

INTERLUDE

THE DEMON LORDS

The demon lord Clayman awaited the appointed hour, a glass of wine in his hand. The Walpurgis Council was tonight, and as a mixture of anger and happiness danced across his face, he thought over a few things.

First, the bad news.

Ignoring the warnings of his friend Laplace, he had advanced his forces into the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania. But they had failed to discover even a single citizen left there. The effort had gone to waste.

The briefing from his commander Yamza drove him into a fit of rage. But until they knew why this happened, giving further orders would be careless. Instead, Clayman decided to gather his forces together and carefully continue the search.

What they found was a group of stragglers, frantically attempting to flee the kingdom. Upon being advised of them, Clayman immediately ordered an attack, sending scouts to the area to search for anyone else hidden nearby. They eventually found several hundred civilians in hiding, but as they attempted to dispatch them all, they immediately ran away.

Finding this suspect, the army conducted further investigation, only to discover that a larger group of some several thousand refugees was fleeing toward the Forest of Jura. The small group of several hundred was just bait to help the rest of them flee.

Those insolent…!

Now Clayman knew why there was nobody left living in the Beast Kingdom. They had undergone a mass emigration to Tempest, relying upon Rimuru for their continued survival. The stragglers were also on to the Clayman force’s activity, fleeing the area once the bait was taken.

He wanted to have those souls safely hunted and collected before Walpurgis, but it just wasn’t going to happen. He had to admit that now, and it made him deeply unhappy.

“Yamza, the Council is about to begin. I want your entire force to chase them down before I return. Kill every last one of them and bring the survivors before me!”

“I swear to you it shall happen, sir!”

He nodded, but it did nothing to overturn the fact that he wouldn’t be awakening tonight. It annoyed Clayman terribly as he closed the magical link.

Meanwhile, there was good news to be had.

Using his feelers in the ground—electric signals and natural geomagnetism—he was constantly gathering information. Nobody had been fully aware of this power yet, giving Clayman free rein over a vast array of data. It was what allowed him to enjoy the alias of Marionette Master.

At the time he gained this skill, it permitted him to interact only with people or things within his line of vision. Now, however, thanks to ceaseless training and effort, it had become the keystone force of his entire empire. This unique skill—Manipulator, it was called—converted information into encrypted communications as it conducted surveillance over a wide area. Deploying a member of his team to an area allowed them to function as his eyes and ears to gather intelligence.

It was this vast network that informed him that Veldora, the Storm Dragon, had revived. This, in itself, was not welcome news—but the human beings who had spoken with the Storm Dragon and apparently survived the experience had some very fascinating things to say.

According to conversations surreptitiously heard from adventurer types leaving the monster town, Rimuru, self-styled leader of the forest, hadn’t defeated the Farmus force at all. The missing army was the result of the Storm Dragon’s resurrection—and since he had only just been reborn, the dragon’s stores of magicules were largely lost, emptied out as it raged upon Farmus’s army. That explained why there was no massive onrush of magicules around the Forest of Jura, as one would expect from such a cataclysmic event. That these adventurers lived to tell the tale was another sure indicator.

If the Storm Dragon Veldora was alive once more, there was no way Clayman, a demon lord, wouldn’t have picked up on that. The rumors must have been true, then—he lost his magic force during the battle with Farmus.

These two pieces of news conflicted Clayman.

It would be a simple matter to slay that dragon right now. I may even be able to add him to my cache of pawns…

A tantalizing fantasy. The dragon has been using the town the monsters built as his personal den, it seemed, and it was hard to gather information in that area…but he felt no need for concern. Those empty stores of magicules wouldn’t rebuild themselves in two or three days. After Walpurgis, he’d have all the time in the world to snare him.

And if all else fails, I can simply send Milim after him. For now, though…

It was time to concentrate on the Council.

Or perhaps, if Clayman hadn’t been over-reliant upon Milim’s strength…he might have noticed all the points that didn’t quite add up.

The fact that there wasn’t a single enemy casualty yet. The force, reportedly scattered all across the Beast Kingdom, was now gathered together. Both pieces of information were too important for someone as careful as Clayman to overlook. But it wasn’t Clayman on the ground—it was Yamza. And Clayman’s mind was too full of the upcoming Council to notice. That was how vital this Walpurgis was.

Out of nowhere, Ramiris—a demon lord who preferred to remain incognito, cooped up in her labyrinth, most of the time—asked for Rimuru, the subject of the meeting, to be extended an invite as a supplementary condition. Clayman hadn’t accounted for that possibility; it prevented him from making a snap judgment. But as he groused over it, the others quickly agreed to the suggestion, making it impossible to stage any resistance.

Still, this could lead to good things for him.

It’s better this way. Now we’ve unmasked Rimuru’s true nature. I was almost fooled into believing that he leveled the Farmus military by himself…but there’s no hiding the truth.

Clayman grinned. If Rimuru was joining the Council, he should consider himself welcome. There, before all the other demon lords, he’d know exactly how powerless he really is.

A mere slime, borrowing the majesty of a dragon for his boasts! I hope you consider it an honor to be crushed by my own hands!

He went back to fantasizing about his own future glories. And that was why he missed it. Those small yet glaring inconsistencies out on the battlefield.

“…You be careful, too, okay, Clayman? Now’s not the time to be too reckless.”

His friend’s words flashed across his mind. Now, a small sense of unease was taking root. The nagging feeling that he had missed something. But he laughed it off.

Don’t you worry, Laplace. I will win this…

He drained his wineglass, as if to wash the anxiety away.

It was with a somber gloom that Frey prepared for the Council. Things were in a constant state of flux. The original plan had all but gone by the wayside. She didn’t expect any of this, and now it was all too unclear how things would shake out.

But she wasn’t nervous. She was aware of her limits, and she always made decisions based on cold, hard facts. That was how the Sky Queen always acted. If all went well, then fine. If not…she would have to prepare to make the right move herself.

It all began with a certain promise. In order to defeat Charybdis, she had accepted an offer from Clayman. In exchange, she agreed to take one request from him.

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Several months ago, Milim visited Frey’s domain. She didn’t exactly slip in unnoticed. There was a loud bang! as she shoved the doors open and ran into the room.

Frey didn’t bat an eye. Milim always acted like this. When she felt that massive aura—one Milim never bothered to hide—she knew it had to be her.

“Hey, Frey! Beautiful day out, huh?!”

She beamed at her, playing around with her beautiful platinum-pink hair to show it off. Was Frey busy at the moment? Who cares?

On Milim’s hand, however, was something new. Not a ring—a brass knuckle covering her four fingers. It was something far too boorish for most young women, but on Milim, it couldn’t have been more perfect. It had a relief of a dragon carved into it, half aglow in magical aura, and it fit snugly in her clenched little hand.

“Mmmm, maybe a little too hot, though?” she said as she fanned her face with one hand. It was obvious what she was doing. She never gave a crap about the weather.

“Oh, Milim. Haven’t seen you in a while. You look like you’re doing well. Did something nice happen to you?”

Frey had to take the bait. Otherwise, she’d have to put up with this act for the next hour.

“Ooh, you could tell? Well, just look at this!”

She thrust her Dragon Knuckle–equipped hand in front of Frey’s face, giving her a proud little eh-hem!

Frey glumly sighed. “Oh, wow,” she said, giving Milim what she thought the girl wanted. “It looks great on you. Where’d it come from?”

“Oh, you wanna know?” came the bashful reply. “Oooh, I dunno if I can tell you or not… Hmm, ohhh, what should I doooo?”

This I’m-the-best act was grating on Frey. Despite all the years they had known each other, it still rankled her.

“Well, aren’t we friends, Milim? It’s all right to tell me, isn’t it?”

Milim’s eyes sparkled. “Ooh! Oh yeah, we sure are friends, huh?! Okay, I’ll tell you! To tell the truth—”

Now that Milim finally had the invitation she wanted, she burst into a long story about the town of monsters she visited. The self-aggrandizing tale went on for a while, accompanied by several wardrobe changes from the new clothes she picked up there. It gave Frey some pause. Milim loved carrying on about herself all the time, but rarely to this level.

Once the conversation died down a little, Frey realized that now was the time to do the favor she promised Clayman.

“Oh, right. You know, Milim, I actually have a present for you, too. From friend to friend. Would you like to see it?”

She signaled to her attendants. They quickly brought over a tray bearing a beautiful, shining pendant, perched on top of purple satin cloth. An orb had been installed on the pendant, a jewel that even someone who knew nothing about precious stones could tell was worth a fabulous amount of money.

“Mm? A pendant, huh? Can I have it? But that doesn’t mean you can have my knuckle, okay?”

Frey chuckled. “That’s fine, Milim. Consider it a symbol of our friendship. And as a friend, I hope you won’t be too shy to wear it around.”

Milim gave a bright nod to Frey’s soft smile. “You got it!” she chirped as she attached it to her clothing.

Forbidden magic: Demon Marionette launching… Activated.

At that instant, the expression on Milim’s face changed. Her eyes glazed over; the light of consciousness faded away from them. With the magic in the pendant released, a forbidden spell wormed its way into her.

This jewel was the Orb of Domination provided by Clayman to Frey—and having Milim put it on was the promised favor Clayman asked of her.

So there’s my promise. That takes care of my duty, but what will Milim do…?

Frey observed the girl. She stood there motionless, face a total blank. Then, for just a single moment, she felt like Milim’s blue eyes looked at her.

There, at that moment, Milim knew something weird was happening. Maybe… Yes. Indeed. I suppose it is, Milim…

The Dragon Knuckle fell out of her fingers, clunking on the ground. Frey looked at her and sighed.

“I’m done, Clayman,” she called out to an empty corner of the room. “Are you happy?”

“I am,” the Marionette Master replied, emerging from the corner. “Well done, Frey. Now I’ve obtained the strongest puppet there is! Ha-ha-ha-ha! This is what she gets for picking on me, calling me a young upstart. Pathetic, isn’t it, Milim?!”

He punched her as he laughed his nasal laugh. Her face reddened, a cut appearing on her lips. The multiple layers of Barrier protecting her were gone, meaning that even she could be hurt now—especially if it was a demon lord like Clayman doing the hurting.

“Shouldn’t you stop that?” Frey coldly commented as the half-giggling Clayman prepared to land another blow. It wasn’t a pretty sight to see, and besides—

“Pfft! This isn’t the sort of weak curse that’ll undo itself after a punch or two. This is forbidden magic. It includes all the magic force I can muster from my body. Don’t you resent her at all, after the way she acted around all of us? That’s why you joined me on this plan, is it not?”

“It’s not. I just fulfilled my promise to you.”

“No need to lie to her face like that, you know. This girl is nothing more than a doll to us now. A pointlessly sturdily made doll, I should add. We can just fix her before she falls completely apart.”

The veins were visible in his eyes as he kicked Milim away, Frey coldly watching the whole time. Such an impertinent man. This is how you really are…?

It was at that moment when Frey abandoned Clayman for good. Thus, she decided to act on her own instincts for a change.

“Listen, Clayman. Maybe you don’t know, but Milim comes with a self-defense mechanism, all right? The way she described it, at least, it’s called Stampede, and it puts her in an uncontrollable state. You’re free to trigger that and die if you like, but try not to take me with you.”

The words were enough to restore Clayman’s composure. He resentfully groaned. “Psh. What a bastard of a demon lord this is. Very well. Using her should give my words a little more presence among us all. And you, Frey; you’re a coconspirator as well. I’ll expect you to work for me.”

“Oh? I thought we were equals.”

“Fool! I’m the one who came up with this plan. You’re already one of my pawns. Or would you like to engage Milim in battle?”

“…Are you threatening me?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! You can take that any way you like. But if you don’t want to die, I’d suggest not angering me.”

It was classic Clayman—sometimes offering the carrot, other times the stick, but always with a heaping helping of arrogance. And it’s true; this was Clayman’s plan all along. That, and it was his hint to Frey that Milim had a weakness for the word friend. How he managed to learn that little tidbit, she didn’t know, but all Frey did was keep her promise—although she only did so because of one she firmly believed in.

“…All right.”

“Good. Just don’t think about doing anything to betray me. As long as you listen to my requests a bit, I will personally guarantee your position as ruler of the skies.”

The escape route was cut off. Now Frey was Clayman’s business associate—a fancy name for his puppet. All of this happened several weeks before the Day of Ruin that visited Tempest.

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Thinking it all over again, Frey sighed.

With Milim under his wing, Clayman was using her overwhelming potential violence as a cudgel to coerce her with. Now Frey was simply following orders, forced to do his bidding.

She couldn’t help but laugh at how much she deserved this. She felt like such a fool for believing him. But she also had another thought. Clayman was a sly, conniving demon lord, never one to play down, but he also tended to overestimate his own powers. That’s why he never had a perspective on the true essence of things. Frey, luckily, was blessed with exactly those observational skills—not a “skill” like breathing fire, but something she naturally picked up in her relations with other people. The ability to see the kind of truth that someone like Clayman, who treated people as nothing more than useful tools, could never notice.

So, trusting her instincts, she made a bet. And no matter how it turned out:

I don’t think you’ll be alive for much longer, Clayman.

She began going over the procedure to come. The “promise” came to mind once again. It made her smile.

The frigid land was encased in howling snow and ice, surrounded by frozen tundra. Temperatures stayed at well below zero degrees Fahrenheit, driving away nearly all life.

In the middle of it all stood a tall, looming castle, a beautiful, fantastical palace. A demon castle, one materialized from an unimaginable amount of magical force. It was called Icefayr Castle, and it was the domain of the demon lord Guy Crimson.

A calm, collected man strode along a corridor inside the castle, his hair of platinum blond, eyes long and narrow. Those blue eyes were a prominent feature of his chiseled visage. His skin was fair, practically translucent, and his beauty would almost make some assume he was female.

This was the demon lord Leon Cromwell, known alternately as either the Platinum Devil or the Platinum Saber, and he stalked the halls of this castle like he owned them.

Ahead of him was a large door, decorated ornately by a master woodsmith. It led to the audience chamber where the master of this domain awaited. Leon was here to see Guy Crimson, and as he stood before the door, two large, heavy magic-born grunted and strained to open it up.

“The demon lord Leon Cromwell has arrived!”

A beautiful female magic-born beyond the door shouted Leon’s name as he entered. There, he saw two lines of powerful Greater Demons lining the way ahead on both sides. Each one was a named demon, and each had been granted physical corpuses for use in this world. All of them were powerful beyond the definition of a Greater Demon, easily surpassing what a high-level magic-born could manage. They were also bedecked in a fine array of magical equipment, each having evolved in their own unique ways. They numbered two hundred or more in all, and some were even calamity-class threats, rated Special A on the scale.

But not even these demons could defy the figures beyond—the sheer overpowering awe exuded by the six demons that surrounded the throne in the chamber’s midpoint, under the watchful eye of Guy Crimson.

These were named Arch Demons, capable of subduing even calamity-class monsters. If anything, they could be defined as demon lords themselves.

Amazingly, not even these demon kings were allowed to speak freely in this chamber—for there was a wall, an impregnable force, that none of them could ever conquer.

The green-haired demon that heralded Leon’s arrival was soon joined by a demon with blue hair that guided him down the aisle. She was gorgeous, the personification of all human desires. Her graceful, wispy arms were hidden in the sleeves of a dark-red maid’s dress.

The green-haired one was Mizeri, the blue-haired one Raine, and they were the two pillars who stood on both sides of the absolute ruler Guy Crimson, doing the speaking for him. They were both Demon Peers, superpowered creatures that each rated a disaster classification—the equal of a demon lord.

Now Leon was at the throne. Mizeri and Raine nodded at him, then took their posts beside Guy as the man on the throne stood up. The only people in this room allowed to move a muscle were the two demon lords.

“It gladdens me to see you, Leon,” he said in a clear voice that carried across the chamber. “Doing well, I hope? I appreciate your answering my invitation.”

His bloodred eyes had stars of gold and silver dancing in them, and his wavy, burning hair was a deep shade of rouge. He was about as tall as Leon, and while Leon was feminine in his beauty, Guy’s was more prideful and distant. He had an alluring sort of attractiveness, the look of one born to lead—and conquer.

He walked down the steps from his throne as he greeted Leon, bringing an arm to his chest and embracing him. Then, without hesitation, he placed his hand upon Leon’s face and kissed his lips.

Leon pushed him away, wincing. “Leave me,” he complained, like he always did. He glared at Guy, looking genuinely peeved. “I am not interested in other men. How many times have I told you?”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, you never were any fun like that,” Guy gleefully replied. “I’d be happy to become a woman for you, if you like. But very well. Let us change locations.”

He walked off, without waiting for a response. This, too, was how it happened every time.

Considering the arctic region he lived in, Guy’s clothing was quite unusual. He mostly had his clothes draped over him, revealing a great deal of bare skin. To Guy, who never felt the cold anyway, that was never an issue. He wore a near-mystical smile to complement his bewitching beauty, perhaps recalling the sensation of Leon’s lips against his—and then a snakelike tongue licked his bright-red lips, creating an eerie sort of irresistible allure.



For Guy, who could adjust his gender at will, men and women were both targets of his sexual appetite. He—or she, depending—was Guy Crimson, demon lord, master of this castle, and the oldest and strongest of demon lords. As the Lord of Darkness, he was the sole and absolute ruler of this blindingly cold continent.

Guy pressed on ahead, not bothering to guide Leon. Leon followed behind, as if this was normal to him. No one else in the audience chamber moved until they were both gone. It was forbidden. They all bowed their heads to them, waiting for their ruler and his guest to leave.

Once all were sure they were gone, Mizeri and Raine stood before the rows of demons. And then, a single word from Raine:

“Disperse.”

Then the two Demon Peers left, setting off to prepare tea for their guest. They were the highest-ranked among all the demons in this castle, but their sole occupation was to take care of Guy Crimson. This work was prioritized above all else in this domain—and so they quickly set off, not wanting to attract their master’s ire.

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Following Guy, Leon stepped into the ice terrace on the highest floor of the castle. Despite being open to the elements, not a single snowflake made its way inside. It was a comfortable, fully air-conditioned environment, and since Guy was wholly unaffected by the temperature around him, he had set this up exclusively for Leon’s sake. He might have been arrogant, but when it came to his friends or those who recognized his authority, he took care of them down to the last detail.

Musing about how little Guy had changed, Leon gruffly threw himself down in his seat. It was made of ice but didn’t feel cold at all. That didn’t faze him, nor did the way the ice bent pliably under him, providing a soft cushion.

“So,” he asked, “what did you call me here for?”

An ice table appeared out of nowhere. Raine lined up two cups of tea on it, as Mizeri soundlessly stood by the terrace entrance. They were not to interfere with their masters’ speech, unable to speak themselves without permission. This was not at all an equal relationship. Until ordered, they could not even allow their emotions to be shown in public. If they ever acted on their own without their master’s orders, they would be provided with nothing but a quick death.

Even Demon Peers as powerful as them both were mere tools before the demon lord. That was how strong Guy was, and that was why they wouldn’t move even if Leon attacked Guy right there. His rule was absolute, and worrying for his safety was the height of disrespect. Their presences were thus ignored as the conversation continued.

“Well, as you know, a Walpurgis Council is coming soon. I thought I should implore you to attend, no matter how inconvenient it was.”

“Oh? Rare of you to force anything upon me like that.”

“I know. Even if it means I owe you a favor, I want you to participate.”

“…Why is that?”

“Ha!” Guy smiled, enjoying this. “Wary as always, I see. Very well. Let me explain. It was Clayman who proposed this one. A little man. But for some reason, Milim’s name was among the cosigners. Milim is one of the oldest demon lords, up there with me. She wouldn’t lift a finger for someone the likes of Clayman. So I believe…”

“You believe that reports of Carillon’s death might not be entirely true?”

“Oh, you know, do you?” Guy resented having his thoughts guessed so easily.

Leon paid it no mind. “Clayman went too far,” he continued. “He tried to harass me without leaving any evidence behind, but I’m not letting it pass this time. Whether Carillon lives or not, if Milim is taking action, that is bad news.”

Guy gave this a relieved nod. “Hmm. I agree with you. This might be just another game to Milim, but I don’t like to see anyone tipping the balance of power among the demon lords. It just gives me more work.”

Waiting to make sure Guy was no longer peeved, Leon decided to tackle the question that interested him the most.

“So, Guy, do you think Milim is being controlled by Clayman?”

“Thinking about Milim is pointless,” came the blunt reply. “Someone like me is too intelligent to read the behavior of a moron. That is one of my very few weaknesses.” He shrugged and gave Leon a broad grin, then went back to his first question. “But if you worry about it that much, Leon, should I assume you will be participating?”

Leon could tell that dancing around each other like this would lead them nowhere. “Yes, I intend to. I hate working with others, but this time, I suppose I have no choice.”

“Oh? Well, very good. Before then, I was hoping we could embrace each other in bed later this evening—”

“I have no interest in men. Or in women, unless they strike my fancy. Besides, what benefit would embracing you, as you put it, have for me?”

“You don’t have to start with that. If you wish, I would happily take on a woman’s body for you…”

Guy slithered in for a hug. Leon, seeing it a mile away, dodged it beautifully. One saw this little exchange between them on regular occasions.

“By the way,” he said after it was clear Leon wasn’t putting up with it, “it’s rather rare for Ramiris to provide feedback to us one way or the other, but do you know anything about this ‘Rimuru’ person?”

This was another topic of the next Walpurgis, something everyone had an interest in since it’d mark the first new demon lord after Leon.

“The way Clayman puts it,” Leon replied, “he’s just a self-styled demon lord. Personally, if he has the strength to back it up, I have no problem with him.”

“Ah. So you think Rimuru is qualified to be a demon lord? I was just wondering, since Ramiris, of all people, is involved. If someone’s piqued her interest that much, it should be a lot of fun for me.”

Although this Walpurgis was convened by Clayman, Ramiris had made the additional proposal of having Rimuru himself attend. By Guy’s estimate, Ramiris must’ve had something to say about Clayman’s actions here.

“…Ramiris? I have trouble dealing with that fairy. She makes fun of me every time we meet. I’ve thought about strangling her to death countless times…”

…But if it was Ramiris making this request, Leon had to agree with it. He couldn’t help but feel like he owed that much to her.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Better not. If you kill her, you’d be making me your enemy, you realize.”

“I’m sure. I wasn’t being serious. Besides, there’s no way I’d win in a fight against you.”

That was no lie. Leon was no fan of Ramiris and her big mouth, but he didn’t actually mean her harm. And to be honest, he had no hope of beating Guy. They were both equal in demon lord rank, but the difference in strength was like night and day. Leon was closer to Mizeri and Raine than Guy on that score. There was just no comparison.

“Mm? I wouldn’t be so sure. Maybe you’d kill me one in a million times?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not interested in a fight I’m not guaranteed to win.”

“Quit being so modest. There aren’t many people who could wound me. The mere fact that you have a chance of killing me makes you more than strong enough, Leon.”

“Pfft. The truth’s the truth. You and Milim are on a different echelon from us. And speaking of that…”

Leon was reminded of something—the reported resurrection of Veldora, the Storm Dragon. And when he told that story, Leon managed to honestly shock Guy for the first time in his life.

Just then, an icy, shrill voice echoed across the terrace, cutting them off.

“Oh my. I am very interested in that topic.”

The voice was a perfect match for the beautiful woman it belonged to. Her skin was like porcelain, her eyes a fascinating sort of cold, glowing blue diamond in color. Her pearl-white hair cascaded past her cheeks, where the light-green shade of her lips drew the eye.

She was allowed to move and speak without Guy’s permission, shining more beautifully than any crown jewel. She was praised as the Ice Empress by some, but to the rest of the world, she was known as Velzard, the Ice Dragon—one of only four dragon types to exist, and the demon lord Guy Crimson’s friend and partner. Just like Leon, she was on equal footing with Guy.

“Ah, Velzard,” Leon said, dripping with sarcasm. “I suppose there was a dragon type here, wasn’t there?”

“My, cold as always, aren’t we? But I’m glad to have the chance to see you.”

“Are you? Well, it’s a great honor to have a glimpse at your face.”

There was little real emotion behind this exchange.

“You never did get along with each other,” Guy observed with a groan. Not that he had any interest in mediating. Normally, this would kick off a series of back-and-forth put-downs, but today Velzard changed the subject.

“So the topic you were discussing? Sir Leon, my younger brother has awoken?” Her blue eyes were shining as she asked for details on Leon’s big news. “You are sure of that, Leon?”

“I stopped feeling his presence two years ago, so I assumed he had met his end, but…?”

If Veldora had resurrected himself, it would’ve been obvious. His massive, out-of-control aura would’ve changed the world’s weather patterns. But none of that happened. Guy and Velzard could be excused for their shock.

“It’s no mistake. A spy I sent to the Western Nations reported as much to me.”

“Oh…? So why is that evil dragon acting so obedient? Has he weakened to the point that he can no longer replenish his magicule stores?”

“And who would’ve undone the seal placed upon him? I don’t think he could’ve broken out by himself…”

The Hero had sealed Veldora away—and Velzard had done nothing to save him from it. To her, this was a good way to teach Veldora a lesson for all that selfish rioting. She figured she would spring him out before he disappeared for good, once he was a bit more mature. But then he really did disappear, which perplexed her. It happened much quicker than she anticipated.

“As the spy put it, Clayman’s scheming was the cause. He had impressed upon the Western Nations, and the larger kingdom of Farmus in particular, to defeat and destroy the Great Forest of Jura Alliance this Rimuru character has established. The results cost Farmus its entire military force and caused Rimuru to place his hat in the demon lord ring.”

“You know much about this, Leon.”

“Of course I do. I’m a former human, unlike you. I’ve also just recently learned that Veldora was apparently sleeping right in the middle of the most intense combat. Just before his soul disappeared for good, he was exposed to vast amounts of blood, and it awoke him. That is the truth.”

The Farmus troops were subsequently massacred by his rage, he went on to explain, although Rimuru escaped injury.

“So that’s it? The seal just undid itself?”

“That much, I can’t tell you.”

Velzard nodded at this. Leon could be right, but a single spy’s report wasn’t enough to make a policy decision from. The Hero’s unique skill Unlimited Imprisonment encased its target in a dimension of an imaginary number, shutting out any access or interaction with the real world. But now Veldora was exercising his presence here, once more?

“Perhaps the Hero’s seal wasn’t so complete after all…”

This made sense to her…before Leon corrected her.

“That’s possible, yes, but I have another theory. What if someone swallowed Veldora up, seal and all, and placed him in another subspace of their own making?”

Guy smiled giddily at this. “Ooh, I like that! So someone did undo the Hero’s seal, then! The seal’s too interwoven with the Hero’s own abilities to be undone by any normal skill. Perhaps you or I could do it…but if this person exists, then he must be as powerful as us. How fun!”

“It is just a possibility, keep in mind.”

“And you think this person might be Rimuru, Leon?”

“…Exactly.”

“I see, I see. Then we definitely do need to size this person up.”

Now it made sense to Guy. No wonder Leon wasn’t showing his typical reluctance to attend a Council. Clayman was engaged in reckless violence; Milim was acting unusually strange; Rimuru undid Veldora’s seal and declared himself demon lord. What if all these events were actually connected? At the very least, it’d make this Walpurgis a hell of a lot of fun.

A longing smile erupted across Guy’s face. “You know,” he whispered, “why Veldora is acting so obedient, then?”

“…I think he’s been weakened,” replied Velzard. “I’m receiving only the tiniest of reactions from his presence. Nothing like before.”

Even as a fellow dragon type, Velzard had to concentrate to receive even a weak blip from her younger brother. If his energy had been drained, that would explain that.

“Strange that he hasn’t acted out at all, though. With his personality, violence is practically what he lives for.”

Velzard was having trouble making sense of all this, too.

“Well, be that as it may,” Leon matter-of-factly replied, “I’m not terribly interested in Veldora. If you want to try to drag an old friend of yours back here, be my guest.”

While Velzard was family, and Guy had torn his hair out figuring out what to do with Veldora in the past, Leon had no connection to Veldora. As long as this dragon didn’t mess with his domain, he had no intention of being involved. That’s how dangerous Veldora was to him.

“Are you leaving?”

“Yeah. That’s all you needed from me, right?”

“Well, one moment. No need for all the rush. I wanted to ask: Have you made any progress in pursuing your real goal? You know, targeted summoning?”

Guy was referring to the experimentation Leon had spent much of his life working on. He was just as interested in the subject as Leon.

“…Not quite yet on that, no. I changed up my plan and tried having them perform summons at random, but that ended in failure as well. It just attracted too much attention, you see. I brought the theory of ‘incomplete summons’ to the Western Nations, but the Free Guild interfered with me. It’s already a horribly inefficient way of going about this business, and it’ll face another obstacle in the future. Once it does, I’ll just have to find another way.”

To put it in an extreme way, Leon really didn’t care about the Council or the new demon lord. He was simply trying to pick out young weeds before they grew and got in his way.

“Obstacle?”

“Yeah. This one apparently saved the lives of some kids who were just waiting to die. Before I could pick them up, no less.”

“Ah. So they were forced into rescue before you saw any results? And you’re sure you’ll continue being interfered with?”

“Seems likely. He got angry about all these nations summoning children, so he may start applying pressure to each of them. So it’s time to clear out that experiment. If we go any further with it, he’ll find out that I’m there, behind the scenes.”

“Hmm. Could you perhaps rub out this hindrance?”

Guy hinted with his eyes that it’d be all too easy for Leon. But his friend simply sighed.

“Well, this ‘hindrance’ is the exact Rimuru we were just discussing.”

“What?! That’s no coincidence, is it?”

“Funny, isn’t it?” Leon nodded, face dead serious. “That’s why I wanted to meet him for myself sometime.”

Of course, he still could’ve afforded to ignore this Rimuru person, if only Ramiris hadn’t chosen to stick her nose in…

“All right. This seems to be getting more curious all the time. Perhaps Milim is thinking along similar lines, too. She may be a moron, but she’s got quite the instinct for this kind of thing.”

“Perhaps. Tonight’s Walpurgis could be a rather raucous occasion.”

“Hee-hee! No doubt about it.”

Leon and Guy exchanged smiles as the gentle blue eyes of Velzard watched over them. They proceeded to chitchat a little more before Guy changed the subject.

“By the way, I had been wondering about something else. Who is this collaborator of yours providing your information?”

“I don’t know much about him. He seems to be a human from the Empire, and he calls himself a merchant.”

Summoning an otherworlder required vast amounts of magical energy, exacting conditions, and convoluted rituals to work. The pickier you were about who you summoned, the longer you had to wait before you could attempt the summon again. To get around this, Leon did some business with this merchant, who then conducted the summons for him.

“And this merchant can be trusted?”

“Trusted? Trust never needs to be involved. All I’m doing is using him.”

“Ah. Well, if that’s fine with you, I have no complaints. But be careful, all right? I don’t want you dying on me.”

“Heh. You, worried about me? That’s a rare sight from you, Guy. But don’t worry. I have no plans to die until I’m finished with my goals.”

“Again with those ‘goals.’ It’s that important to you?”

“It sure is. I’d put them ahead of well near everything else in this world.”

“Hmm. I’m starting to feel jealous.”

“Don’t give me that nonsense. But I will accept your warning. See you tonight.”

With that, Leon left the terrace. Guy refrained from stopping him this time, as Leon left a single shining crystal and used Spatial Motion to set off.

A pair of eyes watched him go.

“Talk about impatient. I know that’s how Leon is…”

Guy grinned a little as he spoke softly.

“It feels to me that Leon is leaving himself uncharacteristically open to attack,” Velzard observed in her icy voice. “He’s working with people without even knowing who they are. Should I investigate for him?”

“Nah,” Guy replied, unconcerned. “Meddling in Leon’s affairs would just offend him. I don’t want my friends to hate me.”

To him, Leon was a trusted friend, someone whose personality he was keenly aware of by now. He knew about Leon’s talent more than anyone else. If Leon wasn’t looking into his cohorts’ backgrounds, it must have been because he saw no great need to.

“If he asks us for a favor, you can help him out then.”

“All right.”

And that was the end of their conversation.

Now the attendees of tonight’s Walpurgis were set in stone.

Clayman proposed the Council; Frey and Milim signed on to it. Ramiris, with her additional proposal, was also attending, as was the homebody Leon.

Speaking of homebodies, there was another demon lord whose location was a complete enigma. Guy had reached out via their specialized demon lord connection, all but demanding that one’s attendance.

Beyond that, there was his old friend Daggrull, along with… Hmm. What about that other guy? He should be coming. Daggrull promised to bring him along. And that just left Guy himself. It’d mark the first Walpurgis in a while to have all the demon lords show up, except for the missing Carillon.

“It should be a fun one, for sure. You want to join me?”

“Hmm…” Velzard reflected on this. “No, I think I won’t. Perhaps if my brother were there, but otherwise, I have no interest in demon lords.”

“No? All right. Keep the lights on for me.”

“I would be glad to. Now, time to prepare.”

Velzard stood up, leaving Guy to brood over the upcoming Walpurgis as he gazed at the aurora covering the frigid land.

A demon lord working behind the scenes, head full of schemes.

A newer demon lord, but one that could crumble at any time.

An old friend who was starting to get surprisingly active, considering he hardly left the house.

And then the potential birth of a new demon lord.

So exciting! His heart hadn’t sung like this for hundreds of years.

He needed real change like this. Demon lords weren’t friends; they were supposed to be competing with one another. There was no artificial limit placed on their number—there were times when a dozen existed at once, even more. Whether it’s ten or a hundred, anything was fine. If they weren’t strong enough, they’d get pushed out of the picture the next time a Temma War came around, every five hundred years.

It’s just that each time that happened, this new crop would fight for a piece of the pie, and to combat this, the maximum number of demon lords was finally set at ten. The human world, once they became aware of this, started calling them the Ten Great Demon Lords. Guy was firmly against it, but it became a sort of tacit agreement among them. The humans didn’t mind the demon lords picking one another off until they were a more manageable number. Ten was enough.

But Guy figured it was time to put an end to that. The weak didn’t deserve the title demon lord. Perhaps it was time for a new era of rule to unfold—one, he thought, where real demon lords held sway.

Guy was one of the seven Primal Demons, and the first demon lord to be summoned to this world as an Arch Demon. Each of these demons had a primary color associated with them, and his was Rouge.

He was an unnamed demon unleashed upon the world, fulfilling the wishes of the powerless human who summoned him and destroying a nation that the human was apparently at war with. He followed that up by destroying his human’s own nation as well. That earned him his name—Guy, pronounced “ghee.” An unpleasant-sounding name, like the shrieks of the doomed and desperate as he crushed them.

Upon being named, Guy realized he had awakened into his new class of “true” demon lord. He thought it needless at first, given that he believed he was already the strongest out there—but this evolution also affected the Primal Demons Vert and Bleu, summoned alongside him as errand girls. They, too, were given physical bodies to work with, as well as the brand-new class of Demon Peer.

On a whim, Guy decided to make them his servants and gave them names. For Vert, Mizeri, reflecting the misery of mankind. For Bleu, Raine, the rains of blood that fell wherever he strode. They had been faithful to him ever since.

Just after Guy awakened to demon lord-dom, another one did the same. That was Milim, a girl conceived by a human in this world and the first of the four dragon types that ever threatened it. That dragon had paid for its strange dalliance by losing the majority of his power to his own child. The act had been reviled as taboo ever since.

Upon losing his power, the dragon type dispersed his body, came to the surface to attain a physical form, and became the founder of the dragons as they existed in this world. This led to dragon types as being defined as the self-sentient propagations of natural spirits, the prototypes, and all the dragons that existed and thrived in the world came from this first father—Veldanava, the Star-King Dragon.

One day, the Star-King Dragon gave his daughter a pet, a young dragon that would serve as his next incarnation someday. This “pet” was killed by a certain foolish kingdom that ignited Milim’s rage, causing the very heavens to tremble as the nation was destroyed. This made Milim awaken, and the resulting new force sent her wholly out of control, almost wiping all life away from the world.

It was Guy who stopped her. The battle took place over seven days and seven nights, the most severe anyone had ever seen, turning the bountiful fields of the west into an utter wasteland.

In the end, no winner could be crowned. The battle ended once Milim regained her senses. It was Ramiris who did this, back then a leader of spirits who sacrificed her own power to neutralize Milim’s rage. She paid a heavy price for this. Being exposed to the auras of demons and dragons sapped her force and made her fall to the world’s surface, becoming a continually self-resurrecting fairy.

But it did the trick. It prevented the end of the world and allowed Guy and Milim to come to an agreement.

These were the first three demon lords, and each had their own goals.

One wanted to find the farthest reaches of power.

One wanted to live free from all barriers.

One wanted to promote balance in the world.

But that was fine. These differing goals were exactly why they could see one another as equals.

The demon lord ranks were soon swelled by a giant protecting the gates to heaven, as well as a vampire from ancient times. A figure fallen from heaven became number six. This was the second generation—not as strong as the oldest but more than strong enough to rule over the world.

The giant’s body was too imbued with the holy element to allow the seeds of demon lord-dom to take root, but he was still so blindingly strong that he got in anyway—an unusual path to take. The old vampire was shrewd, sly, and more conniving than any of the others—although someone else was currently occupying her seat at the Council for her.

The sixth one was interesting. Definitely strong, but completely uninterested in the world. Laziness was the watchword here. No doubt had the ability to rule the land but probably still living just as “fallen” as ever somewhere.

Four out of the six demon lords at this point had “awakened” to the job, apart from the giant and the fairy. They had survived multiple Great Wars, polishing their skills with each one—enough so to earn ultimate skills, like Guy’s and Milim’s.

In addition to them, there was Guy’s friend, Leon. Leon was a human and a former Hero. A unique upbringing led to him picking up an ultimate skill, making him strong enough even to satisfy Guy’s strict standards.

That made seven. And how many of this next Walpurgis’s attendees would live up to the standard of these seven? Guy couldn’t wait to see.

And then there was Clayman.

That fool thought he could rule over Milim. It was just too hilarious. Guy could barely contain his laughter. That was impossible. If Guy couldn’t do it, there was no way someone like Clayman could. Lower-level skills simply didn’t work on those who possessed ultimate skills. All the natural laws that ruled this world were nothing more than unique cases to them; they could easily nullify any magical attempt to cloud their minds.

An elemental attack that struck at their weak points might have some effect, yes. But mind-domination magic? Out of the question. Anyone spineless enough to be ruled over by conditions like that would never be able to obtain an ultimate skill in the first place.

Ultimate skills, as the name implied, gave the wielder ultimate power to control the very laws of nature. The only way to counter an ultimate skill was with another ultimate skill. That was the absolute, unbendable rule of this world.

Clayman couldn’t do a thing against Milim. Milim was just having him dance on the palm of her hand.

What a fool…

Guy flashed a weak smile as he watched the events unfold.

The era of weaklings styling themselves as demon lords had come to an end. The fakers would get sifted out; the generation of true demon lords would begin. Guy was sure of it. He smiled.

And thus he set off for what was bound to be the most chaotic Walpurgis in recent memory.