith wasn’t that stupid.

Ranga cheerfully nodded. “Yes. I think the same. Lady Shuna is second only to Sir Rimuru in intelligence.”

Generally, monsters in town enjoyed praising one another. Gruecith had the impression that Ranga was a little too complimentary toward his master but he figured it’d be tasteless to bring it up. Besides, he liked that kind of atmosphere. It reminded him of his native Beast Kingdom, where people generally got along in the midst of all their chattering and carrying on.

Lord Carillon is very shrewd, after all. And just as Lord Phobio said, every monster in this town seems so nice.

“By the way, Sir Gruecith, I was wondering about something. I had heard the demon lords Carillon and Milim would be waging war soon…”

Ranga gave Gruecith an expectant look, as if to ask whether everything was all right with him.

“Ah, yeah…”

It was a topic on Gruecith’s mind as well, but the barrier and its magicule blockage kept him from contacting Eurazania at the moment. He wasn’t that concerned, however. It was still three days before the start of combat, and as he said before, he believed that Carillon would win. It seemed like Rimuru was well on his way to becoming a demon lord, so Gruecith also figured he had enough time to see how that all shook out before heading back to help his own master. Besides, the Three Lycanthropeers were there, each far stronger than the likes of him. And as long as they were, no matter how much strength Milim might boast, Gruecith doubted she really meant to wage war.

No point fretting over things now, he thought. He knew they were all bold and courageous over there, far more than people believed. No, his mind was elsewhere.

“…Hope they all get resurrected.”

His biggest concern was the fate of those sacrificed in battle here. If their resurrection turned sour, there was no doubt that Rimuru would suddenly become a major threat. He could feel that instinctively.

“It will be all right. Monsters are made of tough stuff. Plus… all of us are connected in spirit. As long as we remain under Sir Rimuru’s protection, we will not be defeated that easily.”

“Yeah. I think it’ll probably turn out fine, but…”

“Heh-heh-heh. No need for concern. When my master finishes the evolution, I am sure he will bring everyone back.”

It was a firm declaration, one based on Ranga’s confidence in Rimuru. Perhaps sensing Gruecith’s concern, he wanted to make it clear that the concept of Rimuru going out of control couldn’t be further from his mind.

“Yeah, no doubt,” Gruecith replied with a smile. Regardless of the potential threat involved, he didn’t want Rimuru to change very much, either. He didn’t serve him, but he admittedly was attracted to his character—and he owed him a lot for saving Mjurran’s life, too.

Of course, the girl I love is with another guy at the moment… Heh. If he was a bastard, I’d have killed him long ago, but if it’s Yohm, I can’t do much about that. I’ll just have to lay low until she inevitably dumps that idiot…or maybe get a little in the way between them, at least…

The lingering attachment was clear in Gruecith’s thoughts. But he didn’t see the point of pursuing the topic.

“Man, though, I wasn’t expecting to see a demon lord evolution with my own two eyes…”

“Nothing to be surprised about. This is Sir Rimuru, you know.”

“Um, no, I mean…! A monster becoming the seed of a demon lord is something that happens maybe once every few centuries, you know?”

“The seed…?”

“Yeah. It proves the world’s recognized them as a powerful-enough monster. The strongest beings in the land. There are only ten of them, Lord Carillon included.”

“Oh? So Rimuru will become the eleventh demon lord?”

“Well, who knows? You can’t say how the other demon lords will respond to this. This whole thing’s ruining the current balance of power among them. There could be some pretty tumultuous years ahead if it goes wrong.”

“If so, then we will protect Sir Rimuru with our own powers!”

“Yeah, well, I’m in the same boat, too. I’ll be a sword for Lord Carillon to wield. I sure hope I don’t have to face off against you guys, though, I’ll say.”

“Heh-heh-heh. I agree.”

They laughed with each other, glad they were on the same page. The chitchat continued for a while longer.

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Gruecith was expecting absolutely nothing out of the ordinary to happen. But after a decent amount of time passed, Ranga’s eyelids began to droop heavily.

Shuna had apparently anticipated this possibility. When a demon lord was born, anyone below them was given a so-called “gift,” a sort of evolution that could not be resisted, and it put the target in a deep sleep.

“Gnnh… I—I am not sure I can last much longer. I will sleep…but if I do, my orders… Lord…Gruecith… I need you to…take something on for me, but…will you…?”

Apparently, three demons might be coming to the entrance shortly, summoned by Rimuru and ordered to bring over a survivor from Farmus. Ranga hated to pass the buck to him, but he could overcome his fatigue no longer, so he extracted Gruecith’s promise to take care of matters before dejectedly falling asleep.

There was a single survivor, he heard, and a fairly powerful foe at that. Powerful enough that he could attack and defeat the demons. Gruecith would have to be careful, even though the thought of being trusted so much made him a little happy. So he began patrolling the area, a new spring in his step, as he tried to keep Ranga and the defenseless townspeople safe.

Not half an hour later, they appeared.

“Ah, Sir Ranga,” a rather beautiful-looking demon said. “It would appear he’s gone into an evolving sleep.”

It was a shocking sight for Gruecith. The demons had obviously been granted physical bodies, all far more powerful than your garden-variety summon. Ranga said they were Greater Demons, but these guys were clearly a level above even that. The sheer terror of the sight made his hair stand on end—the loudest alarm bell his own instincts could give him.

“Whoa, whoa, I’ve never seen the likes of you before. You an Arch Demon?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. That is correct, magic-born.”

Even at first sight, the danger this Arch Demon presented was obvious. He felt an overwhelming sense of awe—like what he felt whenever he saw Benimaru or the Three Lycanthropeers. Maybe even more powerful.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Please don’t be so alarmed,” the demon cheerfully stated. “I am just a nameless demon summoned by the new demon lord. The two behind me are meant to handle the chore work for me, so no need to worry about them.”

“Chore work?”

He gave the pair a look. They were two Greater Demons, one carrying a passed-out man on his back. Both of them possessed enough magic power to pose a formidable threat. They were cer tainly on the same level as a stronger magic-born in terms of com bat strength.

And these were Greater Demons ? Gruecith couldn’t believe it. But he just shrugged and nodded instead of bringing it up.

“All right. Sir Ranga told me to expect three demons here before long. Is that man the survivor of Sir Rimuru’s attack?”

“It was not an attack. To someone like that, it was just a bit of playtime. Plus, thanks to this man’s surviving, the three of us were summoned here. We’ve been treating him well because we do appreciate that a little.”

“Treating him well, huh…?”

One could question whether riding on the back of a Greater Demon qualified as kind treatment. Gruecith was too smart to say that out loud, though.

“All right. The magicules are pretty thick in town, so you better protect him with a barrier.”

“Wouldn’t that be spoiling him a little too much?”

“…I thought you were treating him well.”

“Ah, yes. You’re right. Having him die would be very bad for us. We have to be sure he sees us performing well for him.”

So Gruecith cast his suspicions aside and decided to guide the demons into town. If they knew Ranga’s name, they had to be the ones Rimuru summoned. They didn’t seem to be under anyone’s thrall—and if there was someone powerful enough to control these freaks, Gruecith knew he was better off not riling them. Here, too, he demonstrated an uncanny ability to know when to shut up.

He was just about to turn around and walk into town when the barrier covering it suddenly vanished. Something was up.

“What on—?!”

“Mm? I-is this…?”

Gruecith turned toward the demon for just a moment. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but wait here for me. I’m worried about what’s going on in there!”

Then he ran off—just as the final events of the day unfolded.

The demon could feel a presence in the air. He took a moment to enjoy it, spellbound by it, before giving orders to his underlings.

“Do not kill this man. Make absolutely sure you do not let him escape.”

Then, by himself, he calmly traveled through space. To a demon like this, using Magic Sense to travel instantly between two points several miles from each other came as naturally as taking a walk around the block. The Greater Demons, unable to do this, nodded their acknowledgment and began following their master’s tracks. There was no panic, no loss of purpose among them; they simply began running unnaturally fast toward the center of town.

The demon had teleported right next to Rimuru.

“I am back, my master,” he said, taking a knee before the figure as his silvery hair blew in the wind. Rimuru had been a slime when he summoned these demons, and while he was now much more handsome in appearance, there was no mistaking him. The near-divine aura he let out was a telltale sign for any monster, no matter what their eyes told them. It was a sort of shine from his very soul, and discerning the color of one’s soul came naturally to a demon.

This demon’s master was currently conducting a solemn ceremony, one aimed at the neatly lined rows of dead monsters before him. To the demon, it was simply a beautiful sight. He wanted to stay there, just basking in the glory of it all, but not now. There was something on his mind.

He quietly came up to his master, taking the utmost care to stay out of his way. Perhaps it would be better to wait until the ceremony was done?

“Forgive my rudeness, Master. It seems you do not have enough magicules on hand…”

The demon was right. Rimuru didn’t seem to have the quantity of magicules this ritual required. Based on his knowledge, the demon surmised he was attempting to hold a ceremony known as the Secret Art of Revival, a skill that created a fully new soul for its target—a level below straight-up raising the dead. If this failed, the targets would be totally unlike how they were before death, transforming into uncontrollable beasts. The act was so difficult that even losing some memories and knowledge in the process was considered a great success.

The Secret Art of Revival had to be woven using arcane wisdom that humankind couldn’t even begin to understand. It naturally required a massive amount of magical energy, along with an unimaginable amount of force to control it. Even a high-level magic-born couldn’t do that. Only demons, with their knowledge of controlling souls, could handle the job, and even then only a handful of higher-level demons.

Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. I’d expect nothing less of my master.

Rimuru was performing this arcane act on nearly a hundred monsters at the same time. Even a single target took up tons of magicules, and this was multiplying that by a hundred-ish. Of course he was short on magicules. So the demon decided to speak up, just in case he could provide some help.

Yes. It is not meeting the stipulated amount of magicules. I am consuming life force as a substitute.

The words flustered the demon.

“Wait, my master! You don’t need to use up your own life for this… Ah, yes! I have a good idea…”

His eyes turned toward the two Greater Demons who had arrived earlier, as if appraising their value, then gave them a satisfied nod.

“Please use these two!”

The two Greater Demons stationed behind their leader stood up then kneeled toward him.

“It would be an honor if these could serve you as well. Nothing could possibly make us happier.”

The other two nodded their agreement. To them, the choice was obvious.

……

Rimuru, or Raphael, looked at the two demons, observing them with his shining golden eyes. No emotion was present in their dazzling beauty. Instead, he gave this flat response:

Understood. This will supply the required number of magicules. The offer is accepted.

Then, without further hesitation, he consumed them with Belzebuth. The Greater Demons disappeared without a trace, gobbled up with the air, taken apart, and converted into pure magicules. The energy appeared to shine a golden yellow to the demon—perhaps, he thought, because their wish to be useful had finally come true. Nothing could satisfy them more.

“Ahhh… How I envy them. Well done, my master. Your evolution into a demon lord seems to be perfect. I feel an overwhelming force from your body, the likes of which I never felt last we met…”

He looked longingly at his newly evolved master. Being able to serve such a new and beautiful demon lord was exactly what he craved. To do that, he needed to prove that he could be useful to him.

Steeling his resolve, the demon stepped away from the ceremony and waited quietly. No need to be further involved now. Meddling too much could stoke his master’s ire, he felt. If he interfered just because he wanted to help, he would be sabotaging his master’s efforts.

Confirmed. The prescribed amount of magicules has been reached. We will now conduct the Secret Art of Revival.

As the demon tried to be as invisible as possible, the ritual commenced.

What began was one of the deepest, most mysterious secrets of this world.

Colorless, transparent balls of beautiful light were enveloped in a thin film of flawless light purple. These were the cores of the victims, along with the astral bodies that protected them. Next, following the Secret Art of Resurrection, the rebuilt monster souls were returned to their bodies. The success rate was 3.14 percent—but that figure had been calculated before he became a demon lord.

The souls of all the demons lined up in that plaza had been gifted Complete Memory as part of the evolutionary process. They all accepted it as a way of fulfilling Rimuru’s hopes. This was an extra skill that made it possible to completely restore the memory of someone, even from a damaged brain. As long as the soul was intact, it could rebuild those memories from the state of death an infinite number of times.

—The link between soul and body was established. And now, the monsters’ cores unleashed their powers, and their hearts began to beat out a pulse…

Right there, the resurrection was settled. A divine mystery, born from the complex interactions of myriad elements. A miracle and a foregone conclusion, engineered by the prayers of Rimuru and everybody else.

But to Raphael, the Lord of Wisdom, who carried this out, there was no happiness at this successful feat. He had just performed the answer provided by his computations, followed the probabilities, and obtained results. He saw no further meaning in it. Success didn’t make him feel happy, and failure wouldn’t have made him feel sad in all likelihood. He didn’t even understand what feeling those emotions would mean. Even with all the great knowledge he wielded, the brilliant brain he was blessed with, it wasn’t enough to understand human emotion.

But deep down, in a heart he should never have had, in a corner of Rimuru’s soul—a will was born. A self, to put it another way. There had to be one there or else a skill wouldn’t evolve in such rogue fashion in order to fulfill its master’s wishes. And then the question came: Why did I take this kind of action? It came from within Raphael, and it was solid proof that this being had a self, separate from his master.

And yet, even this slight suspicion toward himself that was born in his head was something Raphael quickly turned his eyes from.

I think, therefore I am…

It was a thesis that Raphael would find himself constantly thinking about, going forward—and never finding an answer.

Regardless of his internal conflicts, Raphael continued with his incomparably accurate work. He analyzed and assessed nearly a hundred monsters at the same time, repairing their bodies, regenerating their souls, and finally resurrecting them. It was a seamless flow, not a single extraneous motion involved, and everything was handled at the right place and time. Before the monsters in town realized it, the miracle had secretly completed itself.

Only three people knew this: Mjurran, Gruecith, and the demon.

Mjurran was rendered beyond speechless as she watched the ceremony intently, face turned pale as a sheet. She had a front-row seat to the ultimate in secret arts, the exact thing she had been pursuing for so long. A chasm of deep, dark magic of which Rimuru’s presence as a demon lord allowed her an all-too-brief glimpse.

A high-level magic-born like Mjurran would never have a chance. Even the demon lord Clayman’s power seemed like a rude blur compared to this.

She gave thanks for the great fortune of obtaining this insight, even as she swore to herself never to let Yohm become Rimuru’s enemy. If he did, it’d ruin the both of them. That’s why she knew now that he needed her guidance and protection. He knew too little about all of this for any other alternative to work.

Gruecith’s eyes were dazzled by the miracle that took place before him. He didn’t have much in the way of magic knowledge, but he could see well enough that this secret art was like nothing else. It made him tremble in awe at how easy Rimuru made it look.

Damn it, what kind of magic force is this?! This massive, seemingly endless magicule supply, all being controlled with utter perfection. Is this really a newborn demon lord? It can’t be! Lord Carillon couldn’t even do this…

Awe and fear swirled in equal measures.

…And those eyes. Those eyes look like they’re beholding something totally worthless. They treat raising the dead as nothing more complex than repairing a useful tool… Did he think he could just make a new one if he messed up? What the hell is going on here…? He’s usually so warm and kind to other people; was all that just an act? Is this the real him…?!

What Gruecith was watching now was both Rimuru and not Rimuru. Unaware of this, all he could see was a demon lord working beyond the realm of mortal intelligence. And from that point forward, he swore to admonish both himself and the other lycanthropes from ever daring to defy Rimuru.

Unlike the two of them, the demon was filled with utter joy, gazing at Rimuru in sheer, silent awe.

Then a question to consider appeared in his mind: The person who just spoke to me… Was that not my master at all? But he dismissed the thought at once as overthinking matters. In all the many years this demon had lived, he had never heard of anything quite like that. The idea of a skill becoming sentient was too ridiculous to even consider. Working independently to fulfill the requests of its master…

…or maybe it took a demon like this, living in the deepest depths of the world, to even have the possibility occur in his mind. Regardless, the demon didn’t buy it. Besides, there were more important matters to consider.

Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. No matter what happens, I have to gain at least the lowest seat at the table for myself…

His mind resolved anew, he began to consider other ways he could stand out for his master.

Thus, the hope was fulfilled.

When Rimuru—or Raphael, Lord of Wisdom—completed his work, he returned once again into sleep mode, his magicule stores exhausted. The demon lovingly picked him up—an easy task, since he was back in slime form—and, following Mjurran’s instructions, gently placed him on the throne prepared for his rest.

Both Mjurran and the demon agreed that Rimuru was simply out of energy and would likely awaken in a few days. But what kind of “person” would he be like once he opened his eyes? Only the gods could know.

As the three eyewitnesses each pondered internally how to deal with this, they heard several sets of footsteps running toward them. Then they realized that the pressure exerted against Elen’s barrier was gone, reducing the magicule count in the air to practically zero. Yohm, Kabal, and the others immediately ran over to investigate, only to find row after row of sleeping monsters.

“Mjurran! Gruecith! Are you two all right? Where’s Rimuru…?”

“Whoa, whoa,” observed Kabal, “they’re all sleeping? What happened?”

“Did Shion get resurrected and all that?”

Mjurran took a moment to think before responding. Gruecith didn’t appear to have any idea what happened, and the demon seemed too enamored with himself and Rimuru to bother explaining matters to anyone else. Everyone’s gazes naturally began to focus on Mjurran, making her sigh dejectedly.

“Sir Rimuru has successfully completed the demon lord–evolution process. All the other monsters shared in this, too, so they’re all sleeping during their own evolves. And Shion and the other dead… They’ve all been safely resurrected using a secret ritual conducted by Sir Rimuru when he was awake. The ritual sapped all his magical energy away, and he is back asleep now.”

Everyone on-site breathed a hefty sigh of relief.

“Yeah, there’s the boss for ya! I knew I shouldn’t have worried.”

“I wouldn’t relax quite yet,” Mjurran replied to Kaijin. “Their souls might have been revived, but they all definitely died once before, so there’s no guarantee they’ve retained any of their memories.

“Although it’ll probably be fine,” she then just barely whispered to herself. She wanted to keep everyone on high alert just in case, but as far as she was concerned, there was no real danger left to consider.

But her words had the effect of instantly silencing everyone else. Now they realized it was still too early to celebrate.

“Well, outside of that,” Elen breathed, “how about we get a roof over all these sleepyheads for now, huh? There are mats laid out in the great meeting hall—I guess they figured something like this would happen.”

“Fine by me, but every single monster in town? That’s kind of a big project.”

“Yeah,” Gido chimed in, “we’re talking over a thousand of ’em in the plaza alone…”

“All right,” Kaijin said. “In that case, we’ll just take responsibility for bringing Lady Shuna into her bedchamber, all right?”

Kabal erupted into action. “Whoa there, you! I don’t care if you’re Kaijin or not—I’m not letting you get away with that!”

“Yeah, man! That’s far too delicate a job to leave to someone besides us!”

Elen’s suggestion had triggered a war of words between the dwarves, led by Kaijin, and Kabal and his right-hand man, Gido. It went on for several more seconds before Elen finally yelled at them to knock it off.

But the conflict wasn’t necessary from the beginning—because as they bickered, the residents of town began to wake up by themselves.

It was a neat sequence of emotions for them all as they did. First, panic over the vanished barrier and missing magicules in the air. Then, massive outbursts of joy as they realized Shion and the other victims were resurrected. To them, it was a miracle—but only the three witnesses on hand knew what it really was.

In effect, it was just the power of Raphael at work. And nobody on hand realized, in the shadow of all that joy, that Raphael—a simple skill, nothing more—had somehow grown a sense of self-awareness.

Rise and shine!

It was a trite old phrase, but it was the first one my mind came up with.

I hadn’t enjoyed waking up like this in ages. Unlike my previous experiments with forcing myself into a nap-like state, I felt refreshed, satisfied. It goes without saying that I had never experienced anything like it before in this world. But as I got up and took a look, I realized that things had gotten pretty hectic around me. More problems to deal with, I guess. Give me a break.

I could feel this sort of pulsing energy from the monsters. I did a quick Analyze and Assess on them, only to find they bore more magicules than before. They were stronger now, in other words, so I guess my evolution must’ve turned out okay.

Correct. The Harvest Festival has successfully completed. Gifts were distributed to all creatures within your genealogy, leading to further evolution among individuals.

Aha. So becoming a demon lord made everyone under me evolve, huh? And is it my imagination, or is the Great Sage being a lot more talkative than it used to be?

No. It is your imagination.

Oh, all right…

Hey, wait a second!

But as much as I wanted to poke at the Sage about it, it offered no further response. Was it really my imagination? Ahh, I can’t think about this right now. How’s Shion doing? Not to mention everyone else? What’s happening right now? I had an endless wellspring of questions. And as if to answer them all at once:

“Ah! Sir Rimuru! You are awake!”

I heard a familiar voice—and felt a familiar sensation behind my back. A pair of hilly peaks, pliant and warmly surrounding me.

My evolution was complete, but there was no huge difference in my slime form. The only real change was that I’d sometimes turn more of a yellowish color. Was I one of those gold slimes now or something? Like, zooming along at the speed of light? I didn’t actually have that power, but I sort of felt more…elegant. Like I was on top of the food chain when it came to slimes. Not that I looked any stronger, still…

More to the point, this sensation, this familiar lap I found myself in, the way my cheeks were getting rubbed…

“You came back to life!”

It was Shion.

Mm. This feels really great. Just like before. Nothing changed.

“Yes, Sir Rimuru! All of us have come completely back to life!”

Hearing this, I realized that I had a hundred kneeling monsters surrounding us. Then, all at once, they greeted me, excited beyond description for me to wake up.

“““We have all been revived, without a single person missing!!”””

Great. That’s really great. And who’s that I see in the front row? Of course it’s got to be that doofus Gobzo.

Just as I anticipated, the effects of the evolution brought everyone back to life. I guess it was worth becoming a demon lord after all. The resemblance of my chances to the number ? was a worry, but if it worked on everyone, I couldn’t be happier. Hell, even the Sage makes mistakes sometimes. I’ll always welcome a pleasant mistake like this.

Smiling to myself at Shion’s return, I spent a moment to enjoy my position underneath her breasts for the first time in a while. Truly an elegant way to pass the time. But the bliss didn’t last long.

“…Sir Rimuru,” Benimaru said, “you’re awake? Wonderful. We have a variety of issues to— Ah, but before that, I cannot proceed until I confirm you have retained your sanity. You remember the question and answer we discussed in our conference, yes? Let’s go, then: ‘What do you think of Shion’s cooking?’ Give me your answer!”

He gave me a sarcastic grin. Yeah, I sure remember. It’s shitty, right? Man, he worries way too much sometimes.

But just as I was about to give the correct reply, I realized something horrifying. Ummmm… I’m kind of being hugged by Shion right now, aren’t I? If I use the S word to describe her kitchen work…what will happen then?

An image of hell ran across my mind. Oh crap!! If I don’t think of something, Shion’s gonna crush me into jelly with those arms of hers! I can’t believe I let myself fall right into this trap! How utterly devious of him! What’ll I do? Is there some way out of this?

…I got it! Time to have the Great Sage come to the rescue. I’m sure it’ll have the most wonderful solution to all of this…

…and then, upon trying to summon it, I realized it was gone. Um…what? Great, uh, Great Sage?!

…And, wait a second, who had been answering me just a moment ago…?

Report. The unique skill Great Sage has evolved into the ultimate skill Raphael, Lord of Wisdom. As a result, it has disappeared and cannot be accessed.

Whoa. Skills can evolve, too? And, uh, Raphael? Named after the angel and everything? Sounds pretty neat…

But I can explore this later. I still have an unprecedented crisis to deal with right now. All right, Raphael, if you’re the Lord of Wisdom, find the best way possible for me to deceive Shion!

Understood. My calculations did not find any relevant results.

You piece of crap!!!

The Sage was never all that useful for things like this, either, and I guess Raphael inherited that same quirk. He said something about “calculations,” but I doubt he gave the question any serious thought at all. Probably just trying to humor me. The more things change the more they stay the same. Maybe he hasn’t really evolved much at all, apart from the fancy-pants name he grew.

This whole exchange took less than a second to unfold in my mind.

“Hmm? What about my cooking?”

“Ah, um, well, I’m sure Sir Rimuru misses it terribly, no? He can’t wait to see what you’ve been working on, I’m sure.”

Someone needed to stop Benimaru before this got any worse. Damn it. That bastard wanted this to happen from the start! And he even made damn sure in advance that he didn’t get caught up in it. What an asshole! This great sleep session I had, and he’s threatening to have Shion put me in the kind of sleep you never wake up from!

“Ah, I see! He wants me to cook a meal, then, is it? How thoughtful of you, Sir Benimaru.”

Shion smiled triumphantly at the suggestion as I was seized by a turbulent sense of foreboding.

“So you see now?” Benimaru said. “I know this goes without saying, but I—”

… Let me provide a suggestion, then. I recommend replying with, “The answer Benimaru suggested I make was ‘It’s shitty,’ wasn’t it? I do remember that well.”

Wha—?!

The Great Sage—I mean, the Lord of Wisdom—just came up with the most brilliant answer in the universe. Man, I’m sorry I accused him of not evolving too much. You rock, Raphael!

“Hang on, Benimaru! We had a question and answer planned out in advance, right?”

“…Um?”

“Oh, don’t worry—I remember the whole process. The answer that you decided was correct for this was ‘It’s shitty,’ was it not? I remember it perfectly!”

Shion’s smile froze in place as several beads of sweat began running down Benimaru’s face in tandem.

“Sh-Shion, wait! Sir Rimuru has only just awoken! I fear his brain might still be in a state of confusion!”

I took this moment to nimbly evacuate myself away from Shion’s chest, keeping an eye on the panicked Benimaru as I did.

“Very well,” Shion flatly replied. “Sir Benimaru… No, just Benimaru. I serve Sir Rimuru directly; I have no need to use noble titles to refer to you. But if you had wanted to try my cuisine that badly, you should have said so. I will gladly feed it to you until you’re ready to burst!”

She stormed off, smile still frozen on her face. That was pretty scary. Really scary actually.

“Wh-what did you do that for?!”

“Ha-ha-ha! I’m not sure what you mean, Benimaru. Have fun trying to survive the next meal, I guess.”

“This isn’t funny, my lord! I have been testing her new creations so long that I’ve developed Resist Poison recently, too…”

Benimaru could see doom lying ahead. If Shion was that enthu siastic to start cooking, this could be the end for him. Poison resistance, though? Really? That’s pretty much saying that Shion’s food is poison, isn’t it?

“Yeah, well, as they say, you reap what you sow…”

Benimaru gave my assessment a dejected shake of the head. I had no words to console him with. One misstep, after all, and it could’ve been me facing that maelstrom. Better, I thought, to let the original perpetrator face her wrath instead.

After Shion left, the newly resurrected survivors clamored to greet me, as if they’d been waiting their turn this whole time. Everyone had the same knowledge and personality as before (although the atmosphere was maybe slightly different with some), which was a great relief. No memory loss, no nothing—and their souls were all fully intact.

That wouldn’t have been possible if I didn’t obtain the Complete Memory extra skill—glad to see all that evolution effort didn’t go to waste. As one of the crowd put it, “Now I can keep coming back to life no matter how many times I die!”—and I wasn’t entirely sure he was joking.

Complete Memory allowed you to directly tap into the target’s soul. Normally the power could be possessed only by spirit-type life-forms, but somehow I had stumbled upon it, too. They said something about souls that shared the same “genealogy” with me and all that, so I guess it technically applied to me. That’s what the “gift” thing was, probably—it got everyone back, and I couldn’t be happier with it.

After we wrapped up our reunion, everyone went right back to work. The rest of the townspeople also received some kind of gift, I think, but there was no time to examine them all in detail. Benimaru mentioned a “variety of issues,” and I had to address them quickly.

So the moment we overcome one crisis, a new one comes right down the pike, huh…?

“Ah, before we discuss Shion’s cooking, I have something important to tell you.”

Benimaru gave a signal, and on cue, the Three Lycanthropeers from the demon lord Carillon’s domain appeared. Ohhh, right, Milim was fighting him, wasn’t she? I forgot.

“First, let me congratulate you on your evolution!” Alvis the Golden Snakehorn declared as he fell to one knee.

“Yes, yes, but what’s going on?”

Benimaru was the first to open his mouth. As he put it, evacuees from the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania had arrived just a few moments ago. Remarkably, I had been fast asleep for three whole days—which meant that, um, the conflict between demon lords was over and done?

“…Yes. I saw it all for myself.”

Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang, had stayed close to Carillon’s side for the entire battle against Milim. And the result?

“Lord Carillon and Milim collided right into each other…and the demon lord Milim proved all too superior. The Beast Kingdom is…I am sad to say…no more.”

Dang.

I had trouble forming a response. Benimaru gasped as well; apparently, this was news to him.

Phobio was himself gravely injured but still managed to take a Warp Portal over and regroup with Alvis. Gabil’s potions saved his life after that.

The Three Lycanthropeers were silent, Sufia the Snowy Tigerclaw gritting her teeth.

“However,” Phobio continued, “after an unbelievably massive explosion, it was none other than the demon lord Frey who delivered the blow that defeated our lord. The very idea of demon lords working together… I could hardly even imagine. I always believed that Milim had a distaste for such schemes. And, looking back, something else about it struck me as odd…”

So Milim and Frey had joined forces to defeat Carillon. I found that pretty damn odd, too. Milim promised him a one-on-one grudge match, and she didn’t strike me as the kind of demon lord to pull a mean trick like taking along a ringer. Frey, according to Phobio, met eyes with him for just a passing moment. It happened so fast—Frey flying off with Carillon’s body as if nothing was amiss—that he decided it was just his mind playing tricks on him.

“But,” he went on, “the demon lord Frey has the best eyesight out of all her kind. They say she can shoot down small animals on the ground from the loftiest of heights. I may have been hidden, but there was no way she could miss me. And something else concerns me about her behavior…”

Apparently, Sufia reported, the direction Frey flew off to was all wrong. A perfect 180 degrees from her own domain, in fact, and a fair distance off from Milim’s lands.

“Her bearing would have taken her straight for the demon lord Clayman’s domain.”

The other two Lycanthropeers shuddered.

“I—I need to go out for a moment.”

Alvis stepped up to stop him. “Wait right there, Sufia!”

“Yes! If you’re going, then we all need to join forces in our attack.”

Hoo boy. That’s not gonna work. Beastlings like these have a one-track mind, and they’re so easily riled into fury. Even Alvis, who seemed like the most levelheaded of the crew, was no exception.

“Well, hang on,” I ventured. “We need more information before anything else. The way you put it, Phobio, Carillon is still alive. I don’t know what Frey is like as a person, but there’s no way Milim would let someone just horn in on her fight without getting damn angry about it. There has to be more behind this.”

“I feel the same way,” Benimaru said.

“Right. So listen: We all want to help you rescue your lord. So don’t go berserk on me right now, all right? If we don’t work together on this, you might wind up destroying whatever chance you’ve got. Worst-case scenario, you’ll have to fend off three demon lords at the same time. So don’t jump right in yet, okay?”

“Understood.”

“All right…”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru.”

They all nodded, regaining their composure.

We then decided to let them rest and recuperate for a bit. Them, and the other ten thousand or so people who evacuated to town with them, all utterly exhausted. Trekking all the way to Clayman’s domain and challenging him to battle right now was absurd.

In a short time, we had emergency stations handing out food, and the great meeting hall had lodgings hastily prepared to deal with the influx. We weren’t at full strength yet; my people were only just beginning to wake back up. For today, at least, we decided to kick back and relax with a meal together.

Surrounded by the pleasant smell of the emergency kitchens, we awaited Shion’s cooking with a sense of impending terror.

“So, um, good luck at dinner, okay, Benimaru?”

“Wait just a minute! We should be eating her food together, shouldn’t we?! She’s trying her best! Maybe it’ll actually be good, by some miracle! Just promise me you won’t leave me alone!”

“L-let go of me! Miracles don’t occur that often!”

I’ve just wrapped up this awesome, awe-inspiring evolution event, and the first thing I do after that is sample Shion’s cuisine? What kind of prank is this?

In the end, though, the teary-eyed Benimaru was just too pathetic a sight to bear, so I agreed to join him at the dinner table—or more like Shion pushed me to a seat adjacent to him.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! I’m sure you’re looking forward to this just as much as Benimaru is, aren’t you, Sir Rimuru?”

No! Not at all!

Easy enough for me to think that, really, but near impossible to say it. One look into Shion’s eyes, and I realized— oh crap, there’s nowhere to run .

Thus, as the people around us celebrated their resurrection and revitalized their spirits with food and drink, we were being treated to a tasting session straight from the deepest pit of hell.

A few more moments and the lethal weapon that was Shion’s cooking was locked and loaded on plates. She beamed as she brought the food (?) in on large platters. The time has come.

I took a look at one of the steaming plates, and—

“—Whoaaa! Whoa, whoa, whoa! What’s that stuff?”

It wasn’t food. I absolutely refused to accept that this was food. There was a bowl with assorted stuff tossed into it. A stew, maybe? Was that her intention? Wait—no, right, this wasn’t food. Never. There shouldn’t be any question about it in the first place.

“Shion?! Shion, wait a second! There’s something I want to ask you. Do you understand the concept of what ‘cooking’ means?”

“Of course, Sir Rimuru. What do you think? It looks scrumptious, doesn’t it?”

“You damned fool! You got carrots, potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, onions, and all kinds of other vegetables—but you just tossed all of them in whole! I shouldn’t be able to recognize every single one of them in the bowl like that, all floating in the broth or whatever! You’re supposed to peel them, or cut them, or do a whole lot of other crap with them!”

I was shouting, straight from the heart.

Then I turned to Benimaru. “What is the meaning of this? I thought I left Shion’s care in your hands. She hasn’t learned anything at all from you, has she?”

He gazed back at me, as glassy-eyed as a dead fish. “I just couldn’t do it. I’ve never had a setback in my life, but with her, I’ve hit a wall—the wall of my personal limits. Since childhood, I always assumed that nothing was impossible for me, but now I see just how shallow-minded that was.”

How brazen of him. The wall of his personal limits? Bullshit. I’m eating this, too, remember?

I glanced up at Shion. She was quivering, on the brink of tears. I began to feel like maybe I was the bad guy here… Ah well. Like a monk experiencing enlightenment, it was time for me to brace myself, treat this as training, and have at it.

“All right, all right. I’ll take it, okay? But at least try to actually prepare your ingredients before putting them in next time.”

“Umm, but whenever I try chopping up food, I wind up chopping up the rest of the building I’m in, too…”

“Huh? The whole building? Not just the cutting board?”

“…Right. My Goriki-maru is so wonderfully sharp, but it’s a little long as well, so…” Shion pointed at the longsword strapped to her back.

Uh, she cooked with that?

Benimaru threw his hands in the air, as if in surrender. Talk about someone you can’t rely on in a pinch. My esteem for him was in free fall right now.

“Listen,” I attempted, “a katana isn’t meant for cooking. All right? That’s what they’ve invented cooking knives for.”

“No, I work strictly with Goriki-maru. I wouldn’t want to cheat on it with other blades…”

“Oh. I was planning to give you some kitchen knives as a present actually, but I guess you don’t need them?”

“Wait! I was wrong! My mistake! Goriki-maru just told me I was allowed to play around with other knives after all!”

“…Good to hear. So yeah, use those knives to cook from now on, okay?”

She sure knew a gift horse when she saw one. Ah well. It certainly beats chomping into whole tomatoes in what was supposed to be soup. If he ate nothing but food like this (not that I was acknowledging it as food, mind you), no wonder Benimaru acquired Resist Poison.

Now it was my turn…but, hell, I was a demon lord now. Ingesting something like this couldn’t kill me, right? So I resigned myself to my fate and went into my human form. Closing my eyes and steeling my resolve, I brought a spoonful of some kind of mystery goop to my mouth.

Just as I was about to swallow it as quickly as possible, I noticed something odd… Huh? This is, like, super good. Almost like she’s fully re-created Shuna’s home cooking…? You’re kidding me! It tasted nothing like it looked.

I opened my eyes wide as I slowly, carefully ferried another spoonful of ingredients to my lips.

This is good !

Benimaru watched, half praying, his eyes asking Are you all right? to me. I motioned him to give it a shot as well. I guess his experiences with Shion’s food up to now were just as bad as I imagined.

He dejectedly took a spoonful—then his eyes burst open in surprise. Guess my tongue wasn’t lying to me. I almost thought something got screwed up with my evolution for a moment.

Shion watched us with the biggest cheese-eating grin I ever saw in my life. It kind of pissed me off, frankly.

“Shion, what… What is this? Why’s this so much better-tasting than it looks?”

“Hee-hee-hee! Well—”

It turns out—and I had no idea about this—that when the moment of evolution arrived, Shion wished deeply in her mind to become good at cooking. It would take a dumbass like her to wish for something like that as her gift. What was she even thinking? It was exasperating, but I supposed it was also supremely Shion-like of her.

“Hee-hee! So there you have it. I’ve obtained the unique skill Master Chef!”

Yeesh. What a sight. Earning a unique skill because she wanted to get better in the kitchen… How badly did she wish for that anyway? And the way she described it, the skill let anything she made taste exactly how she pictured it in her mind, no matter what kind of dish it was. No wonder it tasted like Shuna made it—that was exactly what she was aiming for.



Shion’s efforts, as always, were pointed in the completely wrong direction. And nothing could’ve been purer Shion than that.

So the rest of the day turned into a wild party, a feast that continued well into the wee hours. There was none of the grim pathos of the past few days. Shion, and everyone else, was back, and their presence brought joy to the town.

There was Gobzo and Gobta, showing off assorted tricks to their audience. One of them had a knife stuck in his head—wonder how they pulled that off. It looked like it was bleeding, too, but maybe I just imagined it. They were laughing so much that I’m sure there was nothing to be concerned about.

Yohm was there, too, along with Elen and her bodyguards. He and Gruecith were staggering around, which was still a better showing than the totally passed-out Kabal. But Mjurran was the clear winner of the night. She didn’t act a single bit drunk—an experienced partier, I suppose. Sufia, noticing this, became the latest challenger to fall victim to her in a drinking match as the party descended further into chaos. It was a wild scene, but at least it helped the lycanthropes forget their worries for a while.

Starting tomorrow, we’d have a lot of cleanup work to do. I’d need to consider what to do with the Beast Kingdom refugees, as well as how we’d rescue Carillon. Plus, there was the Western Holy Church to consider. We’d need to pay careful attention to how they reacted, assuming we wanted to keep on the Western Nations’ good side.

There was a mountain of issues to deal with, but—for now—I supposed we could have a little fun. And maybe it was just for today, but this was turning into a real fest, I’d say. Japanese people love their festivals, after all. No excuse is too petty to kick one off, no reason too trivial for someone to plan a drinking party for his friends. That’s how we lived around here. No need to keep things tense all the time.

I should also mention that this party wound up becoming a yearly occurrence in this land. They named it the Tempest Resurrection Festival.

Deep into the night, while everyone was sleeping off their epic benders, I was pondering over our future direction when an unfamiliar person greeted me.

“I am glad you are awake, my lord. Allow me to express my heartfelt joy at seeing you become a full-fledged demon lord.”

The figure bowed deeply before me.

“Uh, who’re you?”

“I…?! Surely you jest, my lord. Nothing could damage a demon’s heart more than to hear that…”

The visitor seemed genuinely insulted. He looked like a pretty high-level demon, but I seriously had no idea who this was.

Then Ranga poked his head out from my shadow. “Master, this is one of the demons you summoned, using the knights as your bait.”

Ohhh, right. This dude’s still here.

“Ahhh, Sir Ranga!”

The demon turned thankful eyes to Ranga, as if in the audience of a personal savior. And, come to think of it, I did see him during the party, fidgeting and looking supremely out of his element.

“Well, thanks for all your help. I heard you rounded up the survivor for me, too, so Ranga and I could get back here safely.”

“Oh, no, I am hardly worthy of your thanks. But along those lines…”

“Well, sorry to keep you here all this time. You can go back home now.”

“…What?!”

That would explain his behavior. He wanted to leave, but I hadn’t gotten around to giving the order. So I did—but this demon was acting all weird about it. He had rather handsome features—really, you’d almost call him beautiful, despite being male and all. And now that face looked bewildered, ready to cry at any moment. It worried me.

“Oh, um, did I not give you enough of a reward or something?”

“Nothing of the sort, my lord. As I asked you before, I seek the honor of joining your followers! What do you think? Will you please give it some consideration?”

Joining my followers? Umm, I think this Greater Demon I summoned said something like that, yeah, but… Wait. This guy in front of me ain’t just “Greater.” We were talking like nothing was amiss, but this wasn’t any kind of Greater Demon at all.

“Huh? Ranga, did I really summon this dude?”

“You certainly did, my master!”

Hmm. All right.

“Upon receiving the knight corpses you offered as my summoner, I have earned my physical body. I can only hope that I may repay this great favor to you in some way.”

“Oh really? Well, neat…”

He did seem kinda strong, and if he wanted to be my follower that badly, then hell yeah. But that was a two-edged sword. If he ever went out of control, I worried that even Benimaru would have trouble stopping him.

And what about the other two demons with him?

Understood. When carrying out the Secret Art of Revival, you began to run short on magicule energy. When you did, the two demons rendered themselves into magicule form and disappeared in order to help you earn the energy required.

…Man . Raphael tossed that bombshell out like it was nothing. He was acting even more coldhearted than the Sage, showing off the kind of stakes he worked with. So the demons helped out with Shion’s resurrection, playing a role of their own behind the scenes? Boy, now I’m sorry I thought for even a moment that they were useless.

But what now, though? This guy’s aching so badly to help me out that he tossed his demon friends under the bus for me. It’d just be mean to ignore that.

“I can’t really give you a salary or anything. You okay with that?”

“The right to serve you will provide all the joy I need, my lord.”

Well, hell, if he’s willing to work for free, I like those terms a lot.

“All right. Well, sounds good to me. As of today, you’re officially one of us.”

“Ahhhh! I thank you, my lord!”

“Quit with the ‘my lord’ crap. It’s creepy.”

“I understand. How shall I refer to you, then?”

“Rimuru works.”

“Ahhh, Rimuru—such a sweet tone that name has. Sir Rimuru it shall be, then…”

Talk about grandiose. I had no idea what about me he found so attractive, but he just couldn’t wait to be my servant.

“Right, yeah, great. But what’s your name?”

“Being a nameless demon is more than enough for me, Sir Rimuru.”

Huh? He looked way too high-level to not have a name. But that’d be too much of a pain in the ass to deal with. Let’s do what I’ve always done, then.

“Okay. Well, in place of any other reward, I want to give you a name. You got a problem with that?”

“My word! No, no problem at all. This is the greatest gift a demon could ask for!”

His well-featured face burst into abject joy. I guess that’s just how I am, huh? There’s something about me that demons find irresistible. I think I had a right to boast about that a bit.

Right. So, a name. Time to fish into my grab bag of supercar models, maybe? Something that sounds nice and demonic? In fact, why not just throw a fastball straight down the middle with this?

“Your name is Diablo. May you live up to it in your service to me!”

And the moment I said it, I felt my energy drain. I was getting pretty used to this by now. It took only about half my magicules this time, too. The pessimistic side of me was expecting more, given how high and mighty this demon looked. Naming Beretta, that Greater Demon, took over 30 percent of my magicules, so he must’ve been greater than Greater after all.

Report. The individual Diablo was an Arch Demon. When his master evolved, he experienced a massive upgrade in magicule stores. As a result, making a comparison strictly on percentage of magicules consumed will not provide an accurate picture.

Um, all right?

But really, Raphael here seems a hell of a lot more informal with me than the Sage ever was…

Incorrect. It is your imagination.

Oh yeah? You seem awfully free with the advice you’re offering, considering that.

But the Lord of Wisdom just said something I didn’t want to ignore. My energy had gone up that much, and Diablo still took half of it? Like, how much of a boost are we talking here?

Understood. For reference’s sake, the figure is over ten times what it previously was.

Holy crap.

What the hell did I just walk into? I’ve turned into some kinda monster.

Diablo, the demon before me, remained motionless on one knee. A sort of dark cocoon enveloped his body as he prepared for his own evolution. I am so careless sometimes. I guess there’s no cure for stupidity, even after death, so I’ll just have to grin and bear it.

No more casual naming for me! I mean it this time!

I swore it to myself, but something told me I wouldn’t stick to it for very long.

The evolution completed itself as I mused over this. Within the dark form I was greeted with, I could see streaks of red and gold amid his black hair. His eyes were just as golden as before, his pupils shining just as eerie a shade of crimson. The areas that’d normally be white were instead a shade of jet-black, which made them stand out all the more. As he rose to his full slender height, I realized he was dressed in the very peak of classy domestic clothing, like a perfect butler. It was a new image for him, compared to the high-born prince he’d looked like before.

He used to be a ruler; now he served one. But, if anything, that arrogant aura that surrounded him had grown, not shrunk.

“Diablo. That is my name. My heart is filled with deep emotion, Sir Rimuru. From this day forward, I promise to serve you with all my heart.”

He gave me a respectful salute.

This transformation apparently reflected his desire to be my ever-loyal servant. Demons could use the intrinsic skill Create Material to whip up any kind of clothing they wanted, it turned out, so there was no need for a wardrobe. Pretty useful. I’m kinda jealous.

Almost immediately, he said, “Sir Rimuru, you appear to be fretting about something. What is it that troubles you? Because I would hope you can discuss it with me.”

It must’ve been obvious to him. I decided to explain the whole situation, since it’d help me arrange my own thoughts as well. Even if it didn’t lead to an answer, it’d help keep my mind calm.

“It’s nothing big… Well, it is, I guess. I’m thinking about the future.”

“The future?”

“Right now, we’ve got too many problems to deal with at the same time. I think we’re already over capacity with all the plans we need to carry out.”

“Ah…”

I reviewed the circumstances for him.

My main concern was the demon lord Carillon and how Milim was involved with him. But the most pressing matter was how we’d clean up the Kingdom of Farmus and check the Western Holy Church’s movements—both issues that could greatly affect our future relationship with mankind. If we made any misstep with the Church in particular, we’d wind up being the nemesis of every human being in the world. I wanted to do whatever I could to prevent that.

It would be ridiculous, though, to attempt to address all these problems at once. I needed to line up our enemies, our problems, one by one and secure victory against them.

“I see. All of that makes sense to me now. Allow me, in that case, to shoulder some of the burden! I will be happy to fine-tune matters so multiple problems never occur at the same time for you. Your orders, Sir Rimuru!”

Ahhh, ever the sly demon, isn’t he? He understood my worries in a flash and was ready to take action against them. But I wanted to discuss matters with everyone else before deciding on anything.

“Well, hang on. There’s no big rush. We’ll decide on a direction at a conference tomorrow, so why don’t you join us?”

If Diablo’s that eager to pitch in, let him. He seems pretty shrewd, and it’d be a waste to let his powers go unflexed.

Report. I believe we do not need to worry about the Western Holy Church. The Analysis and Assessment of the Unlimited Imprisonment that has shut away the individual Veldora will be completed shortly. Releasing this individual is believed to provide a suitable restraint on the Holy Church’s actions.

Ooooh. Neat. Yeah, if we could release Veldora, that’d sure keep the Church from pulling any funny moves.

…Uh, wait, whaaaat?! You’re being way too engaging with me, Raphael!

Incorrect. It is your imagination.

Yeah, yeah, my imagination. Knock it off, man.

Let’s get back to Veldora. We can actually release him?

Analysis is slated to finish by tomorrow afternoon.

Wow, Raphael. I guess you’ve gotten a lot more useful than I thought.

Well, that certainly opened up a few paths to a solution. As long as we could keep the Western Holy Church in check, that’d give us all the time we wanted to negotiate with the Western Nations. I was scared the Church was agitating them to believe we were evil, and if we kept that from happening, we already knew there were nations there willing to work with us.

Farmus, meanwhile, was no longer a threat. We had crushed the core of their military, and we held their king hostage. We’d help pave the way for Yohm to establish a new nation and focus the attention on him, and nobody there would even have the free time to meddle with us then.

So what problems did that leave?

“Right! I think something’s gonna come together after all!”

I would focus exclusively on striking the demon lord Clayman. Milim told me that anyone who declared themselves a demon lord would quickly face retribution from the others. Why not turn it into a big debutante ball—get my name out there with a bang and go onstage as the sassiest, brassiest demon lord out there?

“Ah, has an idea come to mind?”

“It sure has. I’ve decided to become a demon lord—in name and deed.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. That’s the spirit, Sir Rimuru. And I, Diablo, shall be faithful to you for all the days of—”

“Hmph! And I, Ranga, am his most faithful of servants!”

I gave Ranga a pat on the head for that. The unexpected declaration was kind of endearing, I thought.

It seemed like we had a good playbook to work with tomorrow. And under a sky full of stars, atop Ranga’s back as he squinted in bliss, my own mind felt just as clear and glittery.

The next day, I informed everyone of my plan.

The following people were in attendance:

Shuna, my temporary secretary.

Shion, my official secretary. The temporary one was far better-suited to the job, but never mind that.

Rigurd and the other hobgoblin elders in government.

Rigur and Gobta from our security team.

Benimaru and Hakuro, representing our military.

Kaijin and Kurobe from the manufacturing department, along with Garm and Dold.

Geld and Mildo from construction.

Lilina from management.

Soei, Soka, and the other three members of our espionage team.

Ranga in my shadow as kind of an emotional support animal, I guess?

I also invited Gabil to join in, as well as Diablo, serving as a second secretary of mine. It’d be a good opportunity to introduce him, I figured.

Outside of native Tempestians, there was Yohm; his assistant, Kazhil; and Rommel the staff officer. Mjurran and Gruecith were there, of course, along with the Three Lycanthropeers of Eurazania. There were over thirty people in our meeting hall, all told.

“Thank you all for gathering here, ladies and gentlemen!”

“Why this sudden meeting, Sir Rimuru?”

I was trying to act all cool here, given that I was about to announce my presence as a demon lord, but Benimaru just cut me off. Guess I’ll keep it normal after all.

“First, I have someone to introduce to you all. This is Diablo, who helped me out of a rough spot just a bit ago. He’s pretty strong, and we can all rely on him, so make nice, all right?”

“Hmm? He certainly seems well guarded… I imagine he is just as experienced as you say, Sir Rimuru.”

With Hakuro’s stamp of approval, everyone else safely assumed that Diablo wasn’t some also-ran strength-wise. Without any further complaint, he immediately became one of the gang. Moving on:

“Now—Gabil!”

“Y-yes?”

The dragonewt looked ill at ease in this gathering of top brass. He nervously shot to his feet upon hearing his name.

“Effective today, I’m going to name you head of our development department. That’s a provisional title, but it means you’re now in Tempest leadership. Make me proud, all right?”

“Y-yes! Yes, sir! I promise you that I, Gabil, will eternally put my nose to the grindstone for you!!”

He choked up midway as he accepted the offer. Research and development seemed to suit Gabil a lot more than I would’ve guessed. I was sure he’d do a great job.

Now it was time to visit the main topic.

“So I’ve decided on our direction going forward, and I wanted to relay it to all of you. This has everything to do with Yohm and the Three Lycanthropeers as well, so I want you to listen carefully.”

“Whatever you want, pal.”

“Does this have to do with rescuing Lord Carillon?”

All eyes were upon me. Without further delay, I turned into human form and faced them.

“I’ve decided to become a demon lord.”

“Right.”

…Huh? Kind of a tepid response.

“Um… Meaning that I’m taking the role…”

“You already have, haven’t you?”

Shion gave me an odd look. I guess she figured that was the whole reason she was alive now. And yeah, I was a true demon lord in terms of my rank or whatever, but…

“I don’t mean that. I mean, I’m going to declare to the world that I’m a demon lord, too!”

“Oh? Meaning that you’re going to challenge the other demon lords at their own game, Sir Rimuru?”

Hakuro was kind enough to say it for me.

“Right! Exactly! And not ‘the other demon lords’ exactly. I’m gunning straight for Clayman.”

Yohm, Mjurran, Gruecith, and the Three Lycanthropeers nodded their earnest approval.

“I see,” said Benimaru, boldly smiling. “Seizing a seat at the demon lords’ table for yourself, then? Interesting.”

Nobody else had any objection.

“Right. Behind the scenes, as Farmus attacked us, it was Clayman controlling Mjurran and all the rest. I can’t let that stand. There’s a pretty good chance he’s the one who sicced Milim and Frey on Eurazania, too. That’s all the reason I need, isn’t it?”

My audience nodded back.

I then discussed my thoughts further with them—about our future relations with the Western Nations, about the postwar cleanup with Farmus, about the need to keep the Holy Church from interfering with us, and about rescuing Carillon, as I prom ised the Beast Kingdom’s denizens. I also passed out work assignments along the way.

“Rigurd! I’m leaving negotiations with the Western Nations to you. Evacuating all those merchants back to Blumund should be a pretty good bargaining chip to work with. Keep in mind the trust we’ve built so far and proceed carefully.”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru! You can count on me!”

He sounded ready for the job. The other elders looked just as enthusiastic about it, practically bursting with confidence. I guess they were on pretty good terms with the merchants.

“Benimaru! I want you to tabulate exactly what happened to everyone who evolved in town. We’re going to use every weapon at our disposal to crush Clayman, and to do that, I need to know what kind of powers I have to work with.”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru.”

He, too, was brimming with confidence. It was the expression of a true general, one worthy of being entrusted with all military matters. He sucked at keeping an eye on Shion, but when it came to this job, here was a man you could rely on.

“Shion! I’ll have you interrogate our prisoners. Yohm and Mjurran, you’ll help Shion out with that. Make them talk as much as you can about the state of things inside Farmus, and help us seize their country. Before we do that, we’ll have to finish all the postwar cleanup work, too. There’s going to be a new nation set in place, one with Yohm as its king and leader, and we need all the intel we can to make it work. Don’t kill any of them, all right? They might be useful to us later.”

“I happily accept the task, Sir Rimuru!”

“Sure thing, pal.”

“I will do what I can. Hopefully it will help me repay the favor a little.”

Shion was ready. I made doubly sure to instruct her not to kill anyone, because I easily imagined her doing so otherwise. We should be fine now, hopefully, even as I sensed a sort of restless turbulence deep within her eyes that concerned me. Hopefully I was just imagining it. She was always quick to fly into a rage, so I figured this would be a good way to let her get back at ’em, but maybe I was being a bit too rash.

Ah well. She wouldn’t be alone, ever, so I figured it’d be fine. I had future work for Yohm and Mjurran, so it’d be best if they helped her for now. I made sure to have them contact me should Shion begin to act unstable. That ought to be enough caution to cover my ass.

“Soei!”

“I will gather information on Clayman as quickly as I can.”

Ah. Right. Good. Soei’s certainly a man who can work. He guessed at my motives before I could even give him his orders, and Clayman was the only prey in his eyes right now. Scary dude. Glad I could rely on him—and before I could finish the thought, all five members of our espionage team had disappeared, already carrying out their duties. Once he was back, I was sure we’d have another strategic conference to carry out.

As for the others:

“Now, as I’ve said, I’m going to crush Clayman. I’d like the Three Lycanthropeers to help me with this if possible?”

“I would expect nothing else, O great leader of Jura.”

“Just say the word! We’re running on your orders for now!”

“We are all of the same mind. We lycanthropes reward trust with trust—we repay our favors with our lives. We trust you, and you have given us a favor we could never repay. Now allow us to stake our lives on paying you back!”

“All right. Well, here’s the order. I want you to rest up, recharge yourselves, and prepare for the decisive duel!”

“““Yes, Sir Rimuru!”””

All three of them kneeled and acknowledged that they were under my orders. That’d be a huge boost to our war power, not to mention some extra provisions to use against Clayman. That was a relief.

“Good. So, I want everyone else to evaluate the damage to our town and repair it. We also need some living quarters set up for the lycanthropes—help them maintain a decent quality of life while they’re here. And keep up your security patrols to make sure we don’t have any fights or trouble!”

Everyone nodded their agreement. That marked the end of this salvo of orders.

“Excellent. Now we’ll just wait for Soei’s report before we hold another conference. Until then, I want all of you to figure out the main issues with the work you’re assigned and put together a plan we can execute against them!”

“““Yes, sir!”””

The audience stood up and saluted me. I nodded and gave them a little smile, putting on my mask as I sat down.

“Get to it!”

Every one of them immediately sprang into action.

The only ones left in the room were Diablo, Shuna, and me. Shion griped a bit about being the “real” secretary and all that, but (luckily for me) she put the orders I gave her first. She lectured Diablo a bit on what the job of secretary entailed, but he was perfectly safe in ignoring all of that. Already he was eagerly nodding and giving thoughtful looks at what I said, so maybe that made Shion get all stuck-up with him. If I hadn’t stopped her, she might still be yapping at him now.

I had given her three prisoners to interrogate. She had to take that job seriously or else it’d be pointless. It wasn’t an interrogation so much as torture at Shion’s hands, truthfully speaking. I had given permission for her to deal any kind of mental anguish she could think of, as long as physical pain wasn’t involved. The victims I resurrected were allowed to join in, too, and I was sure they’d be more than eager to make them sing like canaries.

The anger swirling within me had largely calmed now that they were all back. It meant I had no real drive to kill that seedy-looking old man and the guy from the Western Holy Church. The main perpetrator already had his heart broken by Diablo, besides. I couldn’t forgive them, but I no longer had much interest in laying my hands on them.

Depending on how things went, it might be better to let the king of Farmus and the archbishop live so we could more effectively use them. As long as Shion didn’t kill them, then, I was prepared to give tacit approval to whatever she did. If someone hits you, you gotta hit back. Hit back, put the fear of God in them, and make sure they never make the same mistake again. Shion was the perfect person to handle this, and once she extracted the info we needed, I was sure she’d give them a hearty meal—using Master Chef to make sure it tasted just the way she wanted.

While Shion played the role of interrogator, I had other business to take care of.

First, I had to study how this world handled postwar cleanup. I wanted to at least consider things like what they did with POWs, as well as the other conventional wisdom surrounding warfare around here. If all of mankind considered us to be monsters, then I could just operate by my own rules—but if there was a chance we could build cooperative relationships, like we had now, I wanted to nudge things in that direction as much as I could.

Thus I decided to examine what nations generally did in times like these. Yohm and Elen’s gang wouldn’t know anything about politics or government. For something like this, Vester was my man. Soon, there was a knock on the door, followed by Diablo bringing the former dwarven minister into my chamber.

“I hear you called for me, sir?” he asked when he set eyes upon me. “And let me say, I am so glad to see you safe after all these calamities that befell us!”

Yeah, that ain’t the half of it. Not that they were over yet, either. I decided to cut straight to the point.

“You said it. But I wanted to ask you: How do human countries around here wage war against each other?”

“…Ah, you are curious about Farmus, then? That is a rather thorny issue to deal with.”

Vester then began discussing the rules of war with me.

First off, Western Nations countries that were members of the so-called Council of the West generally didn’t fight one another. Even if they did, it’d have to involve formal declarations of war and a litany of strict rules. Failure to adhere to those would put the full weight of the Council against you—meaning every other nation in that western region, pretty much.

What about nations not involved with the Council, though? Assorted scenarios could play out in that case, but basically, the Council never got involved no matter who won or lost. If one side engaged in behavior that was cruel and inhumane beyond reason, however, it would certainly torpedo that nation’s reputation within the Council. Just because rules didn’t apply to the other side, that didn’t mean you could do whatever you wanted. Trying to navigate the boundaries of this seemed like a big headache to me.

On the other hand, though, if you were invaded by another nation, that was a different story. You had the right to request rescue support from the Council, and that was one major reason why the Council had so many small kingdoms represented among its ranks.

Larger nations, such as the Dwarven Kingdom and the Eastern Empire (full name: Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire), naturally weren’t involved with the Council. Get stormed by one of those outfits, and the Council was ready to handle that with a unified front—but if you’re the one storming them, the Council was totally hands-off. You might even get kicked out of the Council for needlessly riling a superpower like that.

Having it laid out for me like that, it sounded like the Council—this sort of United Nations–like presence in this world—was based pretty heavily around the idea of weaker nations helping one another out. Considering the ever-present threat of monsters, I suppose, people there had learned that wars among mankind were pointless.

Now I had some level of understanding to work with. Within that framework, the Kingdom of Farmus had staged a single-handed invasion of Tempest. Was this a holy war, involving the full will of the Western Holy Church? That was a thornier question.

“That’s exactly the issue,” Vester advised. “If Farmus had won or at least forced a stalemate, the Holy Church could’ve driven a litany of other nations to join the battle. The way things are now, though…”

…Yeah. It took one slime to wipe out the entirety of Farmus’s military force. We’re talking literally three survivors. It had to be one of the biggest routs in all of history. Plus, they invaded a country with ties to Blumund. Was it really worth picking a fight with a nation like ours? Beating us wouldn’t earn them anything; it wouldn’t make anyone move from one side to the other. And winning was a pretty big long shot from the start…

“So,” I said, “if the Holy Church abandons Farmus, is it safe to say no other human nation will be willing to stage a military operation against us?”

“The Dwarven Kingdom isn’t part of the Council, but they do keep up on their internal goings-on. From my perspective, I would not expect any moves from them at all.”

Well, huh. Maybe we’re in a better situation than I thought.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! I see, I see. Perhaps a show of force would be advisable against the Western Nations…”

“Hang on, Diablo. I have my own thoughts about that.”

“My pardons.”

“Nah, nah. I think I’m gonna ask you to make Farmus capitulate to us.”

“Ohhh! I would be glad to take that duty.”

I nodded at him as I thought this over. Once we had Veldora resurrected, the Western Nations and the Church would be essentially bound and gagged. We could use that opportunity to prove we weren’t their enemy. Farmus was probably going to get cut out of the Council before long, besides.

Report. I believe matters will proceed in the way you predict.

Good. With Raphael, Lord of Wisdom and all that backing me up, it had to be a sure thing.

Now, how were prisoners of war handled in this world? Unfortunately, even Vester didn’t have much to offer. Wars just weren’t that common, and POWs were generally exchanged for other prisoners, for money, or for other rights and privileges.

The idea of a nation taking a rival’s supreme leader prisoner was practically unheard of. Such a talentless king would quickly lose the faith of his people, no doubt, so I’d be surprised if anyone accused us of regicide or some other dirty deed like that. I suppose we could say that he died in battle, but it’d be much better to give him back alive, I think.

“All right. Thanks for the advice. I’m glad you’re here for us, Vester.”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing that impressive,” he replied, visibly blushing.

His personality had mellowed out considerably here in Tempest, making him kind of a cheerful, intelligent man with a darker side that occasionally rose to the surface, but blushing definitely did not fit his look. There’s nothing cute about a middle-aged guy acting all bashful. “Ah, I almost forgot: Is it all right if I report on these events to King Gazel?”

“Sure, no problem. Tell him to give me some feedback if he has any.”

Even if we tried to hide it, they’d find out in a flash. Better to just give him the whole, unvarnished truth.

“Very well. I will be off, then…”

He was still blushing when he took his leave. Then something clicked in my mind. Wait a second. What if he wasn’t being bashful at all? What if he was just that, you know, charmed by me? I did have my mask off.

Wait… No way…

Assorted concerning scenarios flashed through my mind. I’d just have to hope none of them came to fruition.

The moment Vester left the chamber:

Report. Analysis and Assessment of Unlimited Imprisonment is complete.

Well, perfect. Thanks, Raphael. Let’s go outside and get Veldora out of there pronto.

“I’ve got some business to take care of, so I’ll be gone for a bit. I don’t need anyone to accompany me. Shuna, show Diablo around town for me.”

“Very well. Take care.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Sir Rimuru.”

“No prob. See you later.”

Before long, I was deep inside the Sealed Cave—the very place where Veldora was being held, a region I didn’t even let Gabil and his army come near. Unleashing the dragon in the middle of town was likely to cause some, uh, consternation, so I went down here instead. Besides, even when sealed, the area around him was so dense with magicules that people couldn’t even come near the place.

For me, though, it was easy. It used to take several minutes to pin down the coordinates for Spatial Motion, but now it required no more than a passing thought to wrap it up. In an instant, the two points in space were connected, and a hole opened up before me. One hop was all it took to reach my destination.

Okay. Let’s review where we’re at right now.

I’ve evolved into a demon lord, and my skills have changed quite a bit as a result. Essentially, all those skills (Spatial Motion included) have been brought together under the same umbrella—an umbrella called Raphael, Lord of Wisdom—making them all much easier to use.

The ultimate skills Raphael’s powers involved (quoting from him) were: Mind Accelerate, Analyze and Assess, Parallel Computation, Cast Cancel, All of Creation, Combine/Disassemble, and Ability Adjust. The unique skill Deviant, an old memento from Shizu, was gone, now integrated into Raphael’s own abilities. Maybe that was why he was a lot more talkative than my old partner?

Incorrect. That is unrelated.

So it wasn’t “just my imagination” this time. And that must mean… Ahhh, but let’s not pursue this right now.

By the way, Mind Accelerate lets me extend my rate of thinking by up to a million times. It’s a little hard to picture that with words alone, but crank it up, and it feels like time’s stopped for you. Thanks to all these skills, I could now trigger multiple magics at the same time, with no more than a fraction of a second’s delay between them. It was virtually incomparable with the Great Sage.

The ultimate skill Belzebuth, meanwhile, encompassed Predation, Stomach, Mimicry, Isolate, Rot, Soul Consume, and Food Chain. Soul Consume was a new power for me. Merciless, a power I thought could come in pretty handy, was subsumed into the others—a pity, but it was still active within Soul Consume. I still needed to break my target’s heart before I could take their soul, but it was pretty handy in practice anyway.

Another interesting thing was that Receive and Provide had merged into Food Chain. It set up this entire skill tree of sorts to tap into, with myself at the very peak. Monsters below me could provide their strength to back me up, and I could divert some of my own strength down to them. It was ridiculous—and even now, it was doing its thing, granting me access to the skills the town’s monsters picked up in their evolution. I was letting Raphael take care of all that for me.

That rounded out my skill set, and even I was shocked at how superpowered it was. There’s no way I could take full advantage of this stuff. Raphael himself was subject to Food Chain, too, placing him in the midst of an Ability Adjust. If these skills were gonna change all the time, why bother remembering them?

But enough about me. Let’s turn our attention to Veldora.

This has been a long time coming, hasn’t it? Nearly two years, in fact. But I was finally ready to keep my promise. I still needed to find a vessel of some kind for the guy, but I had a feeling one skill or another would take care of that for me.

I’m bustin’ you outta there, Veldora!!

Then I placed the order with Raphael.

The moment I did, a virtual tempest of magicules swirled around within my Stomach. If I hadn’t evolved Belzebuth, I’m not sure the Stomach would’ve been able to take the strain. It felt like a near-overwhelming gale had burst out of nowhere.

“I, the great and venerable Veldora, have returned!!”

“Venerable”? Dude, is this some new way of talking you developed while you were in here?

“Hey!” I said, trying to keep things light. “Long time no see! How you doin’?”

“…You seem to be treating this great resurrection of mine rather flippantly. But it came more quickly than I expected. I had anticipated a while longer.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Analyzing the Unlimited Imprisonment took a hell of a lot of time in itself. The way I was doing it, I’d probably need another hundred years or so, I’d guess. But then my Great Sage kind of evolved on me, so…”

“Evolved? No wonder, then. Even my unique skill Investigator told me to expect another century or so. All I could do was send the information I gleaned from the inside to your Sage, but the flow of data vastly accelerated itself out of nowhere, so I was wondering what was afoot. A skill evolving, though…? What happened there?”

I answered the question as best I could—I became a demon lord, my unique skill became an ultimate skill, the Sage became Raphael, and I’m one lean, mean, analyzin’ machine now.

“Ahhh… I see. And you’ve become a demon lord in the span of under two years?! An awakened demon lord is not some imposter pushover. Even I would have problems against such a foe!”

By “awakened,” I assumed he meant a true demon lord. When a potential seed goes through the Harvest Festival, that apparently “awakens” them—not that it really matters to me at this point.

“Yeah, well, um… What can I say, huh? I was always kind of like a genius, wasn’t I? Even back then. No regular dude would be reborn as a slime, after all. I kept on naming people, too, and that made me evolve really quickly. I mean, really, it was…easy.”

“…You’ve taken far too many risks, you fool. No wonder I noticed my magical energy being taken from me when I wasn’t paying attention. Whenever you lacked the energy to carry out your ridiculous naming sprees, you took what you needed automatically from me. Of all the foolish things! It was such a blow to my analysis performance that I feared it would extend my imprisonment. But your evolution saved us this time, then? Never did I ever anticipate anything of the sort!”

Huh? So… So I survived all those epic naming sessions mainly because of Veldora? I mean, I did think it was kind of weird, pulling off all these evolutions at what seemed like a minimum of risk. Definitely gotta knock off the naming jags in the future. Hell, no wonder the demon lords didn’t immediately set out to build a vast army for themselves. Now it made sense.

But what’s done is done. Let’s just call it all part of the plan, huh?

“I bet you didn’t. Well, I planned it that way the whole time. Did you receive any gift from my evolution, by the way? The World Language said something about everyone in my spiritual genealogy getting something…”

We should have been connected that way, too. But instead, I felt an audible huh? from my Thought Communication. Veldora fell silent for a bit.

Then:

“Ah! Ahhh! So this is an evolved skill! My unique skill Investigator has become the ultimate skill Faust, Lord of Investigation! The power to reach the ultimate truth, the final goal of my boundless research!!”

He sounded pretty excited about it, dancing around a bit in the cave. I dunno, maybe he’s the type who’s slow on the uptake. His teacher probably would’ve written “too inattentive” on his report card. But whatever.

“Oh, um, that’s great. A lot easier to evolve than you thought, huh?”

“You fool!” came the exasperated reply. “Not even I was aware of such phenomena. It is not a lot easier than I thought!”

No, I suppose not. True demon lords were a rarity, after all, and I suppose it wasn’t such a common thing.

We spent the next while catching up on stuff, sharing our knowledge with each other. Really, we could’ve spent all day down there, but I wanted to get Veldora out into the open sooner or later.

“Hey, so now that the seal’s gone and everything, you wanna go see what’s going on outside?”

“Ah, yes. But what will we do about a vessel to serve as my physical body?”

“I think we can find a way to make that happen, but there’s something I want you to promise me, all right?”

“Oh? What is that?”

“Your aura’s too huge. I want you to hold it back for me. We have human beings in town now, as well as a variety of weaker monsters. If you show up in resurrected form over there, it’s gonna wreck everything, won’t it?”

“…Ah. You really have become a king, haven’t you? All right. You have my word!”

Obtaining this firm promise was the whole reason I went so deep into this cave in the first place. I needed to be sure he could keep that crazy flow of magicules in check. Once I had his word, I unleashed my brand-new Enhanced Replication, or whatever it was called. This was the vessel I had in mind for Veldora—an exact duplicate of me, handsome face and everything.

…Well, huh. No wonder Vester fell for me. I had matured from before, taller and more grown-up. Bewitching, even. Must be the evolution affecting me.

“Hmm. Is that your intention…?”

“Yep. Use it as your vessel.”

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I see! Very well, then!”

With his blessing, I transplanted Veldora’s spiritual body—his heart, as it were—from my Stomach to the Enhanced Replication. He didn’t even have an astral body at the moment, making the operation very unstable, although it’d gradually rebuild itself as part of Veldora’s spiritual life process. My Replication should be the final defense he needed for now…or so I thought.

Report. I have an important development to share.

Whatever Raphael had, it sounded important. Something to do with Veldora, perhaps.

Report. I have confirmed the establishment of a “soul corridor” between my master and the individual Veldora. After consuming the remains of the individual Veldora and analyzing them, I have obtained the ultimate skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm.

That was some pretty heady crap that Raphael was reporting on, as if it was the day’s weather. So shocking that I lost my words for a moment. Apparently, Belzebuth consumed the dregs of Veldora that remained in my Stomach, obtaining part of its powers for itself. This firmed up the link between our souls, transforming it into this new power.

The ultimate skill Veldora consisted of Summon Storm Dragon, Restore Storm Dragon, and a family of storm-related magic. Summon Storm Dragon called forth Veldora in dragon form, the way I remembered him. He was a spiritual life-form now, but once he was fully recovered, I should be able to summon him in that shape as well. I can summon only one dragon at a time; if I summon another, the first one disappears. Maybe I could take advantage of this for transport purposes? It seemed feasible.

Restore Storm Dragon copied Veldora’s memories into my own mind. In other words, if Veldora died for some reason, I could replace him—or, to put it another way, the “real” Veldora would reside within my own soul. That was what allowed me to summon him whenever I wanted, I suppose.

The storm magic granted me access to Death-Calling Wind, Dark Lightning, and Storm of Destruction. These were all incredibly powerful spells, not at all the sort you’d find in a grimoire down at the local library, so it was a nice bonus.

That rounded out the set, and to sum up, it meant Veldora was using me as a kind of backup. Which I didn’t mind, especially if it unlocked all of Veldora’s skills for me.

“A ‘soul corridor’?” Veldora asked. “So all my memories and experiences are gathered in your mind, regardless of where we are in time and space. As long as you do not cease to exist, I am immortal. If I am subjected to Unlimited Imprisonment, you can simply resummon me to spring me out. I was once nearly invincible, but now I see I’ve been granted eternal life as well.”

Wow. Really? Like, that totally seems like cheating. Although it assumes I’ll manage to keep myself alive going forward. Still, crazy. I could create these situations, like— Ha-ha! You thought you could take me? Well, check out this storm dragon I just happened to have bumping around in my pocket! Heh-heh-heh. I almost felt bad for my rivals. Talk about the ultimate ace in the hole.

With that soul-corridor connection, changes began to occur within Veldora. With his heart linked up to my soul, he had lost all his vulnerabilities. In a single moment, both his astral and spiritual bodies were regenerated, giving him new life in his original, complete form.

And then:

“Mnh?!”



He grunted, and then his Enhanced Replication began to mutate. It grew and grew and grew, coming close to seven feet tall. Now he was tall, well-built, supple, and quite muscular. His skin was a dark shade of brown, his hair blond, and his looks rugged and masculine. He was a fine figure of a man, one with just a few suggestions of my own facial features still in place.

It was kind of like if you took my external human form and made it deliberately manlier.

I couldn’t get this manly even if I tried faking it, so Veldora’s will must’ve been involved with this. Just like the battle-obsessed freak he was, he probably wished for something that looked strong and would hold up in a fight. Ah well. At least he didn’t grow into his full, gigantic dragon form.

This resurrection certainly seemed to fill him with joy, too. “Gahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I am fully restored!! I have obtained ultimate power! Anyone who defies me shall be slain!!”

…Um, hang on a sec. That’s weird, isn’t it? He’s starting to sound like a villain here. And where have I heard that line before?

—Wait. That’s gotta be a famous line from the boss character in a manga I used to love…

“Uh… Dude. Why do you know that line?”

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I was rather bored in there, so to pass the time, I analyzed your memories and read through the works I found inside.”

“Um, don’t you think your analysis work would’ve gone a hell of a lot faster if you didn’t waste your skills on stuff like that?!”

“What?!”

“…Huh?”

We stared at each other. It wasn’t exactly an affectionate moment. Veldora’s eyes swam as he considered what he had done.

“…Well, regardless, I have finally been released! My thanks to you, Rimuru!”

Way to change the subject, you bastard. I swore in my heart that I would pursue this issue in detail later on.

Still, just as I requested, Veldora was trying his best to rein in his aura. He was trying, but after having his full, vast, expansive strength restored to him, it was all gushing out like a tsunami. So I gave him a crash course in aura suppression—otherwise, I’d never be able to introduce him to anyone else.

“Not like that! Try to picture it building up in a little compartment in your body!”

“Mmh? Ah, speaking of which…”

Veldora closed his eyes, meditating over something for a moment. Then I noticed his aura shrink down a considerable amount.

“How is this?”

“Ohhh, much better.”

“Gahhhh-ha-ha-ha! I see my manga knowledge has paid off! It is as if all the knowledge of the world was contained inside those arcane volumes!”

—No it’s not, dumbass. What a goofball, trying to act out all those crazy stories. But…well, with a little practice, he oughtta be fine.

Report. The Food Chain process on the monsters who share in your soul hierarchy is complete. A large number of skills have been gifted to you, their master. Would you like me to sift through them and execute Ability Adjust?

Yes

No

Now the Harvest Festival had done its work on the townspeople.

There was no way I’d be able to fully harness the dozens, perhaps hundreds of skills streaming my way. Better to have someone rework them to be as simple and easy to use as possible. I mean, really, a skill’s something you may or may not be able to obtain after many years of diligently applying your latent talents. Now I had a zillion. It was just too much—a waste of power on someone like me.

So I thought YES —and the process of elimination wrapped up in an instant.

Report. Using the unique skill Unlimited Imprisonment as a base, the consolidation process has been completed. The unique skill Unlimited Imprisonment has evolved into the ultimate skill Uriel, Lord of Vows.

Wait. Waaaaaaait a second. Since when did I have Unlimited Imprisonment, too?! Because I think that’s kind of an important piece of information, but Raphael treated it as a total given, didn’t he…? I guess he’s just the kind of person to lose all interest in a solved problem, no matter how difficult it was.

So. Lord of Vows. Or loyalty, to put it another way. The collected prayers from those who vow fealty to me. All those prayers crystallized to form this new ultimate skill—and the moment I obtained it, I could feel a new strength. Strength, and an unbelievably reassuring peace of mind. And why wouldn’t I? This strength was proof positive of the bonds my friends and I shared.

But…hang on. Does this now mean I’m in possession of four ultimate skills? Those are some amazing toys, there. Nobody’s gonna mind if I get a little carried away with them, would they?

…Ah, but I shouldn’t let my guard down. Villains usually meet their tragic doom when they get all cocky like that. No self-proclaimed demon lord would leave themselves open like that. Whenever I do, things usually go awry, don’t they? We need to proceed carefully.

For now, let’s go over our new skills.

Understood. The forces of the ultimate skill Uriel, Lord of Vows are as follows:

I had Raphael spell them out for me, as always.

Apparently, this skill had merged some of my extra skills into it as well. The only intrinsic skills I had left at the end were Infinite Regeneration, Universal Detect, Universal Shapeshift, Lord’s Ambition, Enhanced Replication, and Universal Thread.

Meanwhile, the skill itself largely offered the following four features: Unlimited Imprisonment, Control Laws, Universal Barrier, and Dominate Space.

Unlimited Imprisonment:

Entombs the target in a complex number of spatial dimensions.

Universal Barrier:

Provides absolute defense with a multilayer barrier and the severing of space between both sides.

Control Laws:

Black fire and thunder. Magical control. Control of heat quantities and inertia. The ability to freely store and remove heat from the Stomach.

Dominate Space:

A movement ability, allowing the user to freely switch between spaces for which they are aware of the coordinates.

So, kind of the culmination of a lot of skills I had gathered so far.

I could trigger Unlimited Imprisonment any time I wanted to. It was equal to the prison Veldora had been trapped in, making anyone caught inside impossible to retrieve, by and large. Universal Barrier automatically protected my body—fully handled by Raphael—without my having to think about it.

Control Laws seemed like it’d let me engineer all kinds of phenomena through the control of magicules. The description was a lot of Greek to me, really, but for now I could have Raphael figure it out if I wanted something.

Dominate Space, meanwhile, was about as close to instant teleportation as you could get. As long as I could perceive something with Universal Detect, I could flick myself right over there, no need to build a hole in space or anything. This included any place I had visited before, although that required a little time delay.

Frankly, the powers of Uriel were mind-boggling. All the offense from before, plus movement, defense, and banishment—all massively powered up. I felt safe in summarizing it that way.

Like, I’m invincible now, aren’t I—? No, no, I just told myself I’d refrain from such nonsense. No getting carried away.

As I pored over my new skills, Veldora seemed to have controlling his aura pretty well mastered, figuring out the traits of Faust, Lord of Investigation along the way. He keeps on spouting off such incredible BS that I forgot, but Veldora’s actually a lot smarter than I am.

This Faust thing was pretty amazing, too. It encompassed five skills—Mind Accelerate, Analyze and Assess, All of Creation, Control Probability, and Investigate Truth—and if you asked me to explain how it worked, I’d be stumped. A couple of those skills I had never heard of before, but sadly, Food Chain wasn’t in the cards for him. No need to be greedy, though. I doubted he’d be able to fully use it anyway.

So our preparations were complete. Now, for the first time in several centuries, Veldora would be unleashed on the outside world.

Upon leaving the cave with him, I found everyone waiting for us at the entrance—and really, we were just about to have chaos on our hands. A large number of people were assembled around the cave, and they were (to say the least) unruly.

Some of them had already realized the legendary Storm Dragon was back to life, with one contingent wanting to march inside to save me and the other refusing to budge until I gave them orders. The arguments between them had grown heated in my absence, even as Benimaru stood silently with arms crossed.

“But I tell you, if Sir Rimuru is gone, then we’ve got no way to rescue Carillon, our lord. We gotta get him outta there, no matter the cost!”

“How many times do I have to repeat myself? Sir Rimuru ventured into the cave of his own volition. Clearly he has some motivation for this, and it is not for us to interfere with that.”

“But it’s been three days! If we don’t do something—”

“All right, you mewling vermin! Will you be quiet for me, or would you like to be crushed instead?”

“What’d you say?!”

“Enough, Diablo!” Benimaru finally thundered. “You are not mediating over this conflict at all! And it’s all right, Sufia. There is no doubt that Sir Rimuru is just fine. If he is in any danger, we will immediately take action. But if Veldora, guardian deity of the Forest of Jura, has come back to life, we certainly cannot afford to make any ill-advised moves.”

He distractedly scratched his head. I guess things were a lot worse than I pictured. Wow, three whole days? Between freeing Veldora and working out my skills, I must’ve lost all sense of time.

By the looks of things, the lycanthropes wanted to plunge into the cave and Diablo was trying to stop them. My demon was being backed up by Treyni and the other dryad sisters, along with Jura’s other native residents, although Diablo himself was trying to act as a neutral arbitrator.

Now it was time to delve in myself. This whole quarrel was my and Veldora’s fault anyway, so…

“Hey, guys. Sorry if I made you all worry.”

“““Sir Rimuru!!”””

This led to yet more gasps and shouts as Rigurd sprinted up to me.

“Ahhh, Sir Rimuru! You’re safe! We were so worried! We received word from the Sealed Cave that Veldora the Storm Dragon’s presence revived itself without warning. Are you all right? We heard you had ventured into the cave.”

I gave the concerned-looking Rigurd a smile and a nod to show I was fine.

“Alvis, Sufia, Phobio, and all the other lycanthropes—I guess I put a lot of undue concern on you. Sorry. I should’ve explained myself better.”

“N-no, Sir Rimuru. As long as you’re safe, it’s fine.”

“I was so worried, but…indeed, it is fine.”

“So what happened to the Storm Dragon?”

The Three Lycanthropeers seemed greatly relieved. Given how I was the key to rescuing Carillon, I’m sure my absence must’ve freaked them out mightily. Veldora, meanwhile, must not have liked the “Sir” being omitted from his epithet, because he scowled back at them. I grinned, patted his shoulder, and told him to calm down before I addressed the crowd.

“That is exactly what I came here to show you all. But before that, allow me to introduce—”

I then pushed Veldora, the handsome young man standing next to me, toward the forefront.

“This is li’l old Veldora in the flesh! He’s kinda shy, but make nice with him, all right?”

The entire region of town fell into silence. Everyone’s eyes landed on Veldora, nobody daring to say a word. In the midst of this:

“Wait a moment! Enough of that nonsense! I am not in the least bit shy—I just had so few people reach my domain while they were still breathing, up to now.”

It was delivered in a peeved, dissatisfied voice, but it was more than enough to plunge the scene right back into chaos.

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…

The dryads were the first to recover. They all kneeled before Veldora, Treyni included, and bowed their heads.

“O Sir Veldora, guardian of the forest, how it fills us with joy from the heart to see you alive and well again!”

“Gahhh-ha-ha-ha! The dryads, eh? Haven’t seen you in ages. Well done managing my forest for me!”

“Oh, we hardly deserve your praise. It is still nowhere near enough of a task to repay the favor you showed us, taking us in after we were separated from our Spirit Queen.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. So I guess you and Rimuru are working together? I intend to be just as obliged to him going forward, so keep up the good work!”

Whoa. What’s he mean, “just as obliged”? We’re gonna have a talk about that later on, to be sure. I had a feeling I’d be taking care of a lazy, useless bum unless I stepped up and did something about it.

“Y-yes. Certainly. But—”

“Umm, if I may,” piped up Doreth, youngest of the dryads, recovering from her paralysis just in time to take the words from Treyni’s mouth. “Sir Veldora, what kind of relationship do you have with Sir Rimuru?”

I could tell everyone was straining their ears to hear the answer. They were intensely curious about it. I could practically hear them holding their breath.

“Ah, that? Eh-heh-heh. You’d like to know?”

Don’t give me that “eh-heh-heh” crap, man. What’s the point of acting all high and mighty here?

“Yes! By all means!”

Everyone else nodded. It served only to make Veldora smile triumphantly. You see? You guys all spoiled this dragon for so long that he thinks he can get away with well near anything.

“We…are friends !!”

Oh please. Stop. Now you’re embarrassing me, too. I wanted to die of shame at the way he proudly bellowed it out, but the monsters gathered before us were now more frenzied than ever.

“My goodness! First Lady Milim and now Sir Veldora?!”

“When did he ever do that …?”

“Ohhh, yeah, ol’ Rimuru’s always been that way! Really cool!”

“Yeah, that’s sure the slime I know. I’ve come to expect damn near anything from him, really…”

The murmuring continued for a few more moments.

“So… Er, why are you taking that form, Sir Veldora?”

“Oh, this? My friend Rimuru prepared it for me. Over the past three days, he has helped me learn how to restrain my aura so I can converse with all of you without any adverse effects. What do you think? Don’t you agree this is better as well?”

“I do.” Treyni sighed, overcome with emotion. “I really do.”

“This will be a great help to all of us, truly.”

“You look so amazing, Sir Veldora!!”

“Yes! Yes, I do, don’t I? Gahhh-ha-ha-ha!”

The other dryad sisters gave Veldora just the kind of praise he craved. Well, if he’s happy, I’m not gonna rain on his parade.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Well done, Sir Rimuru. You trained him to hold back that all-powerful aura of his? How fascinating…”

“You said it, Diablo. But more than that, he’s friends with Sir Veldora? That’s what I’m more surprised about.”

“Perhaps,” Rigurd said, “but looking back, it makes sense. Sir Rimuru first showed himself in our village just when Sir Veldora himself disappeared.”

“Indeed, I had always wondered if the timing of the two events was more than a coincidence.”

“Yeah, I kinda kept it a secret from you guys. I thought at the time it’d take a century or so to free Veldora, and if word got out, there was no telling who’d take that as a signal to attack us.”

“Ah, I see…”

My explanation seemed convincing enough to them—and in the end, Veldora became a member of our town far more easily than I’d guessed.

Just then, Soei appeared before me via Spatial Motion—I guess that was my gift to him.

“Sir Rimuru, I have returned to report on Clayman’s activity…”

Before he could continue, he realized that he was surrounded by the Three Lycanthropeers and nearly every VIP in the land of Tempest.

“…Did something happen, my lord?” he asked, perhaps hesitant to divulge his report in front of this massive audience. Yeah, something sure did happen, didn’t it?

“Oh, nothing too serious. Your report’s the most important thing for now. Here, you three listen in, too—”

“Allow us to, if you could.”

“Yeah, me too!”

“No way we aren’t staying involved now.”

Guess I didn’t need to ask. Great! Now’s the perfect time to nail down a plan.

“Soei, summon all the town leaders who aren’t here right now! And have Yohm and Mjurran join us in the great meeting hall. Kabal and his gang, too, while you’re at it.”

“…At once.”

Then he Spatial Motioned out of there. I was sure he’d have them here in a flash. It was time for an all-hands conference.

I couldn’t overstate the importance of this meeting. The future of Tempest was riding on it—a future where man and monster could live together. If anyone got in the way of that, we’d knock them out of the picture, no matter what. And right now, my friends and I had the power to do that.

First, the demon lord Clayman. Next, the Western Holy Church. Let’s have ’em all accept their just deserts for laying hands upon my friends. The thought brought a soft smile to my lips.