

CHAPTER 3

THE EVE OF BATTLE

It turned out to be unusually easy for Clayman to convene a Walpurgis Council.

The use of Carillon’s “betrayal” as the topic was important to him. The way it was explained to the demon lords was basically that Carillon violated their nonaggression agreement by invading the Forest of Jura, and Milim punished him for it. That was clearly a screen, but none of the other demon lords protested. It would all be coming out during the Council—but by then, it’d be over. That was Clayman’s aim. Walpurgis would earn him valuable time toward awakening himself, becoming a true demon lord, and obtaining immense powers. And Milim would be there, too. If she acted subservient to him in front of the other demon lords, that’d just prove to them all that Clayman was not willing to accept any back talk.

That was his plan, and to make it reality, he needed his military operation to succeed. It had to wrap up quickly, before the other demon lords could interfere. He also had the perfect excuse—to punish Carillon for violating that treaty, just like how the Council was convened. He just had to produce the evidence he needed to prove it.

With everything in place, Clayman immediately took action. Passing through the demon lord Milim’s domain, his forces pressed on into the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania. Yamza, a man faithful to Clayman from his very heart, was chosen to be their leader. He was the only one who knew his master’s true aims—to drive his army of thirty thousand into Eurazania and claim the over ten thousand souls inside before the Council began.

“These people drive me up the wall! How dare they propose that we work together?!”

The man yelling angrily was Middray, head priest of the temple built for the Dragon Faithful in their domain’s largest city. This made him leader of those who worshiped Milim as a goddess.

“But, Father Middray, failing to follow this order would put us in serious trouble. Yamza, their commander… He bore an imperial edict from Lady Milim herself, did he not?”

The simpering associate pleading his case before Middray was Hermes, a member of the priests who served this temple. He had a transcendental air about him, which most people mistook as him being spaced out and insincere. It grated on Middray’s nerves.

“Silence, Hermes. I don’t need you telling me that! I know it!”

Hermes couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the enraged head priest, even though he understood too well what irked him. It was those magic-born who had been camped out since yesterday. They had come here, to the City of the Forgotten Dragon, without warning and promptly occupied it like it was theirs all along. Apparently, they were a force from the demon lord Clayman, heading for the demon lord Carillon’s domain to investigate an agreement he had broken.

Refusing them simply wasn’t an option. Middray could rant and rave all he wanted; it wouldn’t have changed a thing. There was a pretty good reason for this—the demon lord who toppled Carillon’s Beast Kingdom of Eurazania was none other than Milim, the object of Hermes’s and his fellow priests’ worship. If their supreme being was involved, it was only natural for Clayman’s forces to ask them for help in collecting evidence against Carillon. In fact, if they didn’t find anything, that would put Milim in an embarrassing position. Milim herself wouldn’t care, but Hermes and the others would.

“Ah, Lady Milim can be such a handful sometimes…”

Her selfishness could be forgiven, Hermes reasoned, but just a little—really, a tiny amount would be fine—he wished that she gave them a moment’s worth of consideration.

“How dare you, Hermes! You will never cast doubt upon Lady Milim’s actions!”

“No, I know that, but…”

But it’s getting harder and harder for us because we’re always spoiling her. He didn’t say it. It’d just spark another wave of anger from Middray. This is quite a handful, he thought, sighing.

He recalled how things had spiraled downward since yesterday. The army had requested permission to pass through in advance, and even then, their high-pressure tactics rubbed the priests the wrong way. This force clearly looked down upon the Dragon Faithful; it was obvious that their requests for “support” weren’t really requests at all. They were orders, through and through.

The Dragon Faithful that resided here, in the City of the Forgotten Dragon, numbered less than a hundred thousand in total. They all worked together in their daily lives, there being no central government to speak of. As a result, none were particularly gifted in battle—they relied on Milim’s protection to keep the peace.

That, at least, was how it appeared to outside observers. But this was only half right.

Yes, there was no government. All the crops and other goods produced were collected at the Central Temple, where it was distributed equally by the head priest. It might seem like this system would fail, encouraging people to grow unproductive and lazy, but that wasn’t the case. Everyone, workers and nonworkers, was guaranteed at least a certain amount of the wealth—and the more hardworking would also be provided with additional supplies.

This was similar to the “universal basic income” idea that had gained traction around modern Japan. The main issue was who got to decide how much of a contribution each individual made to society…and that was Middray’s job, granted exclusively to him by Milim.

That right afforded Middray all but absolute power in this city, but he never abused that power. Why? Simple: Because the other priests who served him had the right to dismiss him from office. If he got too selfish with his decisions, he’d lose his post. That understanding was what kept Middray from becoming a tyrant. (Of course, they already had a tyrant on hand in Milim, and nobody was stupid enough to try to imitate her game, but still.)

Thus, these tens of thousands of people were far better led and organized than one would expect at first. While some may think the city was lacking in military strength, that was completely untrue. The Dragon Faithful, thanks to certain local conditions, all had very strong physical skills. In addition to their organizational acumen, each adult was strong enough to almost reach C rank. Their pacifism didn’t make it clear at first, but this was actually quite a formidable group of warriors.

The priests, in particular, were in a class of their own. There were only a hundred or so of these guys, handpicked from the best the region had to offer, and they could definitely mess you up. Their daily “prayer sessions” to Milim (i.e. battle training) gave them superior combat skills, and once you got up to the level of Middray or Hermes, they were even strong enough to give Milim a run for her money. That’s why Middray was so enraged that Clayman’s forces were treating them like dirt.

And that wasn’t this people’s only secret. The second one was the clincher.

Another day passed. Clayman’s army was now freely raiding the city’s storehouses for food supplies. The veins throbbed on Middray’s forehead as he was asked to remain patient with them.

“But why has Lady Milim not returned?” he asked, trying to adjust the target of his rage.

“Well, who knows?” Hermes distractedly replied. They had gone through this back-and-forth a dozen times or so, and it was getting on his nerves more and more.



“We prepared this wonderful meal for her… I hope Lady Milim is not hungry somewhere out there, you see…”

“I doubt it,” Hermes countered. In fact, he was sure about it. The wonderful meal Middray mentioned was a “plate of nature’s bounties,” which in fact was a bunch of raw vegetables on a plate. The last time he had a meal with Milim, Hermes stole a glance at her, only to find her lamely chewing away, all expression drained from her face.

I could tell she wasn’t enjoying it, he thought. She was just trying her best to power through it. Judging by her joy when some roasted meat was brought out, there was no doubt in his mind.

He had suggested to Middray that actually cooking the food might please Lady Milim more, but that fell on deaf ears. It was the head priest’s firm belief that providing all the glories of nature, in their most natural form, was the best possible way to pamper her. That’s exactly why Lady Milim hardly comes around any longer, he wanted to say, but it’d be his neck on the line if he did.

Hermes had traveled extensively across the land, giving him insight into the cuisines of many nations. The other priests, meanwhile, didn’t have that experience. They were too closed-minded to think that anything apart from “pure nature” would be right, so Hermes just gave up eventually.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” mused Middray. “But just imagine. That villain Clayman, thinking he’s king of the world, making Lady Milim write that edict…”

It was definitely written in Milim’s sloppy— Er, unique handwriting. They had no choice but to carry it out, but they could only go so far with it.

“Yeah, true. We can’t do much if it’s Lady Milim’s orders…but they’ve emptied out Food Storehouse Number Three, too. We’ve only got seven left. That’s going to make things lean until the next harvest…”

“Dammit all!!”

Veins swelled across Middray’s bald head like the skin of a melon. It was rather clear just how angry he was. And given how he had to work hard to keep from laughing at it, Hermes was a pretty shameless priest, too.

As they spoke, the very source of all their troubles came walking up—the general manager of the Clayman force.

“Feh! Keep your cool, Hermes.”

“I hear you.”

You first, Hermes thought. He was hoping the man would walk on past, but sadly, he was headed straight toward them. They closed their mouths and waited for the man, Yamza, to arrive.

Yamza was the general commander of Clayman’s forces, a man seen as one of the demon lord’s most trusted confidants. Slender in size and build, he looked light enough to float into the air, making him a fighter built for speed. Or perhaps, not a fighter so much as a swordsman. A first-class swordsman with arms as fast as a passing gale. The Ice Blade, a Unique weapon gifted to him by Clayman, allowed him to use the aspectual magic Ice Blizzard. Between that and his latent sword skills, the Frozen Swordmage was an A-plus magic-born in rank.

“Well, hello there, Father Middray. We do appreciate the provisions you’re supporting us with. With an army of thirty thousand, there’s just never enough to go around.”

He flashed a friendly grin at them, but his eyes weren’t smiling. He silently, carefully gauged Middray’s response. He didn’t give Hermes a glance. It was a common thing to see, magic-born treating humans like second-class citizens. Hermes wasn’t a fan, but he sucked it up, just as Middray told him to. There was no point starting a fight. He saw it as just a temporary affront.

“Ha-ha-ha! It’s an honor to be in your service. However, sadly, it is difficult to provide you with much more than we already have. Lady Milim would be saddened if our people don’t have enough to eat.”

“What are you saying?!” Even that little retort was enough to set Yamza off. “Your Milim was the one who stepped out of line. We’re trying to clean up the mess she made, so the least you could do is show us all the respect you can!”

It was an act, of course. He was pretending to be mad so that he could see how Middray reacted. If the head priest retaliated, he clearly intended to use that as a pretext to sack the city.

“Ah, my pardons,” Middray modestly began. “We were thinking only about ourselves there, for a moment. We will provide you with all the cooperation we can, so please feel free to ask.”

Hermes was thoroughly impressed. All that haughty elitism, and Middray didn’t let any of his anger reach his face. He kept the smile going the whole time.

Well done, Father Middray. Your head didn’t go all melon-like at all. I would’ve snapped at him long ago.

Yamza returned his smile. “I see, I see. I was hoping to hear that. We have enough people to sweep up the Beast Kingdom, but allow me to give you the opportunity to help us out. You should be able to support us with material transport, shouldn’t you?”

“W-wait just a minute! First you take our food, then you take our people from—”

Hermes hadn’t intended to resist him. He just let his mouth run off. The next instant, Hermes felt an intense pain in what used to be his left arm.

“Ah?!”

“Silence, you piece of trash!”

The slitted eyes of Yamza, placed upon Hermes for the first time, were cold as ice. Holding his severed arm in place, Hermes gritted his teeth and glared at him.

“…So you don’t know your place. You appear in a hurry to die.”

Now his smile was brutal in its chill, as Yamza pointed his bloodstained sword at Hermes.

Bastard. Thinks he can tell me what to do—

Just as Hermes was about to lose his temper, he was thrown back by a force like a wild animal butting against him. This was a kick, from Middray, hard enough to nearly break the skin.

“Ah, no, my apologies for all of this, Sir Yamza. I’ll teach this fool how to behave correctly, so please, by my name, I hope you will forgive him.”

Middray bowed his head toward the magic-born.

“Pfft. Always a pain, isn’t it, when the people below you are such idiots? I will forgive him just this once. We will depart tomorrow morning, so I want all of you priests to prepare immediately!”

Middray’s mediation was enough to make Yamza sheathe his sword. But it came at a heavy price. The Dragon Faithful’s priests, the leaders of their people, had just been forcibly conscripted.

Yamza promptly left with nothing more to say. He wasn’t expecting fighters among the Faithful; he just wanted the priests and their healing magic. And thanks to Hermes’s needless meddling, Yamza had everything he wanted.

After he left, Middray sighed and healed Hermes’s wound.

“You utter fool. I warned you about that.”

“I’m sorry—I just couldn’t help myself…”

Hermes held his arm in place as Middray began his work, casting the holy magic Recovery on it. In a few moments, the amputated limb was good as new. The blood loss made him a little light-headed, but he could use his own Healing skill to tackle that.

“All right. Well, even if the priests are gone, our people won’t be affected right away. But that man…”

The anger he held back was now clear on his face as Middray glared in the direction Yamza walked off to.

“…He is damaging Lady Milim’s own assets.”

He was referring to his attack on Hermes. It was an unforgivable act of aggression, although he was now trying to sweep that kick he landed under the rug.

That kick hurt like hell, too, y’know…

But Hermes didn’t bring it up. He knew Middray didn’t mean ill of him. As befitting someone who worshiped Milim, Middray tended to fly into violent rages all too easily. Something you could say about everyone in this domain, really…

“No, but really… Do you mind if I kill him?”

“Fool,” the head priest promptly replied. “You don’t stand a chance.”

He wasn’t wrong. Hermes probably couldn’t even scratch him.

“Yeah. That sword’s unbeatable, and I think he’s hiding something else, too.”

“Indeed. He is the confidant of that scheming sneak Clayman; he won’t reveal his true powers that easily. A real man would put it all on the table to secure victory, but not them…”

I wouldn’t call that approach very smart, Hermes thought, but again, Hermes didn’t agree too often with the way people thought in this domain. So he pretended to agree and went back to work. With the new deadline of tomorrow morning coming out of nowhere, he had a mountain of business to settle.

The next morning, with two days left until the Walpurgis Council, the Clayman force continued their forward march.

It was the morning after the summit. I had been working all night, and my body was giving me a lot of guff for it. Or my mind was, anyway. In reality, I couldn’t have been healthier. Not needing to sleep helps a lot at times like these.

Last night, after our conference, Soei contacted me again. He participated in the meeting in the flesh, but one of his Replications reported in this time, after collecting information from across the Beast Kingdom. Soka, and the other four people on his team, were contributing as well, providing a few more solid leads.

The Clayman force, ever on the lookout, still had not moved.

In the midst of this, they all searched for someplace to deploy our own forces, but a problem arose. The fleeing residents of the Beast Kingdom were spread out all over the place. If we wanted to rescue them, then no matter where we transported our army to, we might have some areas left unevacuated before time ran out. Thanks to the Clayman force’s invasion route, we were lagging behind schedule.

Suggestion. It would be more effective to transport the citizens to a single location.

Hmm. I see. Yeah, I suppose it would be. No reason why that kind of transport is military only. Dominate Space allowed me to smoothly travel wherever I wanted, including to Soei, his Replications, or Soka and the others. I could then use the new type of transport spell we devised to collect all the evacuees together.

Thanks to that, things got very busy after the conference. First, I had Geld’s army go on ahead to build a field base that could accept these refugees. I transported them over to the former location of Eurazania’s capital, which Milim had turned into a vacant lot. Being a wide-open field, it stuck out like a sore thumb, but there’d be no better place to deploy a large force in.

Then I personally went from village to village, transporting the refugees out. This we wrapped up before the end of last night, which was why I was so exhausted—mentally speaking, that is.

Phobio was with me, which thankfully kept us from dealing with any resistance, although it exhausted him as well. “Performing all this teleportation,” he marveled before he left, looking at me like I was some kind of fiend. “How can you keep yourself together…? And such elaborate transport magic, over and over again… It seems absurd.”

Well, that’s rude of him, isn’t it? Of course I’m tired.

By now, Phobio should have been asleep in a room inside one of the field tents Geld’s force built. But that didn’t matter. Our main force would be ready soon, so I needed to perform one really big transport shortly.

I headed for an empty field just outside town. Rigurd was there, having spent the night preparing for this. Unlike me, he was running and hopping around, a bottomless well of energy. Rigur was called back as well, and he was pitching in all he could to help Rigurd. Once they were done, it was my job to transport all the people gathered here to our Beast Kingdom field camp. Once that was over, I planned to start preparing for the Walpurgis Council two days from now.

Upon reaching the field, I found lines of Tempestian soldiers waiting for me—including ten thousand beastmen, led by Sufia and Alvis. Their armor was piecemeal, nothing unified about it, but that was unavoidable. We had simply provided them whatever armor we didn’t need, and since many were capable of transformation anyway, this was better than confining them in full uniform.

Next to them were my leaders, ready to serve as reinforcements. Even compared to the Charybdis battle, our size—and our power to wage war—had grown tremendously.

Benimaru, noticing, stood next to me and took this opportunity to explain the evolutions that had taken place.

Following my own demon lord evolution, everyone else in Tempest had some change of their own. The World Language said something about everyone in my “genealogy” receiving “gifts,” and I assumed that meant everyone I had named.

“Based on what we heard from the townspeople,” he said as we faced the ranks of soldiers, “the men now enjoy enhanced stamina. The women report that their skin is glossier and more beautiful than before. None of that mattered to me—or I should say, it was beyond my comprehension, but I suppose you could say their spiritual strength has risen.”

Some, he reported, looked like they turned back the clock a few years. Everyone appreciated it. But these were the townspeople. They were holding down the fort back home. Let’s see what our fighters are packing.

Among our platoons, as well, there was a litany of changes. Some soldiers learned new skills for themselves; others gained the same skill in groups, based on the unique nature of their squad. I couldn’t wait to dive in and see for myself.

We first visited a group that had been with me almost from the start—Gobta’s goblin riders, a legion of hobgoblins led by starwolves that almost never naturally appeared unless the right conditions were in place. But were they really hobgoblins? That’s their species, perhaps, but their essence was something wholly different now.

Astoundingly, they had all learned the extra skill Unify. This was a rare one that let man and mount quite literally become one, turning them into mobile, high-speed, four-legged warriors. They were awarded an A-minus rank in this form—they didn’t manage a solid A since they were geared mainly for one-on-one combat, but they were killers in battle. A few working together could probably beat an A-ranked magic-born.

That was the whole gimmick with them, of course. The goblin riders were a team, guaranteed to work rapidly with one another’s thoughts and remain steadily in formation. They were keeping up with Hakuro’s training, after all—and if you imagine a hundred moving in tandem, you can see what made these Riders so fearsome.

I definitely felt like the human-invented ranking system was doing these guys a disservice. I could expect a lot more from them than that, even.

Next, we visited some of Benimaru’s personal trainees.

Once I became leader of the Forest of Jura, we started enjoying a lot more combat-ready monsters in our midst. This included three hundred ogres, the most powerful of which were young men and women from the village that sought my help early on. They looked up to Benimaru a lot, which affected the “gifts” they received.

It was really a crazy sight to see. Some had volunteered for the force, making them named warriors from the start. They were strong enough to be considered low-level magic-born, which made them a tremendously reliable asset. Even a wild, non-sentient ogre ranked a B—and these guys were both fully equipped and had learned some Arts. These were never gonna be wimpy kids.

These ogres had formed a sort of elite personal guard for Benimaru, and each was A-minus in rank. I named them Team Kurenai, or red flame.

Now, for the fighters assigned to Benimaru’s main force.

This was around four thousand hobgoblins, and their evolution was really fascinating to me. They had more or less taken on the flame element, learning skills like Control Flame and Resist Temperature Change. Kind of a surprise. Each soldier ranked a B equivalent, and you could call them a specialized assault team.

By the way, these hobgoblins all had a reference to the color “green” in their names, since their skin was green. I don’t know who named them, but I really wish he thought a little more about the long-term effect with that.

Report. They were named by you, Master.

I know!!

Eesh, I wasn’t expecting to get dissed by my own skill here. Talk about unwanted sarcasm. Like, I can’t read that far into every single thing, guys. These monster evolutions just made no sense.

Since everybody was named “green” something, I named this army the Green Numbers. Might as well go with it. I wanted to go with “red” something since these were Benimaru’s forces, but I kinda liked the feel of this, too. It’d be a nice little surprise, this green force unleashing all these flame attacks. I think I’ll have their equipment repainted green for the battlefield sometime.

Next up was Geld’s force, a sort of complement to the Green Numbers.

The high orcs all evolved in the same way, earning power-up skills like Steel Strength and Iron Wall. Their officer class also had the extra skill Control Earth, letting them mold and sculpt the land around them. Good for digging trenches in a hurry, as Geld put it.

In addition, everyone in the army had earned the extra skill Armorize Body, making them into much more of a defense-oriented tank unit. They had also taken on a lot of my personal resistances—Resist Melee Attack to start with, followed by Pain, Rot, Electricity, and Paralysis. Kabal’s Charus Shield, the completed version of the one I gave him as a present, was now a Unique piece of equipment that boosted his magic resistance. Basically, whether it was melee or magic, they could deal with it. I gave half a thought to exposing them to Shion’s cuisine so they could gain poison resistance but quickly banished the thought.

Still, obtaining all those shield-like scales from Charybdis was really a stroke of luck. Kurobe had made lots of copies of the items Garm had created from them, and I really have those craftsmen to thank for that.

Now, this unit was sturdy enough that each member ranked a solid B. That, plus the Unique equipment on each one, made them impervious to any normal force. It was almost unfair how defensively able they were, and they numbered five thousand, their ranks beefed up by a constant stream of volunteers. Normally, they were involved in construction work, but when they received the call, they transformed into a powerhouse, an iron wall that no attack could pierce.

Their official name was now the Yellow Numbers.

Close behind them were the hundred dragonewts under Gabil’s command.

Dragonewts were naturally gifted with a pretty decent array of skills, and they had all but breezed into the A-minus ranks. Now, with my gifts, the dragon in their blood had awakened to an even stronger degree. Each of them now had the intrinsic skill Dragon Body, along with either Flame Breath or Thunder Breath, giving them some much-needed long-range attacks. Gabil could use them both, which meant he really was an exceptional dragonewt, I guess.

What I still didn’t really get was Dragon Body.

Report. The intrinsic skill Dragon Body is—

Oh, um, I didn’t need the full documentation. I know now that I can’t use it, so there’s not much point in hearing it. I’m sure Gabil and the rest will take the time to figure out how to use it best, if they want. What’s the point of having power if you never earned it for yourself? That’s what I think.

Huh? What about me? Well, I have the ultimate skill Raphael, Lord of Wisdom. If I have a problem, Raphael will help me out. No issue there. That’s my power, so in a way, it’s like I’m the one making the effort there. I don’t think it’s going too far to say that.

So! Hopefully Gabil and his team can learn how to use that Dragon Body thing before it’s too late! Not to throw it all on you, but good luck.

Still, in a way, it was almost like this squad’s talents were going to waste with Gabil. They could fly; they could breathe fire and lightning from the air… It’s nuts. And thanks to their intrinsic species aspects, they were resistant to pretty much everything—scales of steel, breastplate armor of magisteel. Whether by sword or by magic, no halfhearted strike was going to break their skin. Flight alone was enough to give them an overwhelming advantage, but look at that defense! Speed, offense, defense—the complete surprise-assault package, all in one.

I named them Team Hiryu, or flying dragon. They only numbered a hundred, but they were the strongest unit in our forces.

Last but not least, we had a brand-new unit, one positioned as my personal elite guard. Led by Shion, they were also a hundred strong, composed of the victims I revived after the battle in Tempest. There were some children, age-wise, among them, but apparently they had grown up to—and beyond—the point of maturity. I guess their frustration at not being able to fight encouraged that kind of evolution? Who knows?

As far as skills go, they all earned the extra skills Complete Memory and Self-Regeneration. Those two complemented each other. Complete Memory meant that even if their heads were blown off, their memories remained in their astral bodies. They could then use Self-Regeneration to recover fully instead of dying instantly. This meant they had basically gained the astonishing healing skills of the Orc Disaster of yore.

If Self-Regeneration ever evolved into Ultraspeed Regeneration, they’d be pretty much immortal. And I had a hundred of these guys. I couldn’t even deal. And thanks to that regeneration, they were durable enough to take Shion’s ultra-intense training and deal with it just fine. As a female member put it, one who was just a little girl not long ago: “We don’t die or anything!” I didn’t have much of an answer to that, no. I wasn’t sure if this was the best thing for ’em, but hey, have fun! Break a leg!

Their strength was at around a rank C for now, but I had a feeling that, over time, they’d become the strongest unit in our forces. With that expectation, I decided to name them Team Reborn. They all had a whole new life ahead of them, after all.

That rounded out the briefing.

It felt like the effects of my evolution dovetailed well with everybody’s personal efforts to bear some major fruit for us. My first impression was Wow, we’re more damaging than ever. The total force was under ten thousand, but we could whip pretty much any army out there. Their numbers weren’t as strong as the Farmus military I wiped out, but in terms of war power, we would’ve totally overwhelmed them.

All this stuff came as a total surprise to me. Being outnumbered is still a weakness, but we’d just have to gradually build that up, between strengthening our country and negotiating with others. I think a standing force of around ten thousand would be the number to shoot for.

Plus, we still had our reserve forces protecting the Forest of Jura. They weren’t part of this campaign—the difference in training was just too much—but if we could work ’em up, they’d serve us well enough in battle, too. That’s something to tackle in the future.

Still, after Benimaru finished his report, I couldn’t help but be amazed by the sight of ten thousand of my soldiers in formation. That, plus ten thousand beastman soldiers—an army of twenty thousand, all lined up and waiting for the order to march.

Shion’s Team Reborn, as my personal guard, was on standby away from the crowd. They were holding down the fort back home this time, so they’d just get in the way among these ranks.

“Sir Rimuru,” Rigurd reported, “everything is ready.” I thanked him for his long hours of frantic work. “Oh, I hardly deserve it,” he said, smiling.

So if we’re all set, it’s time to get transporting.

“Oh, um, Lady Alvis…?”

“Alvis is fine, Sir Rimuru.”

I was trying to be polite, but I guess I made things worse. Let’s just bulldoze right over that.

“All right, Alvis. We have all your friends assembled on the other side, so I want you to relay what we talked about to them. I think Phobio should be organizing them into units, so you take care of the rest!”

“Understood. I promise I will not forget your kindness.”

She bowed deeply at me, followed by Sufia and the rest of the beastmen. It felt almost oppressive, but I didn’t react. That was how they wanted to show their appreciation.

“You really saved us,” a smiling Sufia told me. “Now we can smash up Clayman’s forces without a second thought. We’ll let you have him, Sir Rimuru, so take out all our anger on him for me!”

Pretty scary face, considering that smile. Alvis was similarly glaring at me, in apparent agreement. Everything was set for them; now all they had to do was go wild on the battlefield. We’d enjoy a force of twenty thousand beastmen alone, so I’m not sure we needed the reinforcements, but the more the merrier. If it was just them, we’d still be outnumbered anyway.

With these extra fighters, we now had a unified force of thirty thousand to go against Clayman’s own thirty thousand. We were even now, and we were the better-quality army. Victory was as good as ours. The only problem…

“Benimaru, any issues with our operation?”

While I was rounding up beastmen last night, I had Benimaru and his team shake down our plan of action once more. The gist of it hadn’t changed, but since we weren’t spreading out our forces to collect the refugees any longer, a few details needed to be changed.

“We’re all set, sir.” He shot me a crafty smile. “If Clayman is targeting the citizens of the Beast Kingdom, then retreat is certainly an effective option as well.”

Yes. I agreed with him. No need to smash right against his front line and get people killed.

“I discussed it with Sir Benimaru as well,” Alvis said, excitedly playing with the staff in her hand. “We’ve got enough leeway now to move the site of battle, so it’ll be a little while before we begin…”

All systems go, then. Failing to complete his mission before Walpurgis would make for one angry Clayman, no doubt. At the very least, he’d treat his underlings even worse than usual. If their army’s commander fears that and starts freaking out, the ball’s on our side.

“…We will deploy the force at the entrance to the Forest of Jura. The wasteland that was once our home, the now-toppled orcish kingdom of Orbic—now, it shall be their grave.”

There was something close to sheer malice in Geld’s voice. Clayman’s scheming cost him his home nation, and now it would be the site of the decisive battle. I suppose anyone would’ve felt the hand of fate at play here.

The strategy, as it was, is pretty simple. We’d make it look like we had the refugees evacuate into the Forest of Jura, then strike at the enemy forces trying to pursue them. That’s about it.

Raphael provided the perfect simulation of it in my brain. Obtaining and replaying the information Soei and his gang gave me, I had a picture of the future that was almost as vivid as reality. I then Thought Communication’ed that to everyone else, so we could all equally grasp it.

Our original plan called for us to keep the refugees secure as we lured the enemy over, eventually surrounding and destroying the force. With this change, the faster units would serve as bait instead. That reduced the danger to the individual forces involved, which greatly boosted the chances of this working.

The key to this was making sure they were all inside the forest before crushing them. I didn’t intend to kill them all, but I didn’t like the idea of them running away and attacking again later. We had to be thorough.

“You got all that, Benimaru?”

“Of course. Let’s give them enough hell that they never dare defy us again!”

Ooh, he’s got his no-mercy face on. I like that.

“Let’s wipe ’em out, Benimaru!” Shion added, cheering him on.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh… You need to take out the garbage fast, you see, before it rots.”

Diablo was…also cheering him on? I’m not so sure, but whatever. They both wanted to join in, of course—they just loooove fighting. But Shion would stay with me to prepare, and Diablo would be stepping into Farmus land soon. They were out of the picture. Now to just leave things to Benimaru and wait for the good news.

“Right! No matter what happens, I want you to report back immediately. I’m sending you off now. Win this one, guys!!”

“““Rahhh! Victory shall be yours!!”””

And now they were all looking at me, all those many, many eyes. As I regarded them with my own golden pair, I deployed a square of magic. I spent ages practicing this last night, so I had it down pat. Beneath the feet of all twenty thousand, a giant square drew itself in layers, from the bottom to the top. A complex array of geometrical shapes built themselves up inside, too intricate for me to figure out. Something this size, of course, required a lot of magic and concentration. My energy rapidly drained, but based on my figures, I should manage to hold out. (Not to brag, but my magicule stores had risen exponentially, too.)

It took around five minutes in all. Everyone stood there, bolt upright, waiting for the transport spell to complete. And then, the moment the mélange of shapes within the square stacked up above the heads of everyone inside—the entire army was gone, in the blink of an eye.

Transport complete. Looks like we got them out of there.

Back when I was practicing last night, I was a little concerned Clayman had noticed all the light this was generating in the darkness. So I combined it with a blindness bomb to sap all the light away from the magic square. You never know where you may mess up—diligence is key. There was no need for that now, though, and the sight that unfolded before me could only be described as magnificent.

“Well done, Sir Rimuru. Such a beautiful spell.”

“Indeed. It was so charming!”

I had earned high marks from Diablo and Shion. Diablo must’ve really liked magic. Once things calm down, I’d like to talk shop with him a little. Maybe he’s got a spell or two I don’t know about. And I’ve got to help Shion stop being jealous of everyone around her. I can’t afford any weird drama around here.

Such were my thoughts as I nodded at them, and we went on our way.

After everyone left, we were greeted by a clearly bored Veldora. “Rimuru,” he asked, “can I go and beat ’em all up, too?”

I knew it. He hadn’t listened to a single word I told him.

“What are you, deaf? I’m trying to keep you a secret until the Walpurgis Council begins! If you go crazy out there, the secret’s gonna be out in two seconds!”

“Gwaaaah-ha-ha-ha! Yes, yes, of course. I almost forgot!”

“Almost,” my ass. I don’t know what to do with this old coot. I gave him a whole bunch of manga volumes I had stored up, but will that be enough? Because I’m really worried he’s gonna try to pull something stupid. Better keep a very close eye on him.

Yohm and his squad also set off that afternoon. I look forward to having them tell everyone they run into along the way that Veldora is back—I told them to make sure and phrase it so it spreads as quickly from village to village as possible.

The purpose for this, of course, was so Clayman would hear about it as he keeps snooping on us. Hopefully the news will reach him sooner than later, I thought as I saw them off. Diablo told me to “expect us back very, very soon,” but how much of a pushover does he think Farmus is anyway? It almost made me worried, but I still left things up to them anyway. Everybody makes mistakes, after all, and if something came up, we could think about it then.

It wasn’t long after when Gazel set off toward the Dwarven Kingdom. His assorted ministers were livid, which made his departure a bit more hurried than I think he would’ve liked. Guess that decoy he hired wasn’t up to the job, and I could guess why. I definitely shouldn’t be taking any lessons from him on that front. Nobody likes being found out.

Another day passed—and while Benimaru reported that things were moving along well, we weren’t without our problems.

Naturally, a group of thirty thousand soldiers and refugees is a little restricted in where it can go. These were stout beastmen, however, not humans, so I was told that they should reach their destination without too much delay. I wasn’t too worried, though. I had something to deal with that.

“Right,” I said, patting Benimaru’s shoulder. “We’re all ready to take in the refugees here, so I’m gonna transport all the noncombatants over to Tempest.”

“Oh… There is that, yes…”

Benimaru groaned, chiding himself for not coming up with it first.

You know, though, that transport spell costs a lot of magicules. The more people you’re transporting, the more it adds up. At this point yesterday, I was fresh off moving a force of twenty thousand around; I didn’t really have much free energy left. I couldn’t go shooting that off rapid-fire, so it wasn’t like I was deliberately wasting time. Besides, this was a completely new sort of magic, one that flew in the face of conventional approaches, so we’d be able to weave this into future tactics with a lot more frequency. I mean, I don’t think too many people could cast that spell anyway, so that should help preserve our unique superiority.

Regardless, Rigurd had set up the required camping quarters after I sent everyone off yesterday, so I figured we could transport the refugees alone into here. So I did it all in a snap. And none of them were nervous about it, either. I guess they were all adaptable enough that they got used to it quick.

I let Rigurd guide them around, since that work I started yesterday was still calling my name. I really wanted to finish it up in time for Walpurgis, so I just had to hope no more issues arose.

In the end, the day of the Walpurgis Council began without any major crisis. My work was done before lunch, allowing me to dive into the final stages that afternoon. Looks like I’ll be on time. That’s a relief.

“Rimuru, is this…?”

“What do you think? Pretty neat, huh?”

“What’re you, some kind of genius?!”

I had enough of dealing with Ramiris’s yelling at me. I didn’t want to engage any longer. I had to save my mental acuity for this evening, so I’d just ignore her rantings for now.

After lunch, I worked on the final touches, then placed the finished item in my Stomach and headed over to the treant village where Treyni lived. Veldora wanted to join me, but he’d have to wait. I didn’t want anyone attacking town, not that I thought they would. Right now, the whole urban area was being protected by a Barrier that Veldora put over it. That prevented any potential eavesdropping from Clayman as well, so him abandoning town at the moment was a bad idea.

So I promised him “next time” and set off with Ramiris and Treyni. I assigned Beretta to deal with him, as much as it hurt my conscience. He’ll probably be used and abused, I’m sure. I’ll have to reward him later.

With a quick casting of Dominate Space, we were on our way. Once we reached the village, we quickly spotted the insectoids Apito and Zegion. When I first saved his life, Apito was maybe around a foot long, but now he had grown to nearly twenty inches. It was great to see that guy in good health. Zegion, meanwhile, was at well over two feet and strong enough that a lot of monsters knew better than to pick a fight. Of course, there weren’t any monsters around here that were hostile to Zegion anyway, so there’s no real way to gauge his power. I told it not to do anything too risky, so it probably hasn’t. Unlike Gobta and Gabil, it knew its limits and didn’t get all carried away over everything.

Apito flitted right up once it spotted me, happily providing me with some honey. Ah, thanks! The perfect medicine. Let’s have a li’l taste of that… Mm. Yep. That most rare of cure-alls—and it tastes real good, too.

“Hey, whoa, um, Rimuru— Er, Sir Rimuru? I wanted to ask you something.”

I looked toward Ramiris. She looked freaked out.

“What?”

“Those insects… Are those army wasps?”

“Hmm? I dunno.”

“You don’t know?!”

Ramiris gave me the most exaggerated double take I ever saw. So what if they’re army wasps?

(Sir Rimuru,) Apito telepathically said to me, (it is as that person says. I am a queen wasp, the highest of the army wasp order. Would you like me to summon my queendom?)

Whoa, that sounds pretty fancy. I think we can go without that for now, though.

(You can save it for when this village is under attack. If you want your friends around here, I’m sure you can talk that over with the treants.)

(I’ll refrain for now, then,) Apito said, wings thrumming in what sounded like a happy buzz as it flew off. It sounded quite pretty, if a bit chainsaw-like and lethal. Are army wasps pretty dangerous beasts, then? I doubt it. Apito, collecting honey for me and everything, hardly seemed hostile at all.

Plus, Zegion was there, too, giving me a shy salute as it followed after Apito. Maybe that guy was the king of the insects or something—it certainly felt kind of regal. I was pretty sure it’d only grow in strength. Maybe evolve, even. If so, I’d love to have that guy join my team.

Turning around, I saw Ramiris with her mouth agape, while Treyni was doing her best to console her.

“Yeah, you’re right. I guess they are army wasps. Plus, one’s a queen.”

“I heard them! I mean, you… Ugh. Never mind. You can do just about anything, can’t you? And that other one… I mean, I really don’t think it could be, but…”

She wasn’t making much coherent sense. I ignored her. No time to deal with it, and besides, if it was Ramiris, it couldn’t be that important.

We had reached our destination—a dryas, the holy tree that was Treyni’s “main” body.

I took out my completed project from my Stomach. It was an orb, dull in color. No sheen, no glow to it—but you could absolutely feel the power.

What was I going to use it for? Well, Treyni—and all dryads—were descendants of fairies, a form of spiritual life that could take on physical form by combining themselves with plants. They could freely release their spiritual bodies and use magicules to create temporary corpuses to live in. Their “real” bodies, however, were these dryas trees.

The Walpurgis Council was going to be held in some kind of special dimension, so Treyni might not be able to get in. So I decided to conduct a bit of large-scale surgery on her so she’d be able to move around in her “real” body. Unlike Beretta, which had no physical form in this world, Treyni had a corpus. As a result, we needed to transfer the “core” within her from her current body to the new one, much like a golem becoming established in its own form.

I had an idea of what this new core could be. It was a chaos core, one that can only be made with certain materials under certain conditions, and that orb I just took out would be the vessel for this core. In a way, it was like extracting magicules from the magic stones that can be taken from the cores of monsters. It’s hard to make these retain no element at all, so I went through many failures before I created this. I also needed several other materials to make this orb, so I spent nearly all of yesterday gathering them.

Making a chaos core required an equal mixture of spiritual and mystical force inside this vessel. With Beretta I could’ve just filled them with both in equal quantities and densities, but it wasn’t so simple with Treyni. She would have to inject the orb with her own spiritual energy herself, while I put in mystical force that had been mixed to an exactly proportionate density and size.

Now it was time to get to work, and that meant it was time for Raphael to shine. With my signal, Treyni began to turn her body into spiritual matter and let it flow into the orb, without a moment’s hesitation. I injected the mystical force alongside her, not missing a beat. This was precision work, but it proceeded with no calculation errors.

The dryas lost its life force, visibly withering before me. Alongside that, the orb began to blink on and off, almost like a pulse. Light and darkness traced a spiral inside it—and then, the orb began to shine a light shade of green. The flickering of life was thriving inside.

Report. The individual Treyni’s element has mixed into it, but construction of the chaos core is successful.

It had all gone as planned.

“Okay, it worked. This orb is now Treyni’s main body.”

(Thank you so much, Sir Rimuru!)

“Yeah, thanks, Rimuru! Now I can take Treyni here along with me!”

“You should be safe with that, yeah. But… Hmm…”

Treyni would no longer be separate from her main body, so she wouldn’t have issues traveling across dimensions anymore. But something still seemed missing.

“Treyni, do you mind if I take this tree that used to be your body?”

“Of course not. Use it however you like.”

I thanked her, then got straight to work.

“What’re you gonna use it for?”

“You’ll see!”

I cut down the tree, working the wood, creating precision parts with it to form a human shape.

(Oh! Ohhhhh! Is this…? Are you gonna…?!)

Ramiris quickly understood what I was up to. She was right—I thought I would make a replacement body for Treyni, using the dryas that was imbued with her magical force.

Three hours later, the doll-like figure I had been working on all afternoon was complete. Its core was reinforced with magisteel, the surface made of fully polished wood. It felt remarkably comfortable to the touch—a very fine piece of work.

“Oh, is this…?”

Even Treyni, who rarely expressed surprise at anything, couldn’t hide her excitement.

“What do you think? Pretty good, huh? You can use this as your body if you want.”

I didn’t need to ask. Ramiris was overjoyed, but Treyni needed no encouragement from her. She thanked me profusely and installed herself in her new body. From that moment, the wooden doll became Treyni’s new corpus. It was the world’s first fully mobile dryad.

From the moment the chaos core—the heart of any monster, you could say—entered the doll, magic force surged out of it, penetrating and filling every grain on the surface. Then, amazingly, the white grains faded, no longer standing out, turning as intricate and detailed as human skin. Perhaps more beautiful, even. A beauty that goes beyond humanity.

Unlike with Beretta, I didn’t work from a skeletal frame for the face. I simply carved the head to look the way Treyni looked. But once her orb was in there, its expression grew as soft as anyone you met on the street. It was wood, but the mouth still moved, and the eyes blinked. I have no idea what was driving that. “Because she’s a monster” was my only real guess. This body was kind of herself, once, so maybe it was more compatible than most cases.

Either way, that pie-in-the-sky surgery of mine was a greater success than I ever could’ve guessed.

And for some reason, she was stronger now, too.

My mystical aura, injected into the orb so perfectly by Raphael’s fine-tuned work, had produced a chaos orb that worked in exact harmony with Treyni’s spiritual force. It was the equivalent of doubling her magicule stores. I think taking in the holy and demon elements earned her some new skills, too. She struck a greater presence than Shion, who boasted the most magical force out of us all. Definitely stronger than the Orc Disaster. Not up to the demon lord Carillon, but I could feel a different type of sheer awesomeness from her.

I think it could bring her to disaster level, the venerable S rank. Of course, she’d still be Special A for now, a calamity-level threat, due to not actually being a demon lord. The Guild-crafted ranking system really couldn’t deal with special-case magic-born like this. Personally I’d feel safe calling her a sub-demon lord.

Between the dryas, the doll, and the dryad, we had here a creature that was worthy of awakening into a demon lord someday. That’s the kind of powerful magic-born Treyni was now—and among other things, it let her join Ramiris on the trip.

I’ll bet even Raphael was surprised by that one!

Understood. It was all according to plan.

See? Totally surprised. No need to be a sore loser about it.

…

Raphael had nothing to counter me with.

With that mental victory in hand, we all said good-bye to Treyni’s sisters, Traya and Doreth. They had been watching the whole surgery, looking incredibly jealous. I suppose I should do the same thing for them, as thanks for all their work watching over the Forest of Jura…but that would have to wait. We could consider that after we were all back safe from Walpurgis. I didn’t want to lose Jura’s guardians because they were too busy doting on Ramiris, besides.

Well, we were now on our way back to town, and I’d now done all the preparing I could. Looking up, I realized there was no moon in the sky, the stars twinkling at me. Today was a new moon, wasn’t it? And soon, under this beautiful night sky, the bell for the first round would ring out.

With the stars behind me, I set off for my battlefield.