

CHAPTER 5

WALPURGIS

The impossibly ornate door connected right to the meeting hall.

A large, round table was positioned in the center, with twelve evenly spaced chairs surrounding it. Ten demon lords were on the invite list (with Carillon absent), so two of these seats would be empty even if I took up one. Attendees sat in chronological order of their demon lord appointment, and so I was placed right in front of the door—not that I minded. My attention was focused in the room around me anyway.

On an occasion like this, I wanted to observe my new colleagues as much as possible. Of course, there were only two people here right now. One was Ramiris, at the seat of honor way on the other side. She was seated and kicking her legs around, having a whale of a time, like a kid on a car trip. I figured I could ignore her.

No, my attention was on her right, at the seat directly facing me. There I saw a man with bewitchingly attractive red hair. A man, definitely, but there was more than a touch of femininity to his dashing good looks. His eyes were shut, but I doubted he was napping.

One look was all I needed to know: This dude was trouble. Analyze and Assess seemed to suggest that he wasn’t any big deal, but my sixth sense was giving me the eeriest vibes with him. At first glance, he seemed like an inexperienced kid, kind of magically strong but unable to control his aura. Without the Great Sage’s analytical skills, I might’ve been tricked—that was how crafty he was at hiding his true self, feeding the people around him misinformation and making them underestimate his true skills. We hadn’t even started fighting yet, and the battle was already under way.

It made me recall the mind-reading skills of Gazel, the dwarf king. Kind of like my Great Sage, nobody would know you had that skill unless you told them. It wouldn’t be until someone tried it on you that you’d notice it, I think, unless it was a mind reading that went really deep into your psyche to avoid that. As long as my latent resistance didn’t fail me, I was pretty sure I’d be okay.

As a result of this, hiding your skills was very important. You could also bluff people into thinking you had certain skills or deliberately mess up a skill to make them think you were inept to wield it. There were all kinds of ways to play with your opponents’ minds, and that was exactly what this pretty boy was doing—tricking other people’s Analyze and Assess skills to mess around with them.

My idea had always been to hide my powers, keep my aura turned down as long as possible, and give the enemy zero information to work with. This guy, meanwhile, was using his rivals’ data-gathering skills against them. It was a sort of screening process. He was, in effect, asking his foes “Do you have the power to read me?” If they didn’t, they were out of the picture; if they did, he’d gauge their response. If the fake info he planted into their minds was enough to scare them off, they weren’t worth dealing with in the first place—but if you did notice his trick, that glance at the sheer depths of his powers would make you unable to resist him.

But think of it like this. Even the data he wanted you to know about indicated that he had as much magical force as Carillon. There was no way to guess how much he actually had. Even if you understood his game, it was hard not to let it unnerve you a bit.

This was Guy, and he was clearly on a whole other level.

By the time I was done examining Guy, a large man lumbered into the room, bringing only one guest with him. This was Daggrull, the demon lord giant whose overwhelming presence dominated any room he was in. He immediately walked up and slammed himself into a seat at Guy’s right, kicking back and putting his feet up. The empty space between them must’ve belonged to Milim, indicating that the table divided demon lords into two halves based on their order, with Guy on one end and me on the other.

I turned my eyes to him. Guy was a tall figure himself, but Daggrull was enormous, not to mention comfy-looking in his specially made chair. Even something like this chair was an opulent-looking magical item. This was Veldora’s favorite rival, and the magic with which he presented himself definitely signaled to me that he could take on a dragon type.

Plus, the amount of magicule energy on him was just ridiculous. Was that higher or lower than Veldora’s? It seemed bottomless to me, but it’d be hard to accurately measure unless I fought him for real. Still, quality beat quantity. Just because he had a bunch of magicules on hand didn’t make him seem that scary to me. The key was how well he used them. Differences in skill level were a vital aspect of any fight, of course, and a demon lord like Daggrull couldn’t be that unskilled. I suppose I’ll need to watch out for him, too.

Now another one came in, a handsome, muscle-bound man decked out in some real fancy-looking threads. He was tall, if not as tall as Daggrull, and his facial features looked like they’d been chiseled. His short, curly blond hair looked wild on his scalp, perhaps representing his violent personality. To put it simply, he had Hollywood good looks, and he knew how to charm people.

I suppose, of course, the thing that stuck out the most were the two fangs visible from his lips. He must’ve been the demon lord Valentine, the vampire. He sat to Ramiris’s left, so in terms of the seat order, he must’ve been about as old as Daggrull—that, or perhaps he just took over for whoever he replaced. Not that seat assignments mattered that much.

What struck me more were the pair Valentine brought with him. One was an elderly man, kind of a manservant type. Definitely well-trained, unmoving and statuesque. His aura was restrained, revealing nothing—the same strategy I used. The second one, meanwhile, was an eye-catchingly beautiful silver-haired girl who seemed to shine like the sun. Her skin was pale, and she had one red eye and one blue. There was something oddly eerie about this girl, who appeared to be on the cusp of adulthood and was clad in a maid-style dress. Maid dresses are like battle uniforms, as they say, and it wouldn’t be odd for this girl to be pretty strong.

And these two were both working for this guy? That’s a surprise. The girl, in particular, was just letting her gigantic aura out all over the place. But—hang on. When our eyes met, I was struck by the most uncomfortable feeling. Maybe I was imagining it, but it seemed like she was changing the nature of her aura at random.

Understood. Analyze and Assess indicates that the target likely bears more magicules than the demon lord Valentine.

Ah, I knew it. I couldn’t read her overall energy count, but it’s higher than Valentine’s, the guy she’s serving. It was very cleverly concealed—if you didn’t have an ultimate skill like mine, you’d never spot it. But again, they weren’t really intent on hiding it—like Guy, they wanted to assess you, see whether you spotted it or not.

Could this girl be the real demon lord? Or perhaps the previous holder of this seat, the demon lord that retired out. Maybe this is that “Milus,” the vampiress that even Veldora had high praise for. The changeover happened more than 1,500 years ago, so perhaps not too many demon lords knew about that—or did but were keeping mum about it. Or didn’t care. Either way, better be careful.

Valentine, the current demon lord, was no pushover himself. He had a heroic sort of ambition, even more than an untransformed Carillon, so there was no reason to doubt his strength. And if that wasn’t enough, she had that freaky girl with her. If it was her domain that got burned to ash, it wouldn’t be strange for her to despise Veldora at all. I resisted the urge to yell “Why’d you have to piss that lady off?!”

At least there was one saving grace—who wouldn’t mind dying by the hand of such a beautiful figure? (Quite a few people, I imagine, but…) I’ll just have to hope she doesn’t learn about Veldora and me—or if she does, that I don’t have to clean up the mess.

After a little while, the fifth person showed up—this one a loner, almost sleepwalking to his post. He had two swords on his belt, but that’s it. Not much of an arsenal. I got a quick glance at his eyes; they were light blue. His hair was a very dark shade of purple with silver streaks in it. He still looked young to me, maybe even high-school age, and he had well-defined facial features, although they were spoiled by his sleepy eyes and general listlessness.

He stopped by Ramiris’s seat to say hello. “Yo. Man, you’re still, like, the size of a bug, huh?”

“Oh, you trying to start a fight with me? Like you could even handle me, Deeno.”

So person number five was Deeno. He definitely seemed cut from the same cloth as her. Neither was seriously riled; they seemed to just be screwing with each other.

“Why would I need to, dumbass? Like, it’s totally obvious who would win.”

“Pfft! I didn’t realize you were in that much of a hurry to die. I’m in perfect physical form today, I’ll have you know!”

“Uh-huh. Hey, haven’t you shrunk since last time I saw you?”

“What do you want from me?! I only just got reborn recently!”

When I asked her about it, Ramiris said she had been resurrected around five hundred years ago. It would apparently take her several centuries to fully mature. This seemed to convince Deeno.

“Ohhh, that’s why? That’s kinda a pain for you, isn’t it? But you kept all your memories, right?”

“My memories, yes. But my spirit’s degenerated along with my body… Ooh, but I’m still the strongest outta all of you! I need a handicap like this, or it’s no fun!”

“Guy, I think Ramiris is sayin’ something? Did you hear her just now?”

“Bahhh?! What are you, stupid? I know how to pick my enemies, all right? I’m not saying I could KO Guy in one punch or anything!”

A bigmouth like her changed her stripes all too quickly. I guess that red-haired guy really was Guy, too, and judging by Ramiris’s freak-out, he really was a menace. I’ll just write “Guy = dangerous” in my internal notepad. It’s little notes like these that have saved me from peril more than once. You can’t underestimate the power of that.

The two kept on talking in hushed voices so as not to rile Guy. They were discussing Beretta and Treyni, Ramiris’s guests, and of course Ramiris was bragging up and down about them.

“Wha? Why’s a total loner like you got attendants here?” Deeno complained. “You’re making me look like a dweeb for showing up alone!”

“Hee-heeeee! Now I can get back at everyone for calling me a little shrimp and a loner, you in particular! Wait’ll you see how powerless you are against these guys!”

“Oh, you want us to fight? Is it okay if I rip ’em up?”

“Huh? Of course it’s not okay! If you break them, I’m seriously going to tell on you to Guy and make him make you pay for it!”

It’s like Guy was her big brother or something. It was breathtaking how quickly she let other people do the dirty work for her.

“…But really, man, these guys are the real deal. Like, I looked at ’em for real just now, and it’s like, damn!”

Beretta and Treyni silently nodded at Deeno. They were far too good for Ramiris, really.

“Right! You see? You see, you see? Now I’ve got some muscle to back up my words, know what I mean?” Ramiris stuck out her chest (not that she had much of one) to show up Deeno. Their upgrades were entirely my doing, but ah well.

Beretta and Treyni remained silent. They were the perfect attendants. They didn’t speak, and the dozing Shion behind me could definitely learn a thing or two from them.

Once he finished saying his hellos, Deeno stumbled over to his seat. It was next to Valentine’s, making him another member of the old guard. Deeno ignored Valentine entirely as he sat down…and immediately put his head on the table and started sleeping. That seemed kind of rude. Maybe demon lords didn’t make it a habit to say hi to one another, and all those put-downs with Ramiris were the exception to the rule.

Deeno couldn’t have acted less interested in being here. Showing up was enough for him, it seemed, but falling asleep without even bothering to read the room was, in a way, incredibly self-centered. Fearless, too.

I suppose that act had to be backed up with some actual ability. Hopefully. Let’s go with that. He was jamming my skills a bit, so I couldn’t be sure of what he had. He stared at me with his half-open eyes whenever I tried analyzing him, so he had to have noticed. That banter with Ramiris made me think he was pretty chill, but I definitely shouldn’t put my guard down. Given the rapport he seemed to have with Ramiris, though, I hoped I didn’t have to make him my enemy.

The next one through the door was the empress of the harpies, the demon lord Frey. Milim told me about her, and let me tell you, she was explosively erotic. I wondered how she flew with those breasts; they must generate a ton of wind resistance.

…Oops. My mind’s going off track. But can you blame me? That was just the sheer impact of her appearance.

Once she stepped inside, her eyes turned first to Milim’s empty seat and then to me. Even the way she turned her head was mesmerizing. I mean, come on… And when she passed by, oh, what a wonderful aroma she had on her.

As I basked in this, I felt something sinister behind my back. Shion was clearly peeved. Must’ve noticed I was letting that perfume get the best of me. Well spotted, Shion. Riling her any further was too scary a concept to entertain, so I reset my mind and got back to business.

Her magicule count wasn’t anything to write home about—maybe smaller than Shion’s or Benimaru’s. Of course, Shion could probably line up well with Valentine at this point, so I’m not saying it was that tiny. Quality, not quantity. It’d be foolish to judge on this alone. In terms of chest size, meanwhile, it was really hard to pick a winner— Oops. Better not think about that.

If I had to guess, maybe she had a lot of hidden skills? That was the kind of concerning vibe I got.

What was worth noting were her attendants. One was another big-breasted harpy, on the same level as Frey. She was young, and her body was about as lascivious as they come. The other was a large man, his magical energy on par with Frey’s. He had huge, eagle-like wings sprouting from his back, so he must’ve been a male harpy. He was a measure smaller than Daggrull but otherwise could give Valentine a run for his money in muscles and good looks, although the lion mask on his face made the latter part unclear.

Wait. Lion?

Report. According to my analysis and assessment—

Yeah. No way, right? I mean, this guy felt totally different from Carillon. It had to be some other guy. I didn’t need Raphael to spell it out for me. I’m not that dumb.

……

There was no way the AWOL Carillon would attend Walpurgis with such an obvious ploy. He’d be more careful with it, taking pains to act prudently. They say there are at least three people in the world who look exactly like you, and I’m sure that’s the story with this guy, too.

As I observed them, I was struck by the odd feeling that a chilly wind was blowing over me. I turned to find a blond-haired beauty coming in, blessed with looks that only the gods themselves could have given her. She walked right up to me.

“…You are Rimuru?”

“Yeah, but—”

I thought about saying “Yeah, but who’re you?” at first. I definitely didn’t know her—but then it dawned on me. There were four demon lords left. Carillon was missing, and that just left Clayman, Milim, and Leon. Leon was blond-haired, I think, and beautiful enough that people called him the Platinum Devil… Hmm…

“…Oh, you’re Leon? Did you need something?”

“Yes, I am Leon. And no, I need nothing from you. The sight of you brought back some memories, is all.”

It was him. He was beautiful, so much so that you could easily mistake him for a woman. In my past life, I probably would’ve been jealous enough to wish for him to get hit by a truck. He was formerly human, I was told, but kept a majestic presence about him—the majesty of a demon lord.

And I brought back “memories”? I suppose my face was essentially Shizu’s at a young age. So Leon must have—

“Shizu’s dead, Leon.”

Seeing me simply conjured up old memories of Shizu in his mind.

“I know,” he coldly stated. “And of course she would be. She took in Ifrit but refused to become a magic-born.”

“She asked me to punch you out for her. Mind letting me do that?”

I just kind of blurted it out. I wasn’t trying to start stuff; I just didn’t like how Leon was talking about her. It was maybe a little too direct, but Leon handled it with calm composure.

“No, thank you. I wanted her to live as a human being. I even gave her Ifrit as a farewell gift. I see no reason why I deserve a beating for it.”

What a disappointment. I figured he’d be enraged, but he just calmly fired back at me.

“…But I do have a bit of an interest in you. If you have an issue with me, I’ll happily invite you to come visit. You can turn down the offer, of course, if you think it’s a trap.”

Talk about a one-sided deal. He was basically daring me to chicken out. I had to accept it.

“All right. I’ll do that. Feel free to send an invitation, if you get around to it.”

I didn’t say anything more after that.

Leon nodded, looking a little annoyed. “I will. Assuming you walk out of this meeting hall alive, that is.”

With that blunt rejoinder, Leon settled down in the seat just to my left. It was his way of saying our conversation was over. For now, I was fine with that. I got to tell him about Shizu, and I now knew that Leon wasn’t out to antagonize me. At least not here at the Council. He wouldn’t have said yes to that invitation thing if he was.

Maybe it was just postponing the dispute for later, but right now, I wanted to focus on Clayman as my enemy.

These proceedings all unfolded in the hour after we reached the meeting hall at midnight. It looked like the older demon lords had been guided in first, with me getting a head start because I happened to be traveling with Ramiris. It wasn’t any official rule, though, given that people like Leon could travel here themselves.

All that remained were Clayman and Milim. And just when I thought the Council was about to begin, Benimaru tossed a Thought Communication my way.

(Sir Rimuru, may I brief you for a moment?)

This hall seemed like it was in another dimension of sorts, but I guess this link with Benimaru still worked?

Understood. A soul circuit has been established with the monsters under your command. The link is using this to allow your conscious to interact with them.

Oh. That sort of thing?

I guess this soul circuit got hooked up with the gifts I handed out to everyone for my evolution. It didn’t seem as robust as the connection I had with Veldora, but it was good enough for talking, at least.

So I asked what was up. Apparently, the battle ended less than an hour after it began—incredibly lopsided and pretty much as we planned it. Our side had numerous casualties but no deaths. Clayman’s forces had at least a thousand killed in action and over three thousand wounded. That was fewer deaths than I expected, but in this world where you can always get healed as long as you stayed alive, that much was a given.

Still, that was a massive, overwhelming victory. We managed to take some prisoners as well, so I couldn’t ask for much more.

Yamza, the enemy commander, had turned into Charybdis for some strange reason, but Benimaru was kind enough to vaporize the guy for me. Apparently. I’m not really sure what all that meant, so I just kind of glossed over it for now.

…Or I wanted to. But how did he deal with Charybdis’s Magic Interference?

Understood. A number of Arts and skills combined with the unique skill Born Leader allowed him full control over Hellflare.

Aha. So he used control beyond what Magic Interference could handle to hit it with a direct, massive wave of heat. Easy for me to say, but that has to require a hell of a lot of talent. Benimaru’s gotten stronger than I even imagined. Pretty hot stuff.

One factor we didn’t expect was the Dragon Faithful. They were reportedly a pretty formidable fighting force, as you’d expect from Milim’s followers. We didn’t lose anyone to them because they weren’t really out there seeking to kill…but I guess it was my bad for not thinking about them. I figured a force of a hundred-odd was no big deal, but I was wrong. Wars in this world depended more on the powers of a few than the many, but my conventional wisdom from my old world was making me forget that.

Lucky thing that didn’t result in any major breakdowns. I’d have to be more careful next time.

Based on Benimaru’s report, we had a general idea of Clayman’s story.

The force led by Yamza was marching on the pretext of investigating Carillon’s betrayal. They wanted to collect evidence that he backstabbed the other demon lords, killed one of Clayman’s top leaders, and was connected to me. Well, not collect. More like concoct.

With our victory today, that line was cut off. I didn’t know what kind of excuses he would come up with here, but I didn’t imagine they would be well received by any other demon lord. Of course, I intended to kill off Clayman in the end, and I was prepared to do the same to anyone who got in my way. Let’s just try to steer this so I’d secure victory here in the easiest way possible.

I’ll be counting on you, Raphael!

……

Raphael’s rarin’ to go, too. That’s a relief.

Whoops, here’s another report from Soei. Sounds like they’ve captured Clayman’s headquarters. Man, there is just no mercy with that guy. Hakuro pitched in a hell of an effort, too, but apparently Shuna shined the brightest in the fight.

Also, it turns out that I now have an army of undead for some reason? I sort of missed the plot on that, and Soei was being oddly vague about the whole thing, simply stating “Lady Shuna will explain the details later.”

The most important thing, though, was that Carillon wasn’t being held in Clayman’s castle. Plus:

(—We discovered the castle’s treasury, so we’ve called upon Geld to begin the transport process. The room included some evidence linking Clayman to the Moderate Jesters, which I think should help your case.)

Wow. No mercy. We’re even pillaging Clayman’s treasure vault. That doesn’t count as theft, does it? Oh, well. No point sweating the small stuff. We’ll just call it collecting damages for all the trouble Clayman gave us. There’s reportedly a lot, which should help our own budget out greatly.

More important, however, was that dossier of evidence. Benimaru had sent some over for me, and Soei had discovered some more. All of it was now safely received in my Stomach, and with it, I should be able to shut down the basis for any excuse he comes up with. It’d be important to make myself look good around here.

So, much quicker than I expected, we had thoroughly and completely crushed Clayman’s force. It’d remain to be seen how he’d approach this Council, but let’s try using these developments to my advantage.

…And then, just as I finished reading the reports, Clayman finally appeared before me.

He was more handsome than I pictured him—and high-strung. His clothing looked expensive, and I suppose he placed a lot of importance on his appearance, because he was sporting a whole array of Unique equipment that would make him a more-than-decent fighter. It certainly befitted his image as a demon lord not to be trifled with.

What struck me the most, however, was the fox he was carrying in his arms. It was packed to the gills with magicules and mystical force, maybe even up to demon lord levels. That was one of his attendants, and I suppose a demon lord’s servants had to be pretty damn powerful, too.

That, and I tried running an Analyze and Assess on him, and something interesting caught my eye there. I didn’t want to coast on this just because we had occupied his HQ. It was important to finish him off right.

Anyway, Milim followed behind him, completing the night’s attendee list.

All were real monsters, ready to burn you at a moment’s notice. Doing the A and A once-over on Leon produced nothing useful, either. It was kind of funny, seeing Raphael say that it couldn’t analyze something. It meant he had an ultimate skill of his own, something on the same level as mine.

Then I made a realization. Guy had let me read fake info, but was that his way of fending off ultimate skills? If I couldn’t use my ultimate to analyze something, it meant the target had an ultimate, too. That may be why he was feeding me a bunch of nonsense instead—I just happened to know it was fake nonsense because Raphael was smart enough to see that. If it hadn’t noticed, I could easily have been tricked.

This meant, of course, that Guy had an ultimate skill as well. I suspected Milus (?) did, too, and Leon definitely did. An ultimate was several orders of magnitude more powerful than a unique skill requiring an intersection of one’s attributes, luck, and a plethora of incidental conditions. They were rare—uncommon enough that even a true, awakened demon lord may not have one, and all were great as a last-resort ace in the hole.

That was why I needed to be extra careful here. That, and—ugh—it was safe to assume Guy knew I possessed an ultimate now. Big mistake. My lack of experience playing this game screwed me there. I was dealing with some of the orneriest demon lords out there; I should’ve been more on the alert.

Still, what’s done is done. It wasn’t a lethal mistake, either. I just needed to figure out how to deal with it. It’s easy to hide mind-reading skills, just as Gazel did. Guy still didn’t know what type of skill I had, so I probably didn’t need to be too hung up about it. Hell, I could even use this to make them think I’m a fool. To be exact, I would direct Raphael to hide everything at all costs, but maybe show off one ultimate skill that was okay to reveal as my trump card. That way, I could still keep a few cards hidden at all times, right?

It was a gutsy bit of subterfuge, but I was safe in pulling it off with the four ultimate skills I enjoyed. I was planning on kicking up one hell of a storm in the upcoming battle against Clayman anyway, which would make the debut of—

Suggestion. Hiding Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony would be difficult.

Yeah, I think you’re right. It was a great offensive and defensive weapon, capable of consuming and destroying nearly any attack thrown at it. Predation was a pretty core battle tactic for me, so revealing Belzebuth seemed like a good idea. Let’s go with that as my main battle weapon, keeping my other skills hidden until otherwise needed.

I suppose I’m glad that I noticed the need for something like this early on. If I got out of here safely, I’d need to rethink my battle tactics a little. No point being reluctant to use my skills if it wound up killing me.

After that moment of regret, I saw one of the most amazing sights of my life.

“Move it, you half-wit!”

Out of nowhere, Clayman closed-fist punched Milim. That Milim.

“Sit yourself down, you stupid dunce,” he said, ruthlessly bossing her around. I thought I’d explode in anger, but I held it in. Not yet. Just a bit longer. I have to hold back until I have the chance to declare it all, following the rules.

But what on earth happened to Milim? Milim the Destroyer? If it was Clayman being punched, well, that’d just be Milim being Milim. But this? Oh, man, I fear for his safety…

…and yet, despite this bout of violence, Clayman didn’t look like he’d be decapitated anytime soon. Milim did nothing to resist or complain about his treatment. She just followed his orders and sat at her seat.

This is weird. Is she under his control after all? I may have to consider the worst-case scenario here. And to add insult to injury, some of the other demon lords, Daggrull and Deeno included, were looking similarly flummoxed at this. Guy was stone-faced; I don’t know what he was thinking.

Clayman, meanwhile, was looking like he was king of the world, his superiority complex written all over his face. It made my anger burn all over again… Don’t expect your death to be an easy one, Clayman. You’ll pay for hitting my friend.

And with that oath to myself, Clayman’s death was now set in stone. I had no intention of forgiving him, no matter the excuse. But there was no need for panic. The Council had only just begun.

The event was attended by a total of nine people, minus Carillon:

“Lord of Darkness” Guy Crimson (demon)

“Destroyer” Milim Nava (dragonoid)

“Labyrinth Master” Ramiris (pixie)

“Earthquake” Daggrull (giant)

“Bloody Lord” Roy Valentine (vampire)

“Sleeping Ruler” Deeno (fallen)

“Sky Queen” Frey (harpy)

“Marionette Master” Clayman (walking dead)

“Platinum Saber” Leon Cromwell (ex-human)

…And then, me—the subject of this Council, the slime who’d dare call himself demon lord.

Raine, the maid in Guy’s service, made all the above introductions in her clear, loud voice.

Leon was the one who piqued my interest the most. I seem to remember his nickname being the Platinum Devil, but now he was acting all cool and calling himself the Platinum Saber. He certainly looked more the part of a dashing swordsman, but who thought up these nicknames anyway? They didn’t make them up themselves, did they? …Well, I probably shouldn’t comment, given my track record for naming things. Let’s let that topic die on the vine.

After the intros ended, Clayman stood up as the host.

“All right. First, thanks to all of you for answering my invitation and coming here. It is now time to begin our festival! I hereby declare this Walpurgis Council convened!”

Thus, with the chance for cataclysmic events electrifying the air around us, the event kicked off.

Taking advantage of his position as chairman, Clayman started things off by going into a speech, eyeing all of us in order and looking supremely satisfied with himself. His eyes stopped for just a moment when they reached Valentine, but maybe I imagined it—that’s got nothing to do with me anyway.

Leon was seated to my left; the chair on my right was empty, and to its right were Clayman’s and the absent Carillon’s seats.

Clayman went on for a while, explaining matters with an obvious sense of pride, and I diligently listened to all of it. Here’s the executive summary:

• The demon lord Carillon enticed me into declaring myself a demon lord. This allegation is backed up by the fact that Carillon’s armies are stationed in our town.

• He then incited the kingdom of Farmus into attacking the Great Forest of Jura, requesting my cooperation to fend them off and using that as an excuse to meddle with human nations.

• After defeating Farmus, I assumed the title of demon lord, enjoying Carillon’s support behind the scenes.

This kind of unauthorized collusion violated the demon lords’ agreements.

He was better prepared to make this argument than I gave him credit for. It was all a bunch of nonsense, totally ignoring the actual timeline of events, but proving that would be difficult. All of this happened at the same time as the demon lords withdrew from their mutual nonaggression agreement for the Forest of Jura, and (as he bluntly put it) there was no excusing that. As if, you know, I cared about that.

“…That is the testimony I have received from Mjurran, one of my advisers. However, upon briefing me about this, she was murdered— by that fool over there, Rimuru. Thus, I decided to exact my revenge.”

What is he, a thespian? If not, he missed his calling. He almost convinced me, even… Almost. I mean, Mjurran’s pretty alive right now.

“Rimuru was conspiring with Carillon to make an attempt upon my life. And with her last gasps of breath, Mjurran sent me a magical missive to inform me of the plot.”

He paused a moment, pretending to be overcome with emotion. His handsome looks certainly made it a moving sight, but it mostly served to rankle my nerves.



So he’s saying I tried to kill him to claw my way into a demon lord’s seat? And it was Carillon who engineered it all? I have to say, that’s a pretty impressive story to make up. If you actually knew Carillon and how relentlessly in your face and warlike he was, it’d be enough to make you blurt out laughing.

Clayman’s tales continued, meandering here and there, but basically, he was accusing Carillon of betraying the Council. This enraged Milim enough to destroy the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, and Carillon was now dead. Hmm. Dead? Not missing? That seemed unnatural enough to worry me, but I kept on listening.

Milim had taken action out of concern for Clayman, but he had rebuked her, since wrecking nations without any evidence was generally frowned upon. Ever since, she had fostered an affinity for Clayman, relying on and trusting in him—and with his adviser Mjurran dead, Clayman decided to send out a force to secure evidence linking me to Carillon. In addition, he wished to use this Council to discuss how to handle me, after I tried to kill him and declare my rights as demon lord.

The tale he wove couldn’t have possibly painted him in a better light. I was impressed.

But, man, he just kept on talking forever. I wanted to counter his excuses with a little logic of my own. My intention was to show my innocence, prove that my actions were justifiable, and then crush Clayman, after all. That was why I was sitting here politely and hearing him out, but my patience was reaching its limits.

Could we maybe get started soon?

Listening to his tale, I had noticed a pretty decisive hole in his logic—his evidence. His entire dossier of evidence was made up of testimony, all from a single witness—Mjurran, the ring finger, who had sworn absolute loyalty to Clayman. It made me laugh. Not only was she alive, but the Mjurran-related evidence he presented was as flimsy as a plastic bag. I suppose he ran out of time to fabricate anything more substantial than that.

All in all, it seemed like I could build a pretty credible case for myself. I already had all the evidence I needed.

“…That concludes my case,” Clayman bellowed, looking all self-important. “Hopefully, everybody in the room now fully understands that Rimuru, that trifling magic-born over there, is nothing more than a charlatan posing as a demon lord. I believe that a purge is in order here…”

The other demon lords must have been pretty darn patient if they were willing to put up with all this prattling. Some of them had already nodded off, it seemed. I guess it was okay, as long as you didn’t bother anyone. The only rule, I surmised, was that you had to shut up and listen to the guy who convened the Council to start with.

Now we were all free to state our own opinions—and I was ready for it. Raine, who must’ve been taking the emcee post, turned her eyes to me.

“We will now listen to testimony from our visitor.”

Ugh, finally. I had been patient long enough. No more of this clowning around.

“So, um, Clayman, right? You’re a liar.”

“What?”

“I mean, honestly speaking, I don’t give a crap about demon lords. That story about Carillon luring me into this is a load of BS, and Farmus attacked us out of their own greed. Those two things aren’t related to each other at all.”

Clayman gave me an irritated sneer. “Ha! Who would ever believe trite excuses like that? One of my most senior advisers has been killed!”

Here we go. Just what I’ve been waiting for.

“Yeah, Mjurran, right? Well, I didn’t kill her. In fact, she’s alive.”

“Pah! Of all the ludicrous—”

“Whoa, whoa, hear me out. Pretty much all of that speech was based off verbal testimony and your own conjecturing. And maybe that’d be enough to deal with some rank and filer, but it won’t work on me. Mjurran, your supposed tipster, is under my protection. That’s why I’m not letting you mess with me, and that’s why your testimony has absolutely no credibility whatsoever.”

Going into that much detail made even Clayman go a bit pale. But he had no intention of ceding his point.

“Heh-heh. You’re willing to stoop to such lows, then? Did you meddle with her corpse and install some evil spirit inside?”

It was a spur-of-the-moment accusation but not an insane one. In a world as rich with magic as this one, you could even make the dead seem alive if you wanted. Talk about freaky—and another reason why you couldn’t trust oral testimony like that.

“Well,” I said, “I wasn’t planning to believe anything you said anyway. That’s why I figured I’d come over there and beat you up myself, but I wound up changing my mind. Before this Council began, my forces gathered some evidence of their own.”

I flashed a smile as I attempted to show him up. This enraged him, I could tell. He was easier to toy with than I thought.

“What are you trying to say? If you want to die that badly, just come out and say it—”

“Calm down a sec,” I said, cutting him off. “I told you, I have evidence.”

I then produced several crystal balls from my pocket, teleporting them to the center of the round table and magically triggering them one after the other. Each one contained its own video image, including one featuring me fighting the orc general and another shot from Gelmud’s point of view. Shuna had found them all in the ancient castle Clayman called home.

One of them, meanwhile, contained footage from the battle fought just today. It was taken by Benimaru, from his vantage point overseeing the entire landscape, and it contained some really juicy stuff.

“S-stop! Stop that! Please, Sir Clayman, stop this at once!”

Right there, in the ball, Clayman’s field general was screaming and being transformed into an incomplete Charybdis. And that wasn’t all.

“…This is quite a surprise. I was expecting Yamza to turn tail and flee. But imagine…”

“Clayman’s forces are destroyed. The mission’s a failure—the losses immense…”

“…Well, Laplace warned him. Clayman can’t blame anyone for it but himself. We’ll need to brief him about this…”

That conversation between the two weird jesters Geld and Phobio had witnessed was all on video. Probably Footman and Teare from the Moderate Jesters, I assumed. With Laplace’s name popping up, it had to be them. That and “him”—I thought Clayman was behind all this, but it seemed like there was someone else. Maybe…

Understood. It is estimated that all of this is connected.

…I thought so. Whoever it was that tried to make me fight Hinata was also controlling Clayman. That explains the timing—while I was busy fighting the Western Holy Church, this figure had Clayman spur Farmus into combat, and then that whole tragedy unfolded.

Maybe I could understand all this, even if I didn’t appreciate it much. But you went too far, Clayman. So I’m taking you down. Don’t resent me for it. In this world, it’s survival of the fittest.

I proudly beamed at him. “This is what real evidence looks like, Clayman.”

Having this stuff with me definitely made things proceed more quickly, but even if I didn’t have it, it would’ve turned out the same way. I was gonna crush him with my own force anyway, so all I really needed was something to shoot down his lame excuses with. It wasn’t a matter of good or evil—it was all about keeping up appearances. Besides, I had real evidence here, and I saw no reason for anyone to complain about that.

“You, you couldn’t! All of this was fabricated! Fake images, built with magic, to prop up your lies! How could you be so base, you slime?!”

“Lies? They aren’t lies, you dummy. Your army’s all done. And you’re joining them next.”

Clayman turned toward me, face scrunched up in anger.

“Ev… Everyone, you can’t listen to this trickster! This slime, Rimuru, is a notorious bluffer. He undoes the seal on Veldora to destroy the Farmus force, and then he parades around pretending he did the act himself. He’s just a little slime, all bark and no bite! And it is simply outrageous that he dares to deceive us all in the proud demon lord family!”

It was an impassioned speech. As if he wasn’t the one relying on others to save his ass. As if he wasn’t the little one. If he was acting right now, like I said, he was a pretty good actor.

“Look, Clayman…”

This was Daggrull, his voice just as grounded and dignified as his appearance. Wasn’t expecting him to speak up.

“Didn’t you say just now that Rimuru goaded the kingdom of Farmus into attacking? If the news of Veldora’s resurrection is true, why would he execute it in such a roundabout fashion?”

“…All right. Allow me to explain.”

Clayman looked lost for a moment but then opened his mouth again, ready to commit to this tale—the story of the attempt to collect people’s souls to awaken into a true demon lord. I suppose he wanted to keep that under his hat so that the other demon lords wouldn’t get the jump on him, but Daggrull had forced him to fess up.

“…This low-class, unwitting slime must have had the incredible good fortune to acquire the traits of a demon lord. But he must have let it go to his head, for he then traveled to the human realms to investigate the truth behind what he obtained. That drove him to set off a war with the humans on a whim, using the banished Veldora to stage a brutal genocide.”

He was doing his best to convince the table, complete with overblown, theatrical hand motions.

“Leaving someone like this free to maraud again would damage our very reputations as demon lords. I believe he must be purged, but what is your opinion?”

“So cough up some evidence,” I retorted. “Not that you have any, do you? Everything you said was just a bunch of ‘wouldn’t it be nice if…’ junk, and you still think they’re all gonna swallow it?”

Clayman gave me another unamused glare. It didn’t bother me. I was already sick of putting up with his pathetic accusations.

“Ngh… Why does some slime claiming the might of a dragon for himself think he has the right to defy us?! There is no way you could ever become a demon lord!”

“Whether I’m a slime or not doesn’t matter, and besides, Veldora’s my friend. I’m not here to listen to you go on with your bullshit, all right? Can we get to the point, please? Just admit it. Phobio, the magic-born in that video, just showed us how Charybdis was resurrected at your demand, right? As those jesters guided him to. And now one of your own men transformed into Charybdis and went insane. That’s what I’m talking about when I say solid evidence. If you think I’m bluffing, go right ahead, ’cause you’ll be thinking that all the way to the grave.”

I shot to my feet, kicking up the adjacent seat as I did, and tried to look as threatening as possible. Casually, I placed my hand on part of the round table in front of me—and in an instant, the large table disappeared. Nothing to be surprised about. I just stored it in my Belzebuth. Now we had a decent-size space to work with.

The chair I kicked up sailed in the direction of Clayman, smashing against the wall behind him with a loud crash. This didn’t faze the demon lords, either. Only Clayman was unnerved by it.

“All of you are willing to put up with this reckless violence?! He is making light of us all. Should we not be exacting our judgment upon him at once?!”

What, all of them? I always knew he was a wimp. I walked to the middle of where the table used to be.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. Like I said, I don’t care about you demon lords at all. All I want is to build a nation that I can enjoy living in. I need the humans’ cooperation for that, so I decided to offer my protection to them. Anyone who gets in the way of that, whether a person or a demon lord or the Holy Church, is my enemy. Just like you are, Clayman.”

I explained my ideals to the group with far more passion than Clayman could ever manage.

“What?!”

“And if you call that reckless violence,” I said as I sized him up, “what would you call taking over someone’s mind while we’re all chatting at Walpurgis?”

Did he think I wouldn’t notice? In the midst of that whole speech, that little sneak was launching mind-control attacks at me. If I had to guess, he was trying to dominate my consciousness. Too bad it didn’t work; Raphael was guarding me the whole time, so I had it fully taken care of.

At least I had a justifiable cause on the table, so to speak. That was now in the ears of all the demon lords, and Clayman had already started trying to strike me. If any of them wanted to oppose me, it was now or never.

Time to switch over to real action.

I had asked the question to Clayman, but it was answered by someone else—Guy, the red-haired demon lord seated on the far side of the chamber.

“Indeed,” he said with a charmingly attractive smile. “In order to keep things fair, we are only allowed to appeal to others through our own voices.”

“But, Guy, he is insulting us all—”

“Shut up,” I interrupted. “If you don’t like it, then it’s between you and me, isn’t it?”

“He is correct, Clayman. If you call yourself a demon lord, then use your powers to defeat that magic-born. And you—” Guy looked straight at me. “Do you intend to declare yourself a demon lord?”

“Yep. I’m already leader of the Great Forest of Jura, and as far as anyone on the ground’s concerned, I am one.”

No matter the path we had to take to get there, I imagined they would all accept that I’d teamed with the Storm Dragon to rule the forest. There was no point denying that Tempestians were already calling me demon lord.

“Very well. And we have an array of witnesses here as well. If you can win against Clayman before us, I will allow you to adopt the title.”

So beating Clayman ties up all these little strings, huh? This was exactly the development I hoped for.

Clayman began to laugh, just as suddenly as he regained his composure a moment ago.

“Heh-heh-heh… How exasperating. I simply attempted a little trick because I didn’t want to dirty my own hands, and now look at the storm I’ve unleashed. What a mistake.”

He was smiling the whole time. Did he have a screw loose? His thin, almost inhuman smile was still clinging to life as he looked at me. And then, quietly:

“You’re up, Milim.”

Tension raced across the chamber. Even the demon lords were nervous, although some were maintaining perfect calm as always.

My eyes turned to Milim. There was the source of Clayman’s confidence—the belief that he had her under his control. Control that he exercised right at that moment.

So she was…?

“Wow. What a bigmouth. After everything you said, you’re relying on someone else? And bringing in Milim after you punched her out to make her do your bidding?”

I tried provoking him a little, but not even Clayman was stupid enough to bite.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I will be fighting, too, of course. Is there any issue with that, Guy?”

“Not at all, Clayman. If Milim is aiding you on her own free will, I will not stop her.”

This…wasn’t good. Clayman I had a handle on, but Milim was deadly. With Guy so readily granting permission, there was no way I could dodge having to fight her. Even with what I could do by now, I didn’t like my prospects against her—and besides, I wanted to help her out. No, I will help her out!

Just then, the unmoving, doll-like Milim made two fists and struck an overwrought, triumphant pose…or so it looked like to me. Maybe not. It was just for an instant; I dunno.

Man. Poor lady. Don’t worry, Milim, I swore in my heart. I’ll get you out of there.

“Well, all right. I was planning to rescue Milim anyway, so I think I’ll just undo that brainwashing trick you pulled on her—by force, if I need to.”

“Enough of your prattle! You will die in despair.”

“The only one dyin’ here is you, Clayman. I think one of my officers would make a better match against the likes of you. Fighting you myself would just make me a bully.”

Clayman’s face stiffened. A thick, black aura began to float out of him, perhaps generated by his anger. You can’t be a demon lord unless you know how to intimidate your foe, I guess. Not that it was that impressive—but between his rage and panic, that should open up some weak points to exploit. Shion would be fighting him in my place, and I was sure she’d be able to take advantage of that.

I motioned with my eyes to Shion. She immediately sprang into action. In a moment, she was upon Clayman, launching an attack. Concentrating her aura around her fist, she used that single instant to land a good thirty or so blows on him. Then she turned back at me with a look of relief and asked, “Is this all right?”

…Um, aren’t you supposed to ask before you start clobbering? All I did was give you a sidelong glance. That was supposed to be a “You get it, right? Clayman’s all pissed off, so get ’im while he’s off guard” kind of glance. I wasn’t expecting you to beat the crap out of him before I blinked again. Does the expression off guard mean anything to you?

Well…so be it. What’s done is done. The force of the strikes propelled Clayman right in front of me, in the middle of the circle. “You, you, you bastard!” he shouted as he stood up. He was tougher than I thought.

That black aura around him thickened, instantly healing his injuries. It was far faster than what the orc lord could do, but that was pretty much normal for a demon lord. Either way, it made Clayman accept Shion as an enemy, so we were still more or less sticking to the script.

“If that’s what you want,” he said, “then I’ll kill both of you.” Then the fox that had jumped down to his feet swelled up in size.

Report. This is believed to be the Nine-Head mentioned by Mjurran.

Oh yeah, she did say that, huh? So it was another servant of his, not some pet. Then another figure emerged from Clayman’s shadow, wrapped in a black robe. He had two servants, and I had Shion in battle mode. Ranga was similarly enlarged now, ready to pounce.

Wait. Hang on. We’re outnumbered if Milim is joining in… Nah. No need to panic yet. That’s what Beretta is for— Huuhh?!

The moment we all stepped into the circle where the table used to be, it was shut away from the audience by a barrier. The area within it exploded in size, the surrounding chairs seemingly far away and distant. They must have installed some kind of enclosing barrier to protect the other demon lords.

I kind of expected this, given that they created that whole fancy event space and everything…but Beretta, one of my supports, didn’t make it in.

Oh, crap, I didn’t see that pitfall coming— But just as I thought it, Clayman started screaming.

“Milim, kill him!!”

And she was ready to do just that.

There was no doubting the fist coming my way. The force behind it was deadly. But after expanding my senses a million times over with Mind Accelerate, there was a chance I could avoid it. It wasn’t impossible, but I didn’t have much leeway to mess up.

A white-hot ball of energy scraped past my cheek. The speed amazed me. Even with Raphael running at full speed, I still couldn’t fully avoid it. If I even thought about a counter, it’d leave me open enough for a lethal strike.

The only thing I could do, then, was try my hardest to keep up with Milim while I concentrated on breaking her mind control. Even so, my Detect Magic was telling me about events in the circle. It was almost scary, the way I could juggle all of that. Too bad I couldn’t bask in it right now.

Shion was fighting Clayman, but it was two on one with that black-robed figure in the mix, so I couldn’t say she had the advantage. Ranga, meanwhile, was pitted against Nine-Head, and I thought he was winning, but then those three tails on the fox spirit transformed into two magical beasts. All of a sudden, it was three on one.

I, meanwhile, had Milim to deal with. There really was nothing I could do. Nothing, besides pray that everyone stayed alive until I could finish running Analyze and Assess on her.

So, uh, you guys take care of yourselves! Got it?

Beretta quickly set to action, asking Ramiris if it could join the battle. Ramiris, for her part, wasn’t about to turn her toy down.

“Whoa, Guy! I’m with Rimuru, all right? So I want my Beretta to be part of that, too.”

“No,” he coldly replied, paying her as little attention as possible.

“Why not?!”

“Mm? Mere attendants aren’t allowed to join a battle between demon lords. This is a dispute between that slime and Clayman, is it not? You have no reason to join in.”

“What’re you talking about?! Milim’s in there, ain’t she?”

“Oh, she’s fine.”

“So what’s with that? Why’s she fine, and I’m not?!”

Guy rolled his eyes, tiring of this. Ramiris was always something of a loudmouth. Once she got started, it was hard to make her stop.

She had never brought attendants to a Council before, so Guy realized she must’ve had some reason to do it this time. Considering Milim’s involvement, letting Ramiris join in would just add to the chaos. He had isolated the battle zone in part to prevent this.

“Because Milim likely has her own motivations for this. Now will you shut up?”

“Oh, so you think there’s not a thought in my mind about it at all?”

“Is there? Besides…” Guy gave Beretta a look. “Who has your attendant sworn its loyalties to? Your other companion seems ready to devote her all to protecting you, but I’m not so sure about this Beretta. It’s faithful to you, but not completely so. You want me to trust someone so suspicious?”

He had spotted the truth. Beretta’s loyalties weren’t only to Ramiris. And as one of Ramiris’s closest friends, he wasn’t willing to allow an attendant who was weighing its master on the scales against someone else.

“My master is on the balance, yes,” Beretta freely admitted.

There was Rimuru, its master. Rimuru, its creator, but also Ramiris, its current leader. She was a ridiculously optimistic, rash, curious, even cowardly demon lord, but Beretta had grown to love her. It didn’t even mind all that abusive manipulation. Rimuru had wished for Ramiris to be protected and for Beretta to serve her as well. There was no contradiction at all in its mind.

There was just one thing: Beretta wanted to repay the favor to Rimuru. It was once a demon, and Rimuru had granted it both a new life and a new mission. It felt a need to make up for that.

“And if Lady Ramiris wishes to save that figure as much as I do…” It spoke to Guy without any fear.

“Hoh? Audacious enough to address me, are you? Interesting. May I trust this golem at its word, Ramiris?”

The fairy gave him a look that indicated no answer was needed, but she gave one anyway. “Oooh yeah, yeah, of course! So you go help out Rimuru in my place, all right, Beretta?!”

“Hmm. So it will take action if you wish it to, then? You’ve obtained quite a good attendant for yourself, Ramiris.”

“Nah, nah, not obtained. We’re friends! Me, and Beretta, and Treyni, and Rimuru, too!” She smiled contentedly. “Like, everyone, a whole, whole lot!”

Guy wasn’t quite sure what Ramiris was trying to say, but if she was fine with that, so was he.

“Well, all right…” He reluctantly extended a hand to open a hole in the barrier.

“…I thank you, Rouge,” Beretta said.

“Sure. Don’t call me that. I’ll allow you to call me Guy. But I refuse to allow you to recognize another master apart from Ramiris from now on. Is that all right?”

Granting this honor meant Guy saw Beretta as strong enough to live up to his own standards. Now, he was asking it to pick a master. If it attempted to weasel out of the question, he intended to smash it up on the spot. But it immediately agreed.

“In that case, Guy, I will swear my loyalty to Lady Ramiris exclusively from now on. So please allow me to be of service to Sir Rimuru at least once.”

Guy was a tad surprised. Demons, as a rule, wanted to be recognized by their masters for their strength. Beretta, meanwhile, didn’t seem to see strength as too important. Its standards had gone all haywire. It was a nonconformist.

“You are fine with that?”

“Yes. Sir Rimuru has servants stronger than myself.”

That made sense to Guy. But it also confused him, someone this powerful admitting to not being the strongest out there.

“I also enjoy conducting research,” Beretta continued. “The research I do with Lady Ramiris on a daily basis is truly like a dream… Oh, pardon me. My serving Lady Ramiris is part of Sir Rimuru’s request. There is no need to worry about that.”

The words reminded Guy of a demon he knew, the very definition of strange, one who pursued only what personally interested him. If they were part of the same lineage, perhaps demons with dispositions like Beretta’s shouldn’t be so unexpected—but the demon in Guy’s mind rarely birthed other family members. Only an elite few were aware of him at all.

“Let me ask—what is your lineage like?”

Beretta winced underneath its mask and laughed.

“…I was one of the least of the greater demons. However, I think you will find very few demons in the same family tree as I.”

A small lineage. That has to be it, then. Beretta’s hair was gray, the color gone from it, but once upon a time…

“I see. No wonder you didn’t fear me. That family always was self-centered, curious. So someone like you admits there are stronger creatures than yourself?”

Guy shot a passing glance at Shion and Ranga fighting away, then turned back toward Beretta. Yes, Shion and Ranga were powerful—but he didn’t think Beretta was at all behind them.

“I thank you for the honor, but I still have far to go. As long as the two of them serve Sir Rimuru, if I miss this opportunity, I may never have another one.”

“Yes, true. I understand how you feel. You may go.”

The barrier already had a hole large enough to wriggle through.

“Excuse me, then.”

With an elegant salute, Beretta plunged in. Guy cracked a smile as he watched it go. He had an idea who this would be.

…So that’s it. You’re on the move as well, Noir?!

This was an old friend, one who went away from him ages ago. If this was the type of people he was serving now, the slime fighting Milim in front of him must be quite the fascinating figure. A nonconformist serving a nonconformist.

He basked in joy as he watched the battle, even as he thought he could see its conclusion already.

Rimuru was his name? I will have to remember it.

Oh, crap. I’m screwed.

Who’s screwing me? Milim, of course.

Dealing with Milim as a foe made Clayman’s anger seem like a toddler’s tantrum. She hadn’t taken the battle form Phobio saw yet, so she still wasn’t going all out…but her strength went beyond all common sense. I was already exercising everything I had. Raphael, at least, was really humming along for me—seriously, if I didn’t have that skill, I would’ve been dead already.

So I was fully booked with Milim, but my fighting companions were working hard as well. I had thought being outnumbered might sink us, but now I wasn’t so sure.

Ranga had summoned two star leaders, fellow commander-level starwolves, boosting his team so it was three on three. I guess it was possible for him to summon up to three at once, but Gobta was using the third one right now, so that was all we had on hand. Still, I think it was enough.

Nine-Head boasted a massive amount of magical energy, but it didn’t seem too experienced in battle. Ranga held the upper hand from start to finish. The two magical beasts Nine-Head summoned, however, were trickier than I thought. Analyze and Assess told me they were a White Monkey and a Moon Rabbit, respectively. They were both intelligent and capable of attacking in tandem, which made them fiendish in battle. The Moon Rabbit could control gravity, weighing down everyone in the battle zone. It allowed the White Monkey to pummel their foes and Nine-Head to finish them off.

That was their standard path to victory, but Ranga saw right through it, breaking down their teamwork. If he used one of his stronger finishers, he could’ve wiped them out instantly, but he was hesitating since Shion might be caught in the cross fire. He had the upper hand, but landing a decisive blow was proving elusive.

Shion, meanwhile… Well, she was hanging in there, out of pure fighting spirit more than anything. The black robe was hiding an elaborately built magical puppet, and I’m not kidding when I say it looked stronger than Clayman.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! How do you like Viola, my greatest work of art? Beautiful, is she not?”

Clayman was boundlessly confident, and I could see why. A real tour de force, although beautiful wouldn’t be my choice of words if asked. Not with, you know, all those swords and spears flying out of her. Each one of those projectiles was a Unique-grade weapon, as was her armor, but this kind of kitchen-sink approach wasn’t what I would call beauty, really. Whether it was heat, electricity, blizzards, crushing, resonation, or anything else, she had a seemingly limitless supply of every attack type in the world, and she was lobbing it all at her foe.

It was nothing to Shion, however. That was thanks to Ultraspeed Regeneration, which sucks if you’re fighting someone who has it. No matter how much damage she took, Shion could instantly heal back up. Clayman and Viola working together prevented her from going on the attack, but that was just helping fill up Shion’s anger gauge. Once that blew up, things were gonna get scary.

As I thought about that, Shion had someone join her.

“I apologize for making you wait. Sir Rimuru, please utilize my power.”

Whoa, it’s Beretta! I don’t know how, but it must’ve broken into this battle zone.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Beretta!”

“Yes sir!”

“This needless meddling… I was just about to turn these fools into a pair of bloody husks!”

Shion was acting like a sore loser, but I’ll just ignore that.

“Well, don’t let up. Smash them!”

“““Yes sir!!”””

We were now fully back to the original script.

No losing now. The path we took here got a little hairy midway, but with things as they were, our victory was unshakable.

The only problem was Milim. She still wasn’t going all out. If I could free her, we’d win for sure. My qualms about the future settled, I focused my full consciousness on her. The noise surrounding me disappeared. I sharpened my mind, looking at nothing but Milim. Now, much more clearly than before, I could see the path her fist traced in the air.

I focused, using every cell in my body for my calculations. If I lose this, it’d all be meaningless. I had to do whatever it took to release the curse Clayman placed on her. Come on, Raphael. Analyze and Assess every inch of her for me!

What was that? I’m berating my foes for relying on other people, but using Raphael to solve all my own problems? I don’t know where you’re getting the wrong idea. Raphael is my power.

There isn’t a single iota of guilt in my mind!

So, uh, yeah, go ahead.

Understood. Conducting Analyze and Assess… No results.

Huh? Huhhhh?!

Um, what do you mean by that? You can’t seriously mean that you can’t figure out the silly curses Clayman placed on her?

No curse-oriented magic found. This is—

Dude, how useless can you get?!

Whenever this happened before, I figured it was because I wasn’t concentrating hard enough, but after all that effort, nothing. It couldn’t even discover any curse at all. Guess I can’t trust Raphael in a pinch.

This was bad. Really, really bad. Not to sound all depressed, but the chances of me winning in a knock-down, drag-out brawl with Milim were laughably poor. Well, so be it—I’ll just have to hold out until Shion and the rest defeat Clayman.

My mind made up, I confronted Milim. I had gotten stronger. She might be both under someone’s control and not really trying yet, but I was certainly holding my own against Milim. In the past, I’d be eating dirt before a minute elapsed. Right now, we were at minute thirteen or so, and I was still fighting at a full clip.

Hey, maybe she’d snap out of it if I just gave her a good sock on the noggin?

The thought crossed my mind for just a moment, but I dunno… Striking Milim kind of goes against my personal rules…

Suggestion. An energy absorption attack using Belzebuth.

Oh? Ohhhh! That could work!!

I immediately tried it out. Any direct strike on my body would cause damage, so I was mainly parrying her moves. I would be applying just a little bit of force from the side, enough to adjust the paths of her punches and kicks. As I did, I’d use Belzebuth to vacuum up her magicules.

This turned out to be pretty effective. Milim reared away from me, a scowl on her face. It was a teeny-tiny amount of damage, but it worked. All of Milim’s attacks were protected by her own draconic aura; if I could take that out of the picture just by touching it, I’d gradually be able to sap her stamina.



Would I win with this, though? That was another story. If I was focused on “winning,” I’d need to bust out my full strength, leaving nothing behind, and even then there was no guarantee. Even if I pulled it off, I’d wind up revealing all my hidden abilities to the demon lords watching us. In the big picture, that’d be a defeat.

Right now, all I could do was chip away at her like this as I waited for her curse to be undone. Let’s hope that Shion can finish off Clayman sooner rather than later.

I couldn’t say how many back-and-forth exchanges we went through.

I say exchanges, but it was entirely me defending. The rules were intense—one mistake, and you’re out—but I was still fending her off.

A roaring fist from Milim surged past my right cheek. If I didn’t focus, I’d never be able to dodge it. A single hit would shatter my body, no doubt. I had Infinite Regeneration, a healing skill more powerful than even its Ultraspeed cousin, but abusing it would drain my magicules too quickly. I could probably regenerate myself after being reduced to goo, but keep that up long enough, and I’d run out of stamina first.

So focus. Focus. Read ahead of Milim’s moves.

Her right fist had changed in shape. A dragon-fang lash disguised as a punch. It’d glance past my cheek once again, then decapitate me with the nails on her fingers, like the teeth of a dragon. The correct way to deal with it was not to dodge but to take it from the side.

So I took it, pushing myself with my left hand from the inside out. I could feel a burning pain sear through that hand, an explosion of energy that left it heavily damaged. And that was me avoiding the attack. Trying to take a full-frontal blow from her would’ve been crazy. Absolute power, on this level, was a kind of finisher in itself, crushing its opponent. I had just learned that the hard way, but if I didn’t sacrifice my left hand, I would’ve been mortally wounded. I was fine with that, but I was really starting to resent the sheer unfairness of this.

Then, as if reading my mind, I had an unexpected chance. Right there, as Milim lost her balance, she forced her remaining left hand to snap off a punch.

Here we go!

Report. It is believed to be a trap—

Huh?! I thought, but it was too late.

Leaving Raphael’s composed guidance in the dust, I began my attack, grabbing Milim’s left hand and attempting to throw her. If she was off-balance, I thought I should be able to pick her up on my back and slam her down.

But if that was Milim’s trap…?

Her hand stopped dead in the air, a carefree grin on her face—a total “gotcha now!” smile.

Oh, craaaaaaaaap?!

I was attempting to twist my body in front of Milim, both hands reaching out for her left arm. I could see all of that with Detect Magic as if watching it on TV, but it left me totally open. Cornered. Game over.

Her fist moved again—and just before she smashed it right against my head, something cut in between us. A dull thud rang out.

“Gnhh?! Where did that come from? That was just mean.”

I was greeted by a dark-skinned man with blond hair. Looked a little bit like me, actually… Wait, Veldora?!

He was curled up on the floor, grabbing at his head and looking like he was in at least some pain. But if taking a punch from Milim only did that to him, I didn’t see much need to worry. I took the moment’s delay to rebalance and steel myself toward Milim.

“Hey, Veldora, why are you in here?!”

“Grrnnn, what a cruel blow…”

“You’ll be fine, all right? What’s happening in town?”

“Nothing. That man, Diablo or whatever it was, came back, so our defense is as strong as ever.”

Huhhh? Diablo was back? There’s no way they could’ve captured Farmus that quickly…but let’s focus on Veldora for now.

“So what are you here for? If it’s to whine at me, then go away.”

“Why are you being cruel, too, Rimuru…? Ugh. Look, it’s about this!”

He thrust his hands out at me, as if a ta-daa! sound effect should have been playing behind him. He was holding one of the volumes of manga I gave him—the final volume of a long-running series.

“What about this?” I asked, confused.

He looked at me, positively indignant. “What do you mean, what about this? The story in here’s completely different from the rest of the series! Were you playing some kind of trick, taking the ending away from me?”

Ahhhhh! Yes! Now I remember. Yes, it was a trick. I kind of pulled a prank on him, the idea being that I’d give him the rest of the manga if he followed my orders. Kind of like training a pet, really. I had no idea that was the series I left for him.

So he traveled all the way here just because he wanted to read the ending? In this enclosed space in an alternate dimension? I knew I could summon Unlimited Imprisonment with my ultimate skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm, but I guess he could, too. That’ll learn me, I guess.

But that didn’t matter. Diablo was already back in town. Might as well make lemonade out of this.

“All right. Before I give you the real ending, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Mm? What?”

“Play with Milim over there for a while. But don’t hurt her.”

“Milim? Ahhh, yes, my brother’s only daughter. I haven’t met her before, but she’s still just a child, isn’t she? Very well. I am on my way!”

I didn’t know whether it was the manga or Milim that captured his interest the most, but either way, he agreed. The “my brother’s only daughter” bit captured my interest, but again, everything in due time.

Milim herself was looking our way, steeled for anything, and Veldora seemed to be capturing her interest. I could see it in the twinkle in her eyes. Hopefully that meant I was safe leaving for now. Which one was stronger anyway? I was kind of interested to see, but if Veldora was stronger than me, I was sure he could buy me enough time.

There’s just no way I can’t take advantage of this chance—so with my newfound freedom, I wanted to defeat Clayman and settle the score for good.

So how had things gone while I was occupied with Milim?

Leaving her and Veldora behind, I turned toward Ranga first, since things seemed the most intense with him.

“Ranga, you all right?”

“Ah, Sir Rimuru! I am fine, but I have a little situation here.”

Something was up? There didn’t seem to be much life to his attacks, and I didn’t think it was because he was losing interest.

Just as I was about to ask what was up, I picked up on the cause.

(—lp me. Help me. Help me!!)

This childlike wailing was leaking out to us, via Thought Communication, from Nine-Head. The White Monkey and Moon Rabbit were merely trying to protect their shivering master, hence why they kept resisting without admitting defeat. Now I see. Let’s help him out.

“Ranga, hold back the Monkey and the Rabbit. Don’t let them get in my way.”

“Right.”

He took the Monkey, while his two star leaders handled the Rabbit, and I walked toward the snarling Nine-Head—this poor young child, controlled by Clayman.

Report. Analysis indicates a Demon Dominate curse. Remove?

Yes

No

This time, at least, the curse was discovered and removed quickly. Wish I could’ve seen some of that talent when I was dealing with Milim. Ah well.

The moment I undid the magic, Nine-Head gave a joyous yelp, then settled down to sleep, no doubt exhausted. It was as cute as any baby-animal video I had ever seen; apart from the three tails and the golden color to its fur, it looked exactly like a little fox cub. Ranga was right next to me, growling as menacingly as he could, and—all right, that was pretty cute, too. In a cool way.

“Keep this cub safe.”

“Yes, my master.”

I gave the cub over to Ranga as I petted him. That took care of his foe.

Next, I turned to Beretta, and that confrontation was already over. It was lining up all the Unique weapons and armor on the floor, practically beside itself with excitement.

“Hey! Heyyyy! What’re you doing?!”

“Oh yes, hello, Sir Rimuru!” It gave me a joyful salute. “It is a pity I could not show myself in action to you, but I have prepared some spoils of war for you.”

Spoils…?

Viola, Clayman’s greatest work of art, had been taken apart, its pieces strewn all over the place, and now this was Beretta’s gift to me. I knew it was pretty strong, but it took down that arsenal-like magic-born without suffering a scratch…?

And that wasn’t even all.

“Uh, Beretta, no offense, but are you imitating all of Ramiris’s bad habits or what?”

“Huh…?!”

It looked at me—surprised, I think. Its face was hidden behind that mask, so that was only my impression. I thought a word of advice was in order. If this keeps up, Beretta’s going to pick up on nothing but her negative traits.

“I mean, hopefully this is just my imagination, but what are you going to do with all that booty?”

“Well, this… I thought I would present it to you, Sir Rimuru…and I thought you would accept it and, in exchange, provide a place for Lady Ramiris and me to live.”

Um? A place to live…? I knew Ramiris had an urge to live in our town, but why Beretta?

“What…made you worry about that?”

“Actually…”

Beretta’s explanation floored me—and not in a good way. It sounded like Guy cornered it into choosing a master before allowing him to enter the battle zone. Beretta responded that it would serve Ramiris after helping me out in here—but clever demon that it is, it thought about a way to wiggle out of that. If Ramiris were to move to our town, Beretta would be obliged to follow her—and then it could go through Ramiris to serve me as well; that was its plan.

It was one of the flimsiest excuses I ever heard, and it was laying this out like supreme gospel. The word demon couldn’t have described him more accurately.

“Uh… Look, I’m serious, you’re really starting to resemble Ramiris.”

“It is an honor to hear, although it feels rather little like a compliment.”

That’s ’cause it’s not! I swear, I take my eyes off you for a second, and you’ve grown incredibly shameless. Kind of neat to see this maturation take place, though.

“Well, we can save that for later. I’ll have to think about it. I can’t set up something for you guys that easily.”

“Understood, sir.”

It seemed happy enough with that. I figured we were good for now.

That left only Shion to check up on, and that confrontation was right on the cusp of its climax.

Clayman was panting for breath as he glared at her, a loathsome look on his face. Shion had all but made him admit to her strength.

It might’ve appeared like they were locked in an intense competition for superiority, but that would be a dreadful mistake. That was because Shion had Ultraspeed Regeneration, that undefeatable X factor, on her side. They were equals in strength, but Shion could keep up the fight for far longer. While they seemed an even match in each exchange of blows, Clayman’s fatigue had begun to stand out while I was fighting Milim.

Shion probably didn’t need my aid to win this. And now that her advantage was clear to all, Clayman was starting to panic.

“Is that all you’ve got? You are far too weak to call yourself a demon lord!”

Wow, Shion. No mercy, huh? She was totally dissing Clayman.

“You—you—you’ll pay for that! Come to me, Marionette Dance!!”

The demon lord unleashed five puppets, each transforming into a magic-born that lunged at Shion. Each one was high in level, formed from a soul Clayman had put in a doll for deployment at any time. It was part of his hidden arsenal, I suppose—now was no time for him to hold back, no doubt, so he was busting out everything he had.

This was more than enough firepower to take out your average magic-born. But with that massive sword she loved so much, she mowed down all five with a single swipe.

“Pathetic,” she said, not a hint of fatigue on her face. “You never were anything special, were you?” She had been fighting and fighting, and there wasn’t a scratch on her. She was starting to look and act more like a demon lord now.

Clayman, meanwhile, was visibly quivering. “Don’t—don’t give me that, you!” he shouted out of humiliation. “It’s too early to boast of your victory yet! My Marionette Dance will recover itself in moments, striking at you again. The real show begins now!”

He probably wasn’t making that up out of spite. They really could do that. Shion waited for them, a thoughtful look on her face—but the dolls showed no sign of getting back up. There was a good reason for that.

Panic crossed Clayman’s face again. “N-no,” he whispered. “Why aren’t they reviving?”

I could understand the shock of having your beloved tools of battle fail you like this. I decided to provide a little color commentary.

“Hmm, how about I just reveal it to you? Shion’s greatsword is a type called a Soul Eater. Those puppets didn’t have any physical and spiritual defensive spells applied to them, right? You cheaped out on creating them, so she broke them in one hit.”

That much wasn’t worth keeping under wraps to me. Clayman was going to be my prey anyway; if he wanted to know, then let him know.

“A, a sword with spirit-based attacks?!”

“It’s not that rare. There’s a human with one out there, y’know.”

“N-no! That’s one of the least common traits, even with Uniques!”

“Ohhh? Well, what’s it matter? One of my friends forged it for us.”

Shion’s sword was a modified blade created using Hinata’s as a reference. It had the power to attack the spiritual body itself—not literally eat souls or anything but deal damage to spirit-based life-forms. There were no restrictions like that “seven hits” thing with Hinata; depending on the force applied, it could kill instantly unless successfully resisted. It wasn’t guaranteed to kill all the time, but Shion wasn’t exactly a delicate fighter, so it didn’t matter. Since it dealt both spiritual and physical damage, she didn’t need seven hits to finish foes anyway.

“Oh, I see. So this is Goriki-maru Version 2!”

She didn’t know…? I, um, I’m pretty sure we went over all this when I gave it to her? Ah, whatever. Shion was never one to sweat the small stuff, so setting her up with this was the right idea.

“Heh…heh-heh-heh. I see. It was the power of that sword that allowed you to fight against me. Then allow me to add that dirty little blade to my collection! Take this—Demon Marionette!!”

Sounds like Clayman had misread her.

The ominous strings of black light that streamed from both his hands wrapped themselves completely around Shion’s body. She didn’t move. Kinda wish she tried to dodge it or, you know, something, but I guess she didn’t need to.

Clayman, assuming Shion didn’t react in time, found this much to his liking. “Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Behold, the ultimate cursing magic, with the power to rule over demon lords themselves! It seems a waste to squander it on magic-born like you, but so be it. I have some slots to fill in my five fingers, and you would be wonderful to take under my wing.”

He totally had the wrong idea—if that’s what he was saying, poor guy. It wasn’t that Shion couldn’t move—she just didn’t move. Despite all of Clayman’s lofty words, he was probably freaking out over why it wasn’t working at all.

Complete Memory, one of Shion’s skills, was the power to record memories into her astral body. In layman’s terms, it let her retain her memories even if her brain was destroyed. Combine a conscious soul with a set of memories, and you could regenerate the physical body even if it was vaporized. This made Shion into a special sort of race—call her a demi-spiritual life-form if you want—but essentially, it allowed her to think with her soul, and that meant any effect that tried to take over her spirit was neutralized. Against Shion, no mind-takeover curses could ever work.

“Hey,” an annoyed-sounding Shion called out from within her cocoon of black string, “what are you trying to do with this? It’s not hurting me at all, but should I wait a little longer?”

You know—and this has been something I’ve been thinking for a while now, but—I really wish she’d stop acting like this was a pro-wrestling bout. This was supposed to be a duel to the death. Why was she deliberately letting herself get hit by her enemy’s moves? Shion, Sufia…and Milim, too. I just didn’t understand how these war-loving freaks thought sometimes. Gimme a break.

Raphael confirmed to me that Shion wasn’t being affected at all, though. There wasn’t any need to even beware of Clayman’s secret techniques.

“That—that’s ridiculous… My Demon Marionette doesn’t work? It has to! This cannot even be possible! It’s the ultimate in demon domination! It can exact its rule over demon lords!”

It had ruled over Nine-Head a moment ago. Certainly, you could take over the mind of a calamity-level monster with it easily enough. But would it work on the disaster-class demon lords? I think Clayman overestimated his own strength.

Apparently sick of waiting any longer, Shion used his aura to rip her cocoon apart. “So ridiculous,” she scornfully muttered. “Relying on such cheap tricks as this… You don’t deserve your title at all.”

Clayman just stood there, finally succumbing to the panic.

…Or not. What Shion said must’ve flipped a switch somewhere inside of him.

“Heh-heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaaaaa!! I don’t deserve my title? You’ll regret saying that, you maggot! Yes, you’ll regret extracting my full strength from me!”

His shoulders were shaking as he shrieked with laughter. Off went his fancy-looking suit jacket and shirt, leaving him topless. It also left assorted other items he had hidden on his body to clank against the floor, no longer of use to him. I had thought this was over, but Clayman still had something left to rely on.

Suddenly, two pairs of arms grew out from his uncovered back—long, thin, and protected by a black exoskeleton. This was his true character. Not the dolled-up form from before, but this form that evoked wild, crazed insanity.

“But yes… Yes, you’re right. A demon lord… I am a demon lord. I focused on ease and elegance in the way I go about matters, dispatching my foes with style. But enough of that. It doesn’t matter. I had forgotten about how this feels, for so long…and now I’m going to crush you in my hands!!”

The true nature of his rage came to the surface. All he had on him was something he kept preciously protected in his hand. A mask. A jester’s mask, decorated with a smile. Without a moment’s pause, he put it on.

“Hoh? Looks like you’ve grown worthier,” a happy-sounding Shion said. “I’m glad to see that. I am Shion, secretary and personal guard to the demon lord Rimuru, and I will be happy to fight you!”

“And I am the demon lord…no, the ‘Crazed Clown’ Clayman. You are dead, Shion the magic-born!”

The introductions were made. The two moved at the same moment.

Clayman, in his “real” form, was a powerhouse, laying out the full extent of his demon lord–worthy magical force against Shion. His normal arms wielded those ominous black beams of light. The upper arms from his back wielded an ax and a hammer; the lower ones, a sword and shield.

Dealing with both magical and melee attacks at once baffled Shion for a moment. But she was stronger. Swinging the sword she called Goriki-maru Version 2, she clanged the sword out of his hand and crushed his shield. A simple, tactless roundhouse slash from above smashed through the ax and hammer Clayman crossed in front of him.

That freakish force came courtesy of Shion’s intrinsic skill Ogre Berserker, and her frenzy of weapon breaking was the work of Guarantee Results and Optimal Action, both part of her Master Chef unique skill. In other words, Clayman was still no match for her. Even with all his might, she was just pummeling him.

Now he was crossing his two pairs of steellike arms to block Shion’s fists—but they, too, were smashed to ribbons. Her next punch landed squarely in the pit of his stomach.

“Orrgghhh…”

He fell in agony, foaming at the mouth. There it is. The end.

Not that it’s for me to say, but Shion really had gotten overwhelmingly stronger. Dying and getting resurrected like that gave her power on a scale like nothing she ever had before.

“Gerrhhaaahh?!!”

She planted a follow-up kick on him, making him roll around on the ground in agony. The mask was cracked now, revealing bloodshot eyes.

“N… N-no… This can’t be. How could…could I…I, a demon lord, Clayman…?!”

Now Clayman understood the difference in power. But he still refused to accept this reality. It was devastating to him.

“May I put him out of his misery, Sir Rimuru?”

Hmm. There were a few things I could ask him, but I could predict most of the answers. Beyond that, I wanted to know about whose bidding he was doing, but was he gonna be honest with that?

“D-dammit all!! Milim! What is Milim doing?! Destroy that magic-born at once—”

Clayman was screaming out the words now, realizing that his death was near. But Veldora was holding Milim back. Clayman looked at him with disbelief.

“Wh-who…? What—what is this? His power is off the charts…!”

He must’ve just realized that Veldora wasn’t just another magic-born.

“Well, he’s in human form right now, but that’s Veldora. I told you, remember? He’s my friend.”

This silenced Clayman. I’m sure he wanted to deny it, but seeing him spar evenly with Milim forced him to admit it. The two had been fighting for a while now, and it was turning into quite the fireworks show. Skill names flew back and forth, many of which I think I remembered hearing before, and Milim had an honest look of surprise on her face.

Hey, is she really being controlled? Because I’m starting to wonder.

……

Raphael’s reaction made me ponder the idea for a bit, but it was no big deal at the moment. Besides, this would be the first time she’d met Veldora as a person, and it seemed like she was having a blast.

Thus, Clayman gave up on having Milim to rely on. Even in his panicked confusion, he managed to flee to the edge of our isolated battle zone, shouting at the audience outside.

“F-Frey! Frey, what are you doing?! You and I share a common fate! Get in here and lend a hand!”

The pleading fell on cold, dead ears.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Clayman. Nobody can go through this barrier unless Guy lets them. Such a pity.”

He resentfully groaned at this heartless reply, then turned back toward Milim, his eyes twitching and revealing the insanity inside. He must’ve gotten another wild idea in his mind. A crazed laugh crossed his lips as he looked at her once more.

“Kah! Kah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Milim! Milim! Follow my orders and execute a Stampede! Kill everybody you see in here!!”

Well, that sounds awful. Clayman just wanted to survive now, and he didn’t care how bad he looked along the way. This is bad, I have to admit. Now isn’t the time to sit around and watch things unfold. Back into the battle I go.

But just as I started to run, I heard the most unbelievable thing.

“Why do I need to do that? Rimuru and his people are my friends!”

Surprised, I turned around—only to find Milim chilling out there, a wide grin on her face.

“Milim?! Whoa, you—weren’t you being controlled…?”

“Waaah-ha-ha-ha! Thanks a lot for getting tricked by that, Rimuru! You know someone like Clayman would never take over my mind!”

Wh-what?!

……

I can’t articulate why, but I had the strangest feeling Raphael had been angry at me for a while. But back to Milim.

“So Clayman didn’t seize your mind?”

Um, what’s going on here? I felt obliged to check one more time—but Milim just gave me a proud smile. I could hear at least one demon lord in the audience say, “Huh? But she didn’t react at all when he punched her!”

The most surprised of all, of course, was Clayman.

“Y-yes. Yes! I used the Orb of Domination he gave me to put you completely at my beck and call… You killed Carillon under my orders, did you not?!”

Ohhh, Clayman. So shocked by these events that he has no idea what he just said. That oughtta make my video evidence more believable. After all, he just revealed that not only was he the culprit, but there was someone else pulling his strings, too.

“Yes! That! That’s what I wanted to hear,” exclaimed Milim. “Answer me, Clayman. Who’s this he you’re talking about?”

She asked the question casually enough, but she backed it up with sharp, seeking eyes. She had totally ignored Clayman’s question, which was so like her.

Right. So Milim wasn’t being controlled, and she had her doubts about Clayman from the beginning? For what?

Before I could get an answer, another voice butted in.

“Whoa, whoa, who’s been killed here?”

It came from the other end of the battle zone, this low, heavy voice—belonging to the man with the eagle wings that Frey brought along with her.

Wait, no way… Like, with that obvious a costume…?! And if I didn’t pick up on that, does that make me…?

……

Whoa, why does it feel like Raphael’s exasperated with me? And wasn’t it about to say something to me back then? Or maybe not? Ah, maybe I was just hearing things. Let’s forget about it and, um, pay more attention in the future.

The man, Carillon, ripped the mask off his face, his awe-inspiring aura shooting out with it. With a moment’s concentration, he was instantly back to his original appearance. Yep. That’s the Beast Master, all right. No doubt about it.

“Wow, you were all right, Carillon?”

“Yo, Rimuru. ‘All right’ ain’t how I would describe it, but that’s fine. Thank you for taking care of my forces.”

“Oh, not a problem.”

After thanking me, Carillon gave Clayman a knowing grin. Now it was obvious that Milim was under no one’s control.

“Wha—? How…? So it’s true…? But Frey told me… No, Frey, too? You betrayed me as well, didn’t you?!”

Finally getting the whole picture, Clayman gave Frey a half-crazed glare. She responded by pretending he wasn’t there.

By the looks of things, I wouldn’t call this a betrayal, per se…

“Hmm?” Frey nonchalantly replied. “Since when were you laboring under the assumption that I was your ally?”

Yikes. I knew it. Women can be so scary sometimes.

Frey was tricking Clayman from the get-go.



“You, you have to be kidding me! All, all of you… You’ll pay; I’ll make you all pay for this!”

The scream of the pitiful clown echoed across the field, and…

“Shion, do it.”

“You got it!”

Like a hungry dog released from the command to stay, Shion bounded off, using both hands to swing down her blade as quickly as she possibly could. It was a single blow from her sword, a judging strike. Clayman did his best to block it, but his three pairs of arms were all sliced off, his body slashed diagonally down from head to toe. It was unsurvivable—and that one stroke from Shion’s spirit-crushing blade made Clayman fall wordlessly to the ground.

It was over for Clayman. Carillon was alive, and we had all the testimony in order. I’m pretty sure I could avoid being branded the enemy of the demon lords now.

Clayman was barely clinging to life. He was no longer a threat; there was no way left for him to turn the tables. Things were already set in stone, and there would be no more excuses. So, before the demon lords, he had revealed everything. And each of them might take the news differently, but regardless, their trust in him had vanished, none willing to cover for him.

The barrier covering us was removed, and Frey quickly ran up and approached Milim.

“I believed you were still of sound mind, but I truly had my doubts at times, Milim! And you kept our promise anyway. I appreciate that.”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-sha! Of course I did. We’re friends. But you’ve been taking care of that for me, right? Didja bring it over?”

“Yes, yes, you mean this, right? I have to say, though, withstanding the Orb of Domination was simply amazing…”

As they spoke, Frey took something out of her pocket and handed it to Milim. It was the Dragon Knuckle I gave her as a present. Milim accepted it like a kid on her birthday and immediately put it on, beaming ear to ear.

The rest of the demon lords, seeing this, finally put two and two together, and I could hear whispers all around the room.

“Such a cheap performance.”

“I—I saw through it the whole time!”

“Yes, I assumed as much.”

“Yeah, I figured…”

I don’t think I was the only one Milim tricked, but everyone else found the results just as plausible as I did.

Then I heard a groan from below, like the sound of blood being coughed up.

“…When? Since when were you deceiving me…?”

It was Clayman. He was still breathing, still incapable of grasping the unbelievable reality before him. And it was Milim who revealed the cruel truth.

“Y’know, I had a real hard time doing it! With that promise I made with Frey, I had to pretend you tricked me. Then I put on that pendant and made you think it was working on me.”

“You… You couldn’t… I put my full power into it, with the Orb of Domination… The perfect…ultimate Demon Dominate…?! And you…you…”

“Uh-huh! Most magic like that bounces off me pretty easily, so… First I had to remove all my barriers, then hold back my force so I didn’t passively resist it. I had to convince you that the curse was working before your own eyes, or else you’d be far too wary to believe me. So I had to work really hard!”

“Wh…? What…? You… You accepted it on purpose?! My most valuable Artifact… My hidden gem, the ability to control demon lords…”

“Oh, was that what it was? Well, too bad you could never control me!”

She stuck her chest out, looking relentlessly proud of herself.

“Yeah, really,” I commented. “I feel stupid for worrying about you. And between that two-fisted sports pose and the smile you had on your face, your acting abilities really suck.”

“What do you want from me? I was just glad to see you were all angry for me, Rimuru.”

Frey just shrugged at this. “Still,” she said, “when Clayman punched you, I thought I was going to lose my composure. If you decided to fight back against him, you would’ve destroyed my home. Great job putting up with him. That, at least, I have to compliment you for.”

An interesting revelation. So that wasn’t the first time Clayman physically abused her? What a nutcase. Was he actively trying to get himself killed?

“Mm-hmm! I’m all grown up now, too, y’know. So I can deal with stuff like that!”

That obsession with being grown up indicated all too well how childish she still was.

“Oh, how?” Frey protested. “…Well, that’s fine, but you couldn’t have dealt with all that just because of our promise, could you? What did you really want?”

“Hmm? Well, you know, I remember Clayman talking to me about some weird stuff before. Like, about making Rimuru into an enemy of mankind and triggering a war between humans and monsters. If he did that, that wouldn’t be too fun for me, so I thought I’d meddle a bit!”

“Heavens. Imagine, you lifting a finger for somebody else.”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I told you—I’m all grown up now!”

“Yes, yes, let’s just call it that.”

Well, huh… I suppose Milim was sharp enough to realize Clayman was doing someone else’s bidding. So she pretended to be brainwashed in order to find out who it was? She had some kind of promise or deal with Frey, too. Let’s just ignore the fact that she totally tricked me.

The thing to focus on was: That orb didn’t hypnotize her at all. She didn’t struggle out of it midway; it never worked once. It was all an award-winning performance. As she later explained to me, she had been consuming bell peppers to maintain her poker face. The blank expression that resulted from eating this detested food of hers made everyone think her mind had been erased. It wasn’t enough to trick Veldora, but he played along, enjoying the combat session as a way to get limber in his new body. Maybe he was a lot more adaptable to things than I thought.

Like, seriously, Raphael, you never saw it?

……

Oh, um, okay. Guess you did try to tell me something.

I suppose it telling me “No results” should’ve been pretty bleedingly obvious, looking back. Of course it couldn’t find any curse effects on her. I was just jumping to conclusions. I should really adopt the habit of listening more carefully to people—that and hearing them out until the end.

I wasn’t about to tell anyone about it, but, yes, I had my personal regrets.

“By the way,” Carillon asked as he strode up to Milim, “if I could ask you something?”

She smiled back with the Dragon Knuckle eased into her fingers. “Mm? Sure! Anything!”

“I just wanted to be sure… You weren’t under anyone’s control? So that was all you when you were whipping the life out of me?”

Carillon was smiling, too, but I could see the veins on his forehead bulging. Yeah, I’d be wondering about that, too.

“Huh?! That, um…”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It just means I’m weaker than you. But,” he added, no longer hiding his anger, “you willfully blew up my entire nation, didn’t you?”

Milim was caught off guard for a moment—before immediately raging back at him.

“Oh, come on, Carillon! That’s the kind of small stuff you’re preoccupied with? What’s it matter?!”

Yep, that’s the real Milim, all right.

“It’s not small stuff! You know I could have died back there?!”

“Oh, don’t give me that. Just shut up! I was so passionate about my performance— Um, I mean, passionate about deceiving Clayman that I was trying really, really hard! It’s all Clayman’s fault!!”

“His fault? Ugh… Well, whatever. Not that you’ll ever listen to anyone else’s complaints…”

I was starting to feel a little bad for Carillon. Seeing those tears appear on his rugged, masculine eyes, I wanted to console him as best I could. She tricked me, too, so I thought we had something in common.

“Now, now, Carillon. Your Lycanthropeers and everyone else are safe—and they all put in a hell of an effort, fighting for your revenge. It wasn’t all bad, was it?”

“Ah, Rimuru… Thanks for the thought.”

“Yeah, so don’t worry about it. Besides, you can always build another town. I even had our forces capture Clayman’s magic-born to serve as your labor force.”

“Huh? Whoa, are you serious…?!”

“Yep. I’ll provide any technical expertise you need, and all of us at Tempest will help you out as best we can, too. So let’s make it a better, happier Eurazania than ever before!”

We had time for it. Time—and funds kindly provided by Clayman. Considering our future trade prospects, it’d be strategically beneficial for us to have Carillon owe us a favor. It seemed like a great opportunity to exploit, and I wanted to maybe make friends with more beastmen through the work, too.

“Wahhh-ha-ha-ha! Isn’t that great, Carillon? You have me to thank for that, too!”

Her to thank for what, I wondered. Maybe for completely flattening the land around the capital and thus saving us the trouble of hauling away the rubble?

“I’ll really owe you one,” the surprised yet thankful Carillon replied. “And you know, Rimuru—or maybe Sir Rimuru? I promise to you that the Beast Kingdom will never hesitate to help you out if you need it. We’ll be allied nations forever! …And I wish you would at least pretend to regret this a little more,” he didn’t forget to add, turning to Milim.

To her credit, she was back to her usual self—if Carillon and I were cool, she was cool. That’s Milim for you. Always looking out for number one—and I didn’t mind, if Carillon was feeling better.

It appeared that my promises surprised a lot more people than just Carillon. They were a shock to the demon lords assembled around us, too.

“So that was it!” observed the smiling red-haired Guy. “I thought leaving those magic-born alive was a sign of weakness…but I see you’re a rather creative thinker! Hardly any wonder that Noir’s taken a liking to you.”

Noir? Who’s that? Ah well.

Frey was back to focusing on Clayman, a quiet anger enveloping her. “So, Clayman,” she said. “You always were the sort to domineer over weaker people, or those who couldn’t resist you. I don’t think you have any right to call yourself a demon lord. I didn’t intervene since Milim was trying so hard…but you know what? I was kind of angry at you, too.”

It made it clear that Frey had no interest in rescuing him.

“Yeah, I know it’s survival of the fittest, but you took a step too far, I’d say. You wrecked my country, and I wanna see you pay for that, okay?”

Carillon did have a lot of damage to deal with. Damage technically inflicted by Milim, yes, but he was willing to shift the blame to Clayman here—and make him suffer the consequences.

None of the other demon lords voiced any opposition to this. I suppose Clayman wasn’t too popular a guy in this clique. He was already cornered—and now, the final moment was approaching.

Time to finish him off.

Feeling the life ebb away from him, Clayman’s heart was filled with regret. Regret and the words of his friends and advisers, flashing before his eyes.

“Now’s not the time to be too reckless. Whatever ya do, don’t letcher guard down…”

—Ah… You were absolutely right, Laplace…

He thought he was being careful, but he let power drown him. When he beheld Milim’s overwhelming strength, he made the erroneous assumption that it was all his to wield.

It’s just as you felt it. In the end, I was the one being controlled by Milim. I thought I was paying attention…but she tricked me. You trusted in me, left me to rule as your demon lord, but I suppose this is the end for me…

He had ignored his friend’s warning. And that set these results in stone.

“You’re weaker than us, Clayman, all right? So no trying to pull anything weird by yourself, if you could.”

“Hohh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Teare is right. Feel free to depend on us instead.”

Ah, Teare. Ah, Footman. You’re right. I forgot…

He was too focused on himself to feel it right to rely on his friends. He did file the promise in his mind, actually, but he forgot about that when it counted—one of the most inexcusable things he could have done.

I just wanted to get as close as I could to them. Of course I’d take risks to achieve that. Why wouldn’t I? I was part of the Moderate Jesters, too…

It was true. Clayman wanted the respect of his peers. He wanted his powers to be recognized, so he never revealed his Moderate Jesters’ side to the public. Now he realized that was a mistake.

But it was too late…

…He recalled when he first met the mysterious patron that led him to this.

“Hey. You’re Clayman, right?”

“Who are you? Someone in a hurry to die, apparently, if you address me that casually.”

“Whoa, whoa, no need to act so alarmed. We have a common acquaintance who pointed me here.”

“An acquaintance?”

“Yeah. The demon lord Kazalim. Your creator, of sorts.”

“What?”

He had intended to kill this boy with haste, but then he mentioned a name from his distant past. Now Clayman was interested in hearing him out. And when he did, he discovered the truth about him. His ambitions and his power.

“I’m going to take over this world, Clayman, and I want you to help me.”

“Heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I like it. So that’s your request?”

“Yes. A job for the Moderate Jesters.”

“And what are your terms?”

“How does resurrecting Kazalim sound to you?”

It was beyond all expectations. There was no reason to refuse. The powers the boy displayed to him made it clear beyond doubt. He immediately accepted the job.

“I thought you’d agree to it. Now the world can be ours together. It’s gonna be one crazy place for us to live in!”

Seeing this boy, living life as if it was all some kind of wonderful game, Clayman honestly thought he could pull it off. There were obstacles in their way, massive ones, but that made it seem all the more fun. It seemed that way, but now, his mistakes had crumbled the foundation of their whole strategy. And after the boy had fulfilled his part of the bargain and revived Kazalim…

My thoughtlessness led to this. There is no defending me to him now…

Kazalim was alive and well, and he had no way to congratulate him. More just deserts for him. He had been ordered to sit tight and watch how things unfolded, and he ignored those orders for his own petty reasons.

The last thing he recalled were the words of the man himself—the advice his beloved demon lord Kazalim gave him.

“…Clayman. I see much of myself in you. And you may imitate me if you like, but do not imitate my negative aspects.”

It was wise, all too wise, and something he should have recalled quicker.

Ah… Sir Kazalim… I apologize. I forgot your advice, and I committed the gravest mistake possible…

Yes, it was Clayman’s mistake, made in the worst possible fashion. And just like Kazalim, he was defeated in the most shameful way—by a freshly born demon lord. Karma in action, one could say—but to Clayman, it hurt more than anything else.

And I even lost the army you granted me through my mistakes… I cannot die. No, I cannot die yet. If I die here without atoning for this at all, I’ll never be able to forgive myself…

If it had come to this, he at least wanted to pass on what he knew. The thought kindled the light of life in Clayman before he could completely resign himself to his fate.

“You are a walking dead, created by me from a dead body, but I have placed special weight upon your brainpower. You are not geared for combat, unlike Footman and Teare, but no one can use strategy and artifice to command armies the way that you can. That, Clayman, is why you shall become a demon lord…”

Kazalim had high hopes for him, and he betrayed them all. But if it was power he lacked, all he needed was to obtain some. Then he could stand tall with Footman and Teare—surpass them, even. If only Clayman had some power to back up his intelligence, he could’ve sprung past them all with ease.

Yes… Yes, indeed. There was no need to awaken to a “true” demon lord at all. So give it to me. Give me power… Give me the overwhelming power I need!!

Confirmed. Converting the soul into magical energy… Successful. Disassembling and reconstructing the receptacle body…

Clayman wasn’t expecting the internally shouted wish to come true. But the World Language had other plans for him. Right here, at the last moment, his wish had been granted.

So heaven hasn’t forsaken me yet!

In which case, Clayman’s answer was obvious.

Heh…heh-heh-heh… So you treat me like a fool? Well, I’ll repay you for all that. For now, though, I’ve got to get out of here…

He was weak, too weak to even use his voice, but Clayman’s soul was burning bright—his life was a raging flame. And now, with a coolness that was quite the opposite of what was in his heart, Clayman resolved to retreat. The older demon lords—Guy, Milim, and Daggrull, in particular—were too much to handle. Simply awakening wouldn’t give him the winning edge against them, and now was no time for recklessness.

First, he would report back to the boy. That took precedence over everything. The despicable slime he looked down upon was still a question mark, but even the magic-born that served him were stronger than Clayman—and he was on good terms with a revived Veldora, a point he couldn’t afford to ignore. Anyone who survived a confrontation with Hinata couldn’t have done so out of sheer luck.

He needed to abandon his rose-colored glasses and analyze things for what they were. And that was why he had to take the information he learned here and bring it back.

Quickly, he assembled a plan. His idea: to release a massive ball of magical force, as much as he could manage, and slip out of this chamber in the chaos.

I will need to watch out for Guy…

Guy had no time to deal with weaklings. He probably wasn’t even paying attention to Clayman any longer.

…It’s all right. I’ll get out of here, I promise.

And if he could take out a few demon lords along the way, he thought as he scrambled to his feet, all the better.

Among the demon lords watching, I was probably the first one to notice. I had my eyes on Clayman the entire time, never giving up the watch.

“Shion, get back!”

Quickly heeding my command, Shion fell back to my side. Immediately after she did, the area around Clayman—including the spot she stood on—was swept over by a huge quantity of magicules. The storm gathered even more energy from the chamber, focusing itself squarely upon Clayman. If I had yelled out a moment later, Shion would’ve been caught up in it.

“Looks like it’s really happening.”

“Sir Rimuru? What is…?”

The sight of me keeping my cool appeared to relieve Shion. There was no reason to panic. And I wasn’t panicking, buuuut…

“Clayman’s awakened. Just as planned.”

“Just as planned? Well, great!”

I was glad to earn Shion’s full trust, but I wasn’t quite so assured myself. This is all according to Raphael’s plan, but are we really okay with this? ’Cause if we lose, it’s gonna stop being funny real fast…

When I first laid eyes on Clayman earlier, I could see a large number of rifts in the air around him, as if they were attached to his soul. It was malice personified, the remains of the souls from the people he had killed up to now. But I couldn’t just take them from him. They couldn’t go on to the afterlife, and they couldn’t dissolve into the air. If I killed Clayman, they’d go down with him.

As I thought over what I could do about this, Raphael suggested a plan of action: force Clayman into a corner and make him awaken to a “true” demon lord.

Suggestion. If you use Belzebuth to consume the energy Clayman releases upon awakening, it will be possible to restore your magicules.

It was easy for Raphael to say, but there was a litany of problems with that. I didn’t know if Clayman would awaken, and if he did, he’d undoubtedly be powered up. But hey, um, wouldn’t he just fall asleep, like with my Harvest Festival?

Understood. Since Clayman’s evolution did not follow the standard procedure, the process will not be fully complete. As a result, it is believed that he will not require sleep.

So sort of a limited power-up, then. I guess I’ll just have to defeat an awakened Clayman, then.

According to Raphael’s predictive calculations, defeating him would be a breeze no matter how much he was enhanced. That was based on everything from his core strength to the power he could earn and the skills he was likely to acquire. Even at the maximum threat level, its answers indicated I was still on top of him.

No point worrying about it, then. Just gotta do it.

Besides, it was kind of true that my magical energy was just about ready to bottom out. I could replenish it really fast, so it’d bounce right back after deploying a large-scale spell, but restoring it to full actually took a while. Although I had more energy than my awakening took, I was also using Veldora this whole time as a fuel tank to restore it. With him no longer part of me, it was natural to want to keep my own magicules topped off.

It’d also earn me some street cred with the other demon lords. As the new recruit, I needed to seize a seat at the round table with my own power. Showing off my battlefield skill was the best way to earn their acceptance without stirring up trouble in the future. If I didn’t want ’em wheedling me later, I wanted them to think that I shouldn’t be messed with.

Let’s use this awakened Clayman to show off my power. It’ll save everyone a lot of trouble as time goes on. And the power to show off? The ultimate skill Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, of course.

“Hey! Rimuru! Clayman’s awakened? I can’t believe it, but look at all that force! Let me help with—”

“You’re fine, Carillon. I’ll take him on. I’m calling myself a demon lord, and I want to earn my way into the club. I’m gonna dispatch him and make them all accept me!”

Carillon shrugged and stepped aside. “Well, don’t blow it,” he said, and I definitely didn’t intend to. The enemy had to be crushed—that was the only reason I needed. I was more pissed off at Clayman than anyone else. It was time to settle this.

So I walked toward Clayman, now fully on his feet. The other demon lords were content with watching, seemingly all right with me fighting alone. I was sure they wanted to gauge what I had, so I assumed they wouldn’t complain. Milim was brightly smiling at me, and Ramiris was happily humming to herself. Nobody was doubting my chances—which I took as them believing in me.

“Shion, Ranga, step back.”

“But…!”

“I’ve got this.”

“Y-yes sir!”

“Good luck, Sir Rimuru.”

The other lords gave them enough distance to retreat away so that I wouldn’t unwittingly hurt anyone else.

Now I was alone, and Clayman gave me his sickly little laugh. “Heh-heh-heh, ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaah! Look at me! I’ve obtained the power! You thought I was finished, you worm! Now prepare to be crushed!!”

The laughter grew louder as he looked down at me. But it was all an act. It was sad, how well Raphael had predicted all his moves.

As it described matters, there were two potential strategies Clayman could take. One was a desperate bull rush to kill me; the other was to sneer at me, make me lose my cool, and search for a path of escape. Evidently, he chose the latter, and that meant I knew what he’d do next.

I grimaced at him, keeping my eyes firmly on every move he made. Clayman was looking for an opening. So I played along with his performance.

“I told you, you’re cornered. I’m stronger than you. Give it up and tell me whose bidding you’re doing.”

Of course, in my case, it wasn’t a performance—it was what I really wanted from him. Perhaps that was why Clayman so easily took the bait.

“Heh-heh-heh… Impertinent to the end, I see. Once I release my—”

He kept up the act as he suddenly took action. He must’ve figured I was off my guard, because he fired a massive ball of magical energy from out of nowhere. Must’ve been building it up as we talked. It was a huge, superpowered blast, one that contained all the energy he had just awakened into, and it was hurtling straight my way.

Clayman assumed I would dodge it. That or maybe fire off a blast of my own to neutralize it, although a spur-of-the-moment spell like that from me wouldn’t be enough. If I jumped away, it’d explode in midair; if I tried blowing it up, he’d be able to escape in the resulting gigantic explosion. That, I imagine, were his thoughts.



Too bad, though.

“Didn’t I just tell you? You’re cornered. That attack won’t do a thing. Projectiles don’t work on me.”

Belzebuth gobbled up that massive energy blast, leaving our surroundings completely unaffected. Clayman’s scheme bit the dust hard.

“…Whaaaa?!”

It surprised Clayman enough to leave himself open—just long enough for me to snap my fingers. At that instant, a Barrier erected itself over the two of us, a kind of imitation of the one Guy built.

“So he’s stealing my skills?” a bemused but unangered Guy asked. “Talk about shameless.”

Now, I calmly thought, I can consume Clayman with confidence. Man, my thought processes are getting more and more evil by the day, aren’t they? Because I’m a monster, maybe? I wasn’t shirking the idea of eating him up at all. Or was it because I’m a demon lord now? Ah, it doesn’t matter.

“Wh-what? What happened…?”

Clayman could no longer hide his confusion. The biggest, proudest attack he had was wiped away in an instant, and his brain hadn’t caught up to that yet. Like, how many times do I have to say it? You’re already cornered. The moment someone with your level of talent took me on, your future was cast in stone. It’s so important, isn’t it, to fully gauge your abilities against those of your opponent?

“Look, if you’re gonna be serious about this, make it fast. I’ll wait for you. Or were you thinking about ducking out of this chamber while that attack exploded all over us?”

It was a fully rhetorical question I was cornering him with. Talk about disrespecting your fellow man. Well, I’m a slime now, so it’s all right.

I mean, Clayman was still screwing with me. He was on high alert, watching for what I’d do next, but he was still a wimp about it.

Just as Raphael expected, getting awakened didn’t do all that much to change him. He had a ton more magical energy, but that was it. Apparently, he hadn’t obtained any ability to control it or new skills to take advantage of it with. His “awakening” was a far different thing from mine. Me, I could use Mind Accelerate to speed up my brain a million times until it felt like time stopped. I could even cast spells in that state, making it look like I could just think of a magic spell to set it off.

Kneading together a big ball of magic was a terribly inefficient use of my time, so I didn’t opt for that here. Unlike a full spell, which could be conceived and cast through one’s will (or knowledge, in other words), controlling one’s aura always led to a time lag. Of course, I could handle that because I had Cast Cancel and All of Creation. No matter how long and intricate a spell was, living life a million times slower than normal made it simple. One second, after all, now felt like two hundred and seventy-seven hours. Even the fanciest of spells could be pulled off in less than a day, so that meant I could trigger them in less than a tenth of a second. With regular magic, it was simple for me to set off multiples at the same time, even.

Thus, if I were in Clayman’s shoes, I’d use multiple layers of magic to throw the chamber into confusion, then attempt to run as fast as I could. He didn’t choose that, which meant he didn’t have the strength for it. He hadn’t even noticed that I built a barrier around us—one that cut off any escape route. If he wanted to get out, he’d have to do it over my dead body.

Whether he was aware of this or not, the atmosphere around Clayman began to change.

“Heh…heh-heh-heh… A mere slime with a big mouth, I see. You are strong, I will admit that much. But I am capable of far more than this!!”

He had changed tactics to the first scenario—a desperate bull rush to kill me. Giving up the escape, revealing his full force to the demon lords… A risky bet, to be sure, but it gave him a winning chance. Surrounded by a bunch of lords who believed that strength was everything, it’d even be a chance to write off all his previous crimes.

Assuming, of course, he could beat me.

“You seem confident in your aura-control abilities, but do you think you could deal with this? Here we go—my most powerful hidden skill! Demon Blaster!!”

After that long speech to throw off my game, he put his feelers to the ground, stretching them out around me, and then released.

The attack harnessed the ley lines under the ground, stacking them together and mixing in his own magicules to amplify them, then released it as a destabilizing ray of light. That was the long and short of it, and anyone caught in it would have their arrangement of magicules thrown into chaos, destroying them from the inside. Physical resistance would be useless, and even a magical Barrier would be instantly smashed.

This was the natural enemy of any monster, and I had to hand it to him—this was real demon lord stuff. But it didn’t work on me.

“Swallow it all down, Belzebuth…”

The Demon Blaster light beam looked like a herd of dragons rising up from the ground—but now they were caught up in a rift before they could reach me, screaming their last as they were sucked inside. There was no escape, almost like a black hole that consumed all light around it.

“Forget it, Clayman. You’re weaker than me.”

I had to crush him. Crush him and hopefully make him reveal something about his patron. The best way to do that was via terror.

“No… That, that’s not possible!! That—that was my secret weapon!”

Secret or not, projectiles just didn’t work on me. Maybe if he used his head and did something to land a direct hit on me, things would be different.

“Do you see that you can’t win now? So let me ask you. Tell me what you know and who you’re cooperating with. Be honest with me, and I’ll give you a painless death.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-haaa! I am a walking dead! Kill me all you want; I’ll just resurrect myself and come back later to kill— Ounngh?!”

I punched him. Then again, and again and again, without a word. I also applied Mind Accelerate, speeding it up a million times for him. Raphael could influence not just my perspective but those of people around me.

In the real world, it lasted several seconds. But in Clayman’s mind, I was continually punching him, tormenting him with pain and terror, for several dozen days. So I could carve that pain and terror into his soul. And in those few seconds, the terror made Clayman’s hair fall out, transforming his visage into the ghastly, bony gaze of the actual dead.

“Clayman,” I quietly called out.

His body convulsed, then froze out of terror.

“I’m going to ask you one more time. Who are you getting your information from, and how is this person related to you? Tell me, and I’ll make it easy on you.”

But Clayman had more backbone than I thought.

“Don’t… Don’t treat me like a child. I would never betray my friends—and especially not my clients. That, and that alone, is the ironclad rule of the Moderate Jesters!”

Huh. So even villains had certain unbreakable rules.

“All right. Well, so be it.” I casually changed my tone. “Oh, right, I should probably tell you—you realize you aren’t gonna be resurrected, right?”

He had talked about doing that a few seconds—or days?—ago, but it wasn’t gonna happen. Being consumed by Belzebuth was an even more tragic fate than being caught in the inescapable Unlimited Imprisonment Veldora was locked in.

“Wh-what? What are you talking about?”

Was he keeping up that macho act because he was counting on a new life later on, then? The moment he heard me, Clayman began to quiver.

“Look, um, what you told me earlier? About how walking dead can come alive again after they die? And that’s why you wanted me to focus on killing you, so you could pluck out your astral body and try to run away. Right?”

He was an underhanded sneak, but I had to applaud him for his single-minded devotion to his cause. But my observation made his face pale.

“Wh-what did you…?”

He tried to cover it, but I could tell I was right. Not even I needed Raphael to figure it out—but Raphael had even more amazing stuff for me.

“Ummm, so you can connect your astral body to the ley lines here to keep your consciousness and memories protected, yeah? So even if you lose your physical body, you’ll never truly die. That’s why you were pretending to die there?”

Ahhh. Now I see. And just parroting out what Raphael told me made Clayman convulse before me. I was absolutely correct.

“W-wait, wait…”

I knew his game. And now it was time to end it. I turned toward the demon lords surrounding us, ignoring the gibbering Clayman.

“Well! I guess I won’t extract anything else from Clayman, so I’m going to execute him shortly. Anyone have any objections? ’Cause if you do, I’ll be happy to take you on, too.”

It would suck if someone did, but I doubted it.

“Do as you please,” Guy answered, speaking for the Council like I thought he would. No one else voiced any complaint.

“Stop! Wait, stop it!!”

Now Clayman was loudly pleading for his life, finally realizing there was no escape.

“After all the grief you gave me, I’m absolutely sick of you. Don’t expect your death to be all sunshine and rainbows, all right?”

With that, I placed my hand on his head. I thought I’d make it quick ’n’ easy on him if he coughed up some info on his master, but Clayman never sang. I really wanted him to, considering what I’d have to deal with in the future, but hey, I’d probably manage without it. There might be some more leads in his castle to explore, and given the testimony I had that the Modest Jesters weren’t a monster ring, it was obvious that Clayman had worked with humans. I didn’t know if that meant the Eastern Empire or the Western Nations, but either way, if he knew about my own movements, he had to have connections in the west. Track those down, and I should find a trail to follow before long. In a way, relying on the not-too-credible Clayman’s testimony might just lead to more confusion.

So. Clayman.

“…I hope you’ll spend the last few moments before your soul vanishes regretting what you’ve done.”

“No! Wait, wait! Stop!! Stoooopppp!! Help, help me, Footman! Teare, help me! I can’t die yet. I can’t die heeeerrrreee!!”

It was pathetic, watching him try to flee. But I wasn’t about to allow it. No matter how much he carried on, none of it would ever touch my heart. Leaving someone like this alive would just be planting the seed of disaster.

Plus, thanks to you, the naïveté in me just died. There was no way I could let that get one of my companions killed again.

“P-please, Lord Kazalim, help me—”

He reached out to his broken mask, clutching at it as if in prayer—

Crunch.

In an instant, the wailing, howling, resisting Clayman disappeared from sight. Body, soul, and all were greedily consumed by Belzebuth. And now it was converted into pure magicules inside me, where he would get to experience the torments of hell.

And whether a dirtied soul like his—a tainted, evil soul—or a sensible, good soul, death treated them all equally.

And for a moment, I thought I heard his voice:

—Ah, Laplace. You were exactly right. I think I went a little too far. I should have waited and bade my time, like you warned me to… You always were right…

Was that regret? I suppose even a villain like him feels regret. Let’s hope that the “death” I gave him helps him get more familiar with that emotion.

