

FUSE

Illustration by
Mitz Vah



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

5

THAT TIME I GOT REINCARNATED AS A SLIME

– Tensei Shitara Slime Datta Ken –

- VOLUME 5 -
A Demon Lord's Awakening

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-ILLUSTRATOR-
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[Yen Press]

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as a SLIME



A dynamic illustration of a chaotic battle scene. In the foreground, a soldier in blue and red armor is shown in mid-air, having just performed a powerful attack. His sword is embedded in a large, dark, jagged rock formation. Behind him, another soldier in similar armor is also engaged in combat, with his sword drawn. In the background, a massive black dragon with long wings is flying through a sky filled with numerous small, glowing red spheres that resemble falling stars or fireflies. The overall atmosphere is one of intense action and destruction.

Die! May the anger of the gods sear through your very souls!

This was Raphael, the figure that took the form of Rimuru, the apparently soulless master. And even now, the Lord of Wisdom was edging his way closer to Shion.

Bringing his hands forward, he began to cast Analyze and Assess—carefully, with every intention of making his master's hopes come true.



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FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford
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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

PROLOGUE

THE DAY OF RUIN

PROLOGUE

THE DAY OF RUIN

The demon lord Carillon gazed up at the sky, a tense look on his face. Far beyond, he could feel a large, concentrated ball of magical energy flying his way, its aura so powerful that its owner didn't even bother to conceal it.

It had to be his fellow demon lord Milim. She was clearly ready for combat, and her target was this very country.

Swooping in faster than the speed of sound, Milim stopped on a dime directly above Carillon's castle. The declaration that ensued was made at deafening volume. It generally unfolded like this:

"Ah-ha-haaa! I am Milim Nava, the demon lord! And as of this moment, I hereby declare all treaties and agreements made between myself and the other demon lords null and void. That includes any and all pacts made with the demon lord Carillon! I'm also declaring war on him, so how about we meet up again a week from now? Best of luck trying to figure out how to deal with me. Ahhhhh-ha-ha-haaa!!"

As both a demon lord and Beast Master of his realm, Carillon got a headache from simply this one-sided declaration. "What in the hell is that airheaded woman thinking?!" he pondered. But he could stew over this later. For now, he needed to give out his marching orders.

"All warriors of the realm, assemble here at once!!"

The command was carried out with all due haste. In another moment, the whole of the Beast Master's Warrior Alliance—led by their erstwhile leaders, the Three Lycanthropeers—was assembled in the great plaza in front of the castle.

"My lord," stated the Golden Snakehorn Alvis, "we are all present, save for Gruecith."

"Right." Carillon sagely nodded. That single moment was enough, apparently, for him to compose his thoughts. "In a week's time," he gravely began as his army eagerly awaited his speech, "that Milim will come to attack us. The impudent fool has

abandoned all agreements made with other demon lords, not even bothering to convene a Walpurgis to make it official. This means she has made enemies out of all ten of the other great demon lords who rule the lands. It is simply beyond comprehension. Milim always was one to work on impulse a little too quickly, but she can be both cunning and prudent in thought. I can only assume something has happened to drive her into action."

No one in the audience doubted him. They could hear Milim well enough from back there. But it all seemed so unreal that many among them couldn't even guess how to respond.

"So," Alvis calmly said, "how are the other demon lords reacting?"

"Frey and Clayman aren't believing a word of it," Carillon spat back. "Valentine's as unresponsive as always, and Ramiris is too busy bragging about her 'new guardian' or whatnot to listen to a word I say. My compatriot Guy couldn't care less, and I imagine the other three are similarly disinterested. Of course, if Milim and I really *do* engage in war, they'll certainly be forced to believe it then."

It didn't sound like Carillon had many allies to rely on.

"Then war is the only option, General!" bellowed Sufia, the Snowy Tigerclaw. "And as for me, I've already got a ticket for the front row!"

Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang and a man known to let his passion for battle get the best of him, rose. "Sufia," he said, "you can be so optimistic only because you know nothing about the demon lord Milim's strengths. I can't state this more clearly—she is on a different level from anyone else. The entire Warrior Alliance could take her on and be wiped out within seconds."

His previous experience with Milim gave him due reason to be cautious, taking a more analytical approach to this threat. As far as he was concerned, any fight would mean a quick defeat for them.

"I am glad to see you act more maturely, Phobio. You know of Milim's power; I have no reason to doubt you. So who do *you* think is stronger—Milim or myself?"

Phobio winced at Carillon's fastball of a question. He took a moment to compose himself, then looked his master in the eye.

"It is impossible for me, Lord Carillon, to estimate the full strengths of two demon lords. However, as rude as it may be to say, I can tell you that the demon lord Milim lives up to every syllable of her alias, the Destroyer."

He had avoided giving a direct answer, but Carillon could read between the lines well enough.

"Really, then! She is stronger than myself?" He gave this a good belly laugh. "Then perhaps this is the perfect opportunity to show all of you how powerful the Beast Master can truly be!"

This, as far as Carillon was concerned, could be a golden opportunity. And he was not trusting too much upon his own powers, either. He knew, with reasonable certainty, that Milim was likely stronger than he was. But—

"You know, in the end, if I turn tail and flee from my foes simply because of their strength, would I honestly deserve to be called demon lord? Plus, you want me to give up the chance to fight one of the most legendary demon lords ever? I'd never turn my back on that much excitement!"

Now his blood was pumping, his heart dancing in his rib cage. Milim was a pillar of strength. One of the oldest demon lords and (despite her looks) someone who struck fear in the hearts of almost anyone with a pulse. And he'd get to fight her. It was impossible not to be enthusiastic.

His parents had told him, as a child, a fairy tale about a dragon princess who ruled as a tyrant over her kingdom. Perhaps it was about Milim; perhaps it was about someone else. But back then, his parents' words to him were:

"Inspire the wrath of the dragon princess, and your nation shall fall to ruin! Do not engage in conflict with the dragon princess, at all costs!"

Carillon always thought they were being silly. The Beast Kingdom of Eurazania was one of the continental superpowers, boasting a large expanse of bountiful land. They were a warlike people, and over half the population could credibly call themselves warriors. Its military was easily the equal of any other demon lord's domain—and since Carillon became a demon lord, the ensuing several centuries had seen its power

grow even further. There was nobody to fear. Carillon was sure of it. And gaining the chance to fully express his strength made his bloodlust burn white-hot inside him.

But, as king of a nation, he remained coolheaded enough to give one more order.

“Milim will be entirely *my* quarry. Along those lines, if she brings an army with her, I command you to engage them in combat—but if Milim comes by herself, I want all of you to evacuate the country at once. You guys get caught in the cross fire between us, I guarantee it’ll be painful for you.”

“B-but, my lord...?!”

“Allow me to join your side...”

“Lord Carillon, we must—”

“Silence!!” Carillon shouted, cutting off the Three Lycanthropeers’ complaints. “I am the only one of us who can prove a worthy opponent to Milim Nava! All of you must devote more attention to protecting our people. You are forbidden from joining the battle!”

On cue, Carillon unleashed the full extent of his aura, using it to cow every high-level demon into agreement. The sheer force was overwhelming enough that no one dared to object. Immediately, everyone there kneeled and expressed their allegiance.

“Trust me. I will win for us all!”

“““Raaaaahhh!!”””

The plaza was bathed in cheers. The demons and vassals all looked up to their master, roaring with excitement. It had taken precious little time for the nation to decide its direction. From this moment on, the Beast Kingdom plunged into full war mode.

Once it was decided, the beasts began to work quickly. In short order, the evacuation of noncombatants kicked off. It would proceed quickly enough to be completed within a short week’s time.

“Say,” Carillon reflected to his three closest generals, “wouldn’t it be a good idea to confer with that slime at a time like this?”

“Meaning Sir Rimuru, sir?” asked Alvis.

“Ah yes, that was the name. Tell him to stock up on that wonderful drink of his, because we’ll be holding one hell of a victory celebration.”

“Hee-hee-hee! I look forward to it, my lord. The citizens should be evacuated to the Forest of Jura, then?”

“At once. I leave that in your capable hands, Alvis.”

With the order, tens of thousands of Eurazanian residents were on their way to Tempest, under the watchful leadership of Alvis. All who would remain in the country were Carillon, Sufia, Phobio, and twenty or so Warrior Alliance members serving them. The fateful battle with Milim was coming, but for now, they contented themselves with quietly sharpening their fangs.

The day came. Carillon looked up at the sacred mountain that loomed behind his castle, confident in his power. Then he stood, ready to engage Milim.

“Today will be the day when I prove to the world that I am strongest!”

“Fight on for us, Lord Carillon!”

Sufia nodded. “Once we are sure Lady Milim is alone, we will retreat to safety as well.”

“I don’t dislike you, Milim. We could’ve been good friends, I think. A pity.”

Carillon only barely whispered the words. Even in the best of conditions, it would have been difficult for anyone to hear. But they were wholly extinguished by the sound of Milim’s flight rippling across the battlefield.

*

Slowly, Carillon engaged his flight magic. Just as Milim arrived, without a single word between them, the battle began.

First, the preliminaries. His fists, filled with all his might, were enough to hold Milim back. But they failed to damage her, as if her body were simply refusing to take the blows. Her skin was protected by a Multilayer Barrier, repelling all physical stimuli.

With a light exhale, Carillon spread his aura forth, brimming with fighting spirit. As he did, he deployed a multilayer attack of his own, gouging away with it. Each blow had a vast store of slashing force as it struck at Milim—and none of them was enough to place even a single wound upon her. The spirit-infused blows simply knocked a few layers off her barrier, failing to reach her actual body.

Even with his ace in the hole—the White Tiger-Blue Dragon halberd he wielded—Milim's Temma Sword absorbed every blow. Despite her small, childlike frame, she had enough power to fully resist the untold extent of Carillon's own might. This Temma Sword was an ominous blade, a long, curved scimitar that suited her well and glowed a bluish-white. It was legendary, a sword that had felled many magic-born and demon lords in its time.

Geh, she's drawn that sword?!

With a click of the tongue, Carillon fell back, regaining his balance. That single engagement was enough to make him revise his opinion of Milim. He'd had no intention of laughing her off before, but this was beyond all expectation. He hadn't gotten truly serious about the battle yet, but he still had no idea how deep Milim's strength ran. He instinctively realized now that this was no time to leave anything off the table.

“Look, Milim... Why are you doing this?”

“.....”

The question was greeted with silence. Something was strange about this to him. She barely seemed there mentally, almost acting like someone else was controlling her.

“Heh. Let me guess: Has someone taken over your mind? If so, that is quite a pity. I wanted you to put your heart into this so that I could defeat you and prove I am the strongest!”

“.....”

“The silent treatment, eh? Could it really be, then...?” Carillon grinned. “Well, it doesn't matter. I'm going to win either way!”

The idea of the demon lord Milim having her brain taken over seemed like a sick joke to him. But she *was* acting weird—weird enough that he couldn't dismiss the idea as

sheer fantasy. If that was the case... then whatever the cause of this extremely odd turn of events, Carillon knew there would be no negotiating with her. This was a fight to the death, pure and simple.

So, without hesitation—first as a magic-born, then as a demon lord, level by level—he unleashed his force.

As befitting his name of Beast Master, Carillon was a lion-type creature. The king of the beasts, leading all his own beasts. Beast Transform, the intrinsic skill that all his subjects possessed, was now more powerful than ever—transformed within him into the unique skill Royal Beast.

Such was the form that Carillon was in now, the king of all creatures both beastly and magical in nature. His head was the proud head of a lion, his body as hardy as an elephant's. His arms were as strong as a bear's but boasted simian dexterity. His legs were supple, as powerful as any in the feline family—and upon his back, he bore the wings of a great eagle.

All these natural animal advantages melded with one another in the most beautiful of ways, covered in tough silvery fur. He was protected by Legend-class equipment—the best there was, obtainable only by evolving one's own Unique-class weapons and armor over many years.

On his head was a crown, a mighty bird decorating the edge. Around his waist, a jewel-encrusted belt bearing a black tortoise of basalt. In his hand, the White Tiger-Blue Dragon halberd. All of these were infused with the magical power flowing from Carillon's own body, letting them fully release their sheen and force.

The power was overwhelming, incomparable to before the transformation. This, beyond all doubt, was the demon lord Carillon's true form.

Milim's eyes twinkled momentarily at the sight—long enough that it caught Carillon's attention but short enough that he wondered if he'd imagined it.

"Now, Milim," he intoned, dismissing the thought. "I hate to say it, but since I have

shown you *this* form, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave, all right? It is a pity, but farewell!"

There was no room for sentimentality on the battleground. The moment he shouted it, Carillon focused all the power coursing through his body upon his blade. On the ground, the sheer weight of energy would be enough to rend the earth, pulverizing anything nearby. Even now, the remains of the aura filled the air like burned-out embers, hot enough to scorch the atmosphere itself.

"Prepare to disappear from this world forever! Beast Roar!!"

This was, in essence, a particle cannon that fired magical force. The tip of White Tiger-Blue Dragon was now gone, reverted to its composite magical particles. It was the Beast Master's ultimate finisher move, one that could make everything in front of it vanish without a trace on the ground. Normally, its force did not begin to dissipate until around three hundred feet from the launch point. From there, it would gradually disperse before it reached its final point, one and a quarter miles away.

It was a long-range move meant for handling hordes of foes, and now he was focusing its entire fury upon a single figure. It was the first time he had ever done anything of the sort with Beast Roar, but Carillon was absolutely positive nobody could possibly survive such a blast. He gave it everything—no letting up, no thinking about what came next; it contained his full power.

He could feel the magicule count drain from his body. Even flight might pose a challenge after this, but if it earned him the win, it was a fair price to pay. Normally, he'd restrain it enough so he could fire off two or three blasts without issue, but not against *this* foe. This was Milim Nava, the Destroyer.

The attack was true, expanded to maximum range and powerful enough to cause damage to its own caster. No creature could ever survive this—that was how sure Carillon was. He breathed a deep sigh as he attempted to descend to the earth...

...then immediately went into evasive action as his animal instincts sniffed out a lethal threat right behind him. That snap decision saved Carillon's life. Blood gushed out from a wound on his side, caused by the sword as it swished by. He closed the cut through sheer force of will.

In a panic, he turned around. He knew there was no point confirming it, but his mind

still couldn't believe it. His eyes were greeted by just the person he expected, floating there in midair, platinum-pink hair flowing in the wind as she spread her dragon's wings wide. Now there was a bloodred horn jutting out from her forehead, which hadn't at all been there before. Her skimpy outfit, somewhere along the line, had transformed into a suit of ebony armor.

Ahh... Is that how you usually look in battle form...?

Carillon had just about exhausted his magical force. Despair began to paint over his previously indomitable will to fight. *You're kidding me! She took that without getting hurt? Give me a break...* It put him in an odd state of mind; he wanted to cry and laugh simultaneously.

Then, for the first time in the battle, Milim spoke.

"Ha-ha-ha! Not bad! I like it. It's been a while since my left hand's gone numb like this. As thanks, I'll show you something I've got saved up."

The words sounded a bit flat and unemotional to Carillon's ears. But the impending danger they portended gave him no time to ponder over it. He *didn't* want to see it. He really didn't. At least none of his citizens was anywhere nearby. They were fully evacuated. There was no need to worry about the castle town.

Carillon contemplated fleeing the scene at full speed. His instincts, so trustworthy up to now, were telling him that staying here meant death.



* * *

Her draconic pupils burst wide, her wings fully extended, Milim shouted:

“Drago-Nova!!”

The blast of light was thin, beautiful, reminiscent of the twinkling of stars. It rained down upon both the castle and the townscape that surrounded it, and remained soundless as it disappeared. The frequency it emitted reached beyond a human’s auditory range, which, along with the accompanying shock wave, was enough to fully destroy everything visible to the naked eye. Anything exposed to the light was helpless as it was ruthlessly disintegrated.

It was the ultimate in magic, the strongest in existence, and it was one main reason why Milim had always stood at the peak of all the battles she had fought over her many years.

That's insane!!

Carillon just barely managed to flee above Milim in time. The fact that Drago-Nova had launched out in the direction she faced saved his life again—but the sight under him now made him lose all his words. The town, built of simple stone structures that integrated well with the local landscape, was completely erased.

This was Milim Nava, the Destroyer. A demon lord with whom you absolutely never engaged in conflict. Now Carillon had to admit it: His parents had been right. This was doomed. She was in too different a dimension.

But—

“But I wonder if there's...”

“You wonder if there's what? I'd like to know.”

Carillon could feel a thin blade touching the back of his neck. He sensed another woman there, flying in from behind. It was Frey the Sky Queen, the demon lord who held absolute rule over the heavenly skies. Now Carillon realized why Milim hadn't

bothered to hide her overwhelming aura. It provided Frey all the cover she needed to make her approach undetected.

“Ngh, Frey... Not you, too...?!”

“Not me what, exactly? Would you mind taking the time to explain?”

Frey moved her hand—and Carillon’s consciousness went dark.

It was the worst day in the history of Eurazania, one that would later be referred to by the assorted lycanthropes who called it home as the Day of Ruin.

ROUGH SKETCHES



MILIM



CHAPTER
1

CALMER DAYS

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 1

CALMER DAYS

Long before then—long, long before the Day of Ruin unfolded—the magic-born Mjurran was off to spy on Rimuru and his town once again. Her master, the demon lord Clayman, had given the command right after she finished a delivery of a certain magic item. “Investigate these mystery magic-born,” he said. “Find any weaknesses we can exploit, and find me some intelligence we can utilize on the bargaining table.”

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...

The report Mjurran gave him several months ago had been quite extensive. It covered the monster town Clayman was curious about, their level of cultural advancement, and the fact that Milim had apparently become friends with the enigmatic magic-born leading them. Said magic-born was a slime, as well as the masked figure Clayman had seen in previous reports. More important than that, however, was how the dryads, the overseers of matters across the Forest of Jura, had recognized this slime as the head of an alliance between them. They were now a kind of third power in the world, one neither human nor demon lord—and that made them difficult to touch.

Clayman didn’t hide his astonishment at the news of Milim’s new friend. The fact that this weak-sounding slime was the real identity behind that masked magic-born was surprising in itself, but Milim’s behavior was unfathomable. Unthinkable. Beyond the realms of imagination. The thought of a demon lord befriending some random magic-born off the street was the height of recklessness. It did nothing but confuse him.

Mjurran didn’t mind this. She was a regular person, and she long ago concluded there was simply no comprehending the thoughts of a demon lord. There *were* a couple of things... okay, *many* things about that demon lord’s behavior that gave her pause, to be honest. But it wasn’t her job to figure out what made them tick.

So she just reported everything she saw to Clayman and gave him the unvarnished

truth. He rewarded her with a broad smile. “I see,” he said. “This could prove useful. A very fascinating story, indeed.”

It came as a relief to hear. Mjurran was glad her master was pleased, but above that, she had provided him with her ace in the hole—a crystal ball, the most important magic item there was. The information it contained documented the entire battle between Charybdis and this mystery magic-born, as well as a quick sample of Milim’s own strengths. It was a priceless asset, one that elated Clayman.

Not even this, however, was enough to make Mjurran a free woman. She needed to put in an even better performance or else Clayman would remain unsatisfied. She might not have been that useful to him, but she knew full well that Clayman was not the kind of man to let an upper-level magic-born go unchecked.

But it was still a major achievement. One that successfully earned her a decent amount of trust. And being granted a solo mission was perfectly suited to Mjurran, too. If she wanted to escape Clayman, any chance to prepare away from his prying eyes was perfect. And with the demon lord’s authority on her side, she had the ability to do what she wanted without checking in with him.

Back at the monster town, Mjurran continued her surveillance.

During the demon lord Milim’s stay, she had not once engaged in magical conversation with Clayman. She hadn’t used any magic at all in the region—in fact, she’d snuck into the town while holding her breath and restraining her aura as much as possible. For much the same reason, Clayman had not contacted her. Mjurran couldn’t have asked for much more.

Milim was aware of his presence now. True, she had to be more careful than ever. Fully realizing it might already be for naught, she made every effort to stay alert during her duties. Perhaps thanks to that, nobody else had noticed her.

After a while, Milim left the monster town. What could she be doing now, and where? That went beyond Mjurran’s orders to observe the magic-born and his people. There was no need to worry about it. Now Mjurran figured she could rest a bit, as much as her continued alertness made her hesitate. She kept observing quietly—and to achieve this, she decided to take advantage of a group of humans who were now regular visitors to the town.

.....
.....
....

It was now several months since Mjurran had given her report to the demon lord Clayman. She had been active that whole time, but Clayman had never contacted her. She'd given a report when Milim left town, but his only reply was to carry on with her mission.

She could tell his interest in her was dwindling, and she decided some brash action was called for. She was here to gather intelligence, so she thought of ways she might be able to enter town. It was that group of humans who caught her eye first.

Slowly, carefully, Mjurran gathered her information. It told her this was an armed group that engaged in business within the monster town—a group that Rimuru, that mystery magic-born, was attempting to prop up as champions of mankind. Infiltrating this group would be the perfect approach, she thought. It'd let her enter town freely and with the perfect alibi.

So she put together a plan of action. As a former human, pretending to be non-magical was child's play for her. Right now, she was beholden to Clayman for everything, but if it meant her freedom, she was ready to do virtually anything. If something could be exploited, exploit the hell out of it—such was her way of thinking. An approach that probably rubbed off on her from Clayman, as loath as she was to admit it.

*

Before long, she was off to the Kingdom of Farmus, the reported destination of the human party. "My," she said with a sigh, "human towns have certainly *advanced* as of late."

Mjurran had last been a human being several centuries ago. The only towns to speak of at the time were the capitals of kingdoms, where all the royalty lived. Beyond that, you had a few villages larger than the norm, and that was it. There simply hadn't been a lot of humans around—not as many as now.

She stayed out of sight by habit as she walked around town, in search of a certain location—the local Free Guild branch, in this territory ruled by Nidol Migam, Earl of

Migam. She found it just as the sun was about to dip under the horizon. Opening the door, she saw it was crawling with ruffians of all shapes and sizes. Thickly accented voices attempting to negotiate with the front-office brokers, voices yelling at one another in hopes of raising the sale price of their goods, happier voices bragging about the lofty achievements they scored today... The din almost made her feel dizzy, but she tried to tune it out, not wanting to use her magic for it.

Then Mjurran heard someone whistling at her. One of the ruffians, no doubt, sniffing out the fragrance she typically wore to mask the smell of blood.

"Hey, look! She's a real beauty, eh?"

"Now *this* is a find. What's a lovely lady like you doin' in a place like this, huh?"

"See this creature I bagged today? I'm gonna sell it in a bit, so how 'bout you join me at the bar and we'll drink on the profits, eh?"

...Ugh, what a pain, Mjurran thought as she wrinkled her nose. It was beyond her why she was such a target of attention around here. Thanks to living her life in seclusion, avoiding the company of others and focusing solely on her magic research, she was wholly indifferent to her outside appearance. But between the green-tinged silver hair, the blue eyes, and the calm demeanor, the consensus was clear: This was one beautiful woman. A beautiful woman who had just stepped into a Guild branch office packed with people just *barely* on the right side of the law. In the evening hours, no less. The furor was only to be expected.

"So? How 'bout it, eh?"

"Sorry," she bluntly stated, "I've got some business to do."

"Aw, don't be like that," the man countered. "Just come here 'n' join me for a bit!"

"Lay off me, won't you? I told you—I've got business."

For a magic-born, Mjurran was more convivial with other people than most. But not even she was magnanimous enough to let a total stranger act like her best friend out of nowhere.

"Lay off? Hell, you just walk right in here 'n' think you're better than all of us?"

"Ahh, quit it, Isaak. You want the guild master to yell at ya again? This ain't a tavern. Maybe she's got a job for the Guild, huh?"

"Pfft. Yeah, yeah."

The man called Isaak took a step back, his eyes still squarely upon Mjurran. She nodded her thanks to the man who had stopped him, then made a beeline for the service window.

"I'd like to register, please."

"Registration? Will that be for a general-purpose member account, then?"

"No. As an adventurer. Umm..." Mjurran paused for a moment, thinking about which department to join—retrieval, exploration, or monster slaying. Then she remembered how she used to make a regular habit of picking and preparing medicinal herbs. "...The retrieval department, please."

"Retrieval... All right. There's a test required, so are you ready to take it?"

"I am. What do I have to do?"

"Well, please fill this out for us first."

Mjurran did so, offering all the information needed for the Guild to provide her identification papers. Then Isaak decided to try his luck again.

"Whoa, whoa, a woman filing to become an adventurer? Like, you aren't by yourself, lady, are ya? I could help with the exam if you like."

He was grinning the whole time, but the question's real purpose was more to intimidate the rest of the adventurers in the room than anything. Even if Mjurran decided to hire some bodyguards, it'd be harder for anyone else to accept the invite now that Isaak's hat was in the ring. Doing so would instantly make Isaak your enemy, after all, and despite his attitude, Isaak had a pretty serious rep around this Guild.

In terms of pure strength, he was on the lower end of the C rank, but that still put him near the top of the membership roll in this rural branch. Anyone with *real* talent for this line of work usually set up shop in the larger cities, only traveling to the hinterlands if work demanded it. This, unfortunately, gave Isaak something of a

mistaken impression of himself. He thought he was one of the big men around the village, and that meant nobody was allowed to defy him.

Oh, please. I don't feel like getting involved with these yokels. Should I just kill him, maybe?

Ending his life here would cause serious problems, but killing him covertly wouldn't warn the others to stay away from her. Mjurran saw no merit in voluntarily becoming a murder suspect. But what to do, then?

"Hmm. I think it'd be faster if I showed off some of my skills to you." She turned back to the Guild agent, her voice calm and composed. "Hey—I changed my mind. Instead of retrieval, I'll join the monster-slaying department. I can take *that* exam on-site, can't I?"

The agent nodded.

A little while later:

"Hee-hee! This here's the inn, lady!"

Isaak was scared so straight by the carnage Mjurran released that—without her asking—he became her underling.

A few days later, Mjurran was already part of the regular Guild crew, taking on work and living nearby—just as she had planned it. Yohm's team, the armed group she was targeting, would be here soon. She was waiting for them.

Isaak, for his part, was proving to be a surprisingly devoted henchman, unwittingly helping her gather more intelligence. He was used to showing people around town, which helped Mjurran catch up on customers much more quickly than otherwise. He also happened to know a great deal about Yohm and his team, which was an unexpected bonus.

Good thing I didn't kill him after all, she mused as Isaak came to her with some pressing news.

"They're here, lady!"

Now it was time to proceed with her plan.

The scheme Mjurran devised was fairly simple.

She had asked Franz, master of the local Free Guild branch, to introduce her to Yohm. Her work performance over the past few days was already enough to make rumors about her skill spread far and wide. Franz himself was a catalyst for this, given that he served as Mjurran's test manager. At this point, nobody involved with the Guild was unfamiliar with her name any longer.

"I wish you'd stay with this branch permanently," Franz even offered her. But that wasn't part of her plans. All she wanted were those ID papers.

"I'm a pretty handy woman when it comes to magic, you know, so if this man is a true champion of the land, I would love the opportunity to serve him. I hear Sir Yohm has few magic-users among his team."

"Ah, that's a pity to hear. Still, you in Yohm's party would help us out enormously, if indirectly. Very well. Rest assured that I will give you a glowing recommendation."

Things seemed pretty well set in motion, then. Or so Mjurran thought.

Now she was holding her head in her hands.

Why did it turn out like this?

The introduction had gone well enough, at least.

"Huh? I already got a sorcerer and mysticist in Rommel and Jagi. What can some girl do for us beyond that? I'm fine, thanks!"

This out-of-hand denial riled Mjurran.

"Hmm. In that case, let me show you what an angry wizard can do."

And she did. She, in so many words, beat the crap out of Yohm. This got her on the

team, and for some reason, they were treating her as the number-two of the crew, a military adviser with the power to guide their direction, second only to Yohm himself. This put her up there with Yohm's aide-de-camp, Kazhil, and staff officer, Rommel.

Ugh. I was hoping I could just pose as a shamaness and keep a lower profile in this group...

Maybe, Mjurran ruefully admitted to herself, she had a much shorter temper than she thought.



The day taught Yohm a lesson he had almost forgotten: Never judge a book by its cover.

They were in a largely deserted wood outside town. The only witnesses were Franz, who had introduced this woman Mjurran to him, and Isaak, a local petty adventurer.

Yohm sniffed at her. There was no way he could ever let a woman defeat him. A few of his men had joined his side, concerned and overprotective, but they were just silently watching for now.

He saw no reason why he couldn't handle this fight by himself. After all, he was wearing the Exo-Armor Rimuru gave him, the best protection anyone could ask for. It brimmed with enough magic resistance to neutralize pretty much any threat he might come across.

Ha! I have nothing to worry about with conjurers like her. Just dash forward, close the distance, and cut her down!

It was a tactic that served Yohm well. No magic-user had ever given him much of a headache up to now.

“I would like three of you to take me on at once,” the woman called Mjurran declared. “In fact, you can all descend upon me simultaneously.”

This offer immediately made Yohm lose his self-control.

“Don’t give me that nonsense, lady! Rommel, Jagi, don’t bother going easy on her. We got potions to spare anyway. Give ’er all you’ve got!”

They both prepared to follow his order—Rommel less than enthusiastic about it all, Jagi cool as a cucumber.

It was three-on-one when Franz gave the signal to begin. No sane witness could have imagined any possible scenario where they'd lose. The moment the signal came, Yohm was immediately bathed in strengthening magic from Rommel and support magic from Jagi, both enough to make him physically feel his muscles expand to their limits. Supremely confident, he rushed toward his target—and right into a pitfall trap.

“Ah?!”

Right in front of Mjurran, just as he planted a foot down to land a lethal blow upon her, that foot fell through the ground.

“Aspectual magic: Earth Lock,” came the quiet voice as Yohm floundered. Normally, this magic was used to help the caster gain surer footing—but when used on a target trapped in a pit, it made the walls literally close in. Just as the battle started, Yohm was out of the contest.

“How on...?!”

“I’ve never *seen* such simple magic used in such a devious way!” marveled Rommel. One couldn’t blame him. Mjurran had used two magic spells, one to soften and muddy the ground enough to build a pitfall and a much simpler one to solidify it again. No matter how resistant to magic Yohm’s equipment was, it couldn’t do much about the ground caving in on him. It was a breathtakingly straightforward tactic, one crafted with a clear understanding of how Yohm would strike.

The two witnesses were stupefied but not enough to miss their enemy’s next few words.

“Ailment: Silence.”

“—?!”

“—!!”

That was the finisher.

“What a pitiful show.” Mjurran groaned. “Neither of you prepared any defense against

ailment magic? How are you going to handle magical opponents *that way...?*"

She hadn't even needed three minutes to claim victory. It all but forced Yohm to accept that she was a force to be reckoned with.

They were all at the local tavern that night, holding a small celebration to commemorate Mjurran's induction into the group.

"Yahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha! You're a strong woman, you are," Kazhil managed to work in between his laughter. "Sure wasn't expecting the boss to get trounced like that!"

"Ahhh, shut it, Kazhil. I just didn't think it'd be so *easy*. Is that normally how magicians go at it, Jagi?"

"Oh, no, boss, that's just crazy! You'll never find a wizard who *wouldn't* flinch at the sight of a skillful warrior's sword thundering their way. You need to define a point to dig a hole at, too, so you gotta have enough courage to stand right by it to serve as the bait. I don't think either I or anyone else would try something like that."

"He's right, Yohm. She must've planned out that whole bait job in advance. I guess Mjurran was right—sooner or later, we would've met our doom in a clash of magic."

The conclusion made Yohm realize all over again how lacking their team was.

"Pfft. True enough. I can brag all day about how invincible I am, but it don't mean a thing without results. We took you on three against one, and we still lost; I'll admit that to ya. So, you know, I'm sorry to bother you about this, but I hope you can teach us how to fend for ourselves against magic-wielding foes."

"Indeed," Rommel added, "they never taught us how to fight like *that* at the magic academy. We did learn about taking advantage of the terrain in my legion-magic classes, but..."

"...Well, I could help you a tad, perhaps...?"

"Oh, wonderful! I've just *got* to broaden my knowledge a little. Better learn how to use my skills more effectively!"

"I'm in on this, too, yeah," said Jagi.

"Certainly, certainly. But just a little, all right?"

"Yeah," Yohm interjected. "Thanks a lot for puttin' up with us."

It felt a little shameless to him, asking Mjurran for help. But it nonetheless meant that she was part of the team now—a trusted adviser, no less.



Mjurran was starting to suspect she was a bit of an easy mark. She had infiltrated Yohm's team in order to more fully investigate the nation of monsters in the forest, which was fine, but now she was some kind of senior official among them.

These people are so stupid. They don't suspect for a moment I'm magic-born.

She looked down on them for that, but there was still a faint smile on her lips. Interacting with these kinds of people for the first time in quite a while was oddly exhilarating. She wanted this to continue, whether she consciously thought it or not; she wanted to enjoy this state of affairs for just a little while longer.

Then, an innocent look on her face, she went back to her usual work.

Once she'd joined Yohm's team, Mjurran's days suddenly became packed.

She was responsible for giving tactical advice to the party, providing in-the-field guidance on working together to fend off monsters and magical attacks. She had inadvertently admitted to them that she was a wizard, but there was no point regretting that after the fact. She couldn't take back the words, so she resigned herself to their consequences, offering her teachings to Rommel, Jagi, and everyone else in the party at least somewhat familiar with magic.

Tactical advice was enough of a workload; magic only added to it. Simple curses were easy enough to teach others about. She *was* a witch, so talking about the kinds of magic available to humankind was child's play for her. Higher-level magic, on the other hand, was a far different story. Some of it could be conjured only by magic-born. Blithely imparting *everything* she knew could cause serious problems for her later.

So what were humans capable of? Where did the boundary lie between what they could and couldn't handle, magic-wise? She needed to know that before anything.

This is such a pain. Why did it turn out like this...?

She could whine about it all she wanted, but she knew full well that she had done this to herself.

As military adviser, she had one other important role: casting the deciding vote on the party's actions. This was its own barrel of monkeys, one that required far more work than she'd anticipated.

Whenever regular reports came in via the communication crystals installed in each village, the team's main officers would congregate and work out their future direction. Mjurran was among them, but something about these meetings—likely the lack of intelligence among the men, she guessed—made them drag on forever without any resolution. It sorely tried her patience. They passed out these incredibly valuable magic items to all these settlements, and now they were wasting time quibbling over the silliest things thanks to them? She spoke up about all this waste, and once again, she sealed her own fate with it.

Now she was giving orders to each individual platoon, making arrangements for them and reporting directly to Yohm about them. It was all her. She didn't understand why they were giving so much responsibility to someone brand-new to the squad, but given the lack of other qualified candidates, it was like they had just been waiting to spring all this on someone like her.

The only real decent-minded person among them was Rommel.

“Man, Mjurran, I don’t know what we could’ve done without you!”

Receiving such heartfelt thanks made it tough for Mjurran to disappoint him. *Imagine, she thought, trusting a magic-born like me... I can't believe what a pushover I am!* But she never said it.

He had apparently been hired right from the magic academy by the local earl, who had tapped him to serve as his personal conjurer. He had essentially no battle experience, making it hard for him to be decisive on many matters. Until Mjurran came along, every day was a long trial-and-error process for him.

Rommel *did* seem to have a good head on his shoulders, though. She could practically feel him maturing as she taught him. For now, her main mission was to get Rommel

up to snuff as quickly as possible so he could take her place for a change.

Once they decided on a plan of action, the team had to carry it out. They went around the villages in their territory, in order of priority, and dispatched the monsters that appeared. It was her job to juggle the adventurers stationed in each area and keep the whole operation purring.

Why do I even have to do this? This is ridiculous...

She thought she had a legitimate complaint, but as long as she had that mission to infiltrate the monsters' country, she couldn't quit in a huff yet. The whole plan was starting to seem like a failure, but she couldn't bail on it now.

Through it all, days passed on as Mjurran firmed up her position on Yohm's team. Defeating monsters, saving villages...

...This is wrong. It's got to stop somewhere.

But even as she whined to herself about it, she also felt oddly fulfilled. Dealing with people for the first time in ages, recalling emotions she thought she'd forgotten about. And then, finally, mercifully, the group found the opportunity to head back to Tempest.



The magic-born Gruecith was joining them as a guest in their battle training.

“Argh... Boy, that old coot sure isn’t letting up today, either!”

“G-Gobta... Is that demon, er, is Sir Hakuro like this every time...?”

It astonished Gruecith, covered in welts and bruises from head to toe. Gobta, his hobgoblin companion, didn’t look much better.

“Oh, you bet he is. No joking!”

Gobta wouldn’t dare say that in front of the teacher himself. Gruecith firmly agreed, but he bit his tongue so as not to sound ungrateful. It saved the day for him.

“Ohhh? By ‘old coot,’ you wouldn’t happen to be referring to me, would you?”

"Gahhh!! M-Master, why are you—?"

"Silence, you insolent oaf! It'll plainly be at *least* a hundred years before I let you call yourself a disciple of mine!"

They'd both thought he was gone, but there he was, completely concealing his presence until the last minute. His wooden practice sword swung down, faster than Gruecith could follow with his eyes, and smacked right against the crown of Gobta's head. He was out cold in an instant, eyeballs lolling around the backs of their sockets. Gruecith watched piteously as Hakuro then dragged him off, no doubt for yet more "instruction." All he could do was pray for his friend's safety.

He was here in Tempest on orders from Phobio, one of the Three Lycanthropeers, to live in this nation and observe its people. Rimuru, its leader, was away from the land for the moment, but he had already given his full permission for Gruecith to be there. It was hard for him to believe the leader of Tempest was traveling the world solo, but none of his subjects had any objection to it, so he did not press for an explanation.

Right now, his priorities were pointed more toward using this opportunity to gain as much knowledge and experience as he possibly could. Along those lines, he was joining in every training session Hakuro offered him. This was per the invitation of Yohm, the first human friend he'd ever had; Gruecith hadn't expected it to be so grueling at the time, but *this* session was different. The training Hakuro gave when only native Tempestians were in attendance was like nothing he had seen from him before.

This is incredible, he marveled. He was going easy up to now just so Yohm and the humans wouldn't be ripped apart!

Yohm's training involved a rundown of the basics with a bit of skill training mixed in, but the session they just wrapped up was almost all core foundational stuff. "Don't expect me to teach any Arts to a bunch of weak-hearted sissies like you!" Hakuro bellowed as he bashed his pupils to bits with his practice sword in battle (Gruecith included). "You'll have to seize them from me by force! Watch with your eyes, and stake your very lives upon learning them yourselves!"

Gruecith was at least somewhat confident in his skills when he'd joined in. Now, he wasn't. The results were clear as day. Hakuro closed the distance between them in an

eyeblink, slashing away faster than he could follow. Hence all the bruises on his body.

I might've died if that sword wasn't wooden... And how could a wooden sword be so damaging to me, even?!

He was a lycanthrope and therefore gifted with natural healing abilities, but dull pain radiated from everywhere he took a blow. It was some unknown-to-him Art, perhaps, that drilled into him and made the damage cut deeper.

They had put it in different ways, but Gruecith and Gobta agreed: Hakuro was a demon beyond all comprehension. *Maybe* he could have survived against him for a few moments longer than the other hobgoblins. Now, though, all confidence he had in his own strength was shot.

Gruecith had taken an interest in the creatures who served under Gobta, the hobgoblins who rode the starwolves—themselves a rare evolution to see. They were called goblin riders, and they were responsible for security around town. Hakuro trained them, focusing primarily on team-oriented strategy, and they functioned as a single cohesive unit—well honed, well practiced, and moving flawlessly. *If I had to tangle with them, he thought, five would likely be the most I could handle.*

He hoped to invite them to the Beast Kingdom someday, as impossible as he imagined that was. Judging by the residents around town, he knew there was almost no chance they would leave their posts.

The land of Tempest was filled with warriors whose hardiness went far beyond Gruecith's imagination. He might have been complaining about it the whole time, but Gobta, his partner in training, was keeping up with every step Hakuro the ogre mage took. That in itself made him formidable. And he was hardly alone. Rigur, head of the security patrol, was even stronger than Gobta. The dragonewts Gruecith occasionally caught sight of seemed just as daunting to him. He had spotted several powered-up high orcs among the ones who served as Tempest's combat engineers. One among them, named Geld, even looked and acted every bit like a reincarnation of an orc lord. Taking *that* guy on, Gruecith gave himself a fifty-fifty chance. It was his battle to lose.

Last but not least came the ogre mages. Approach one, and their strength was obvious. In his own mind, Gruecith figured he could defeat Kurobe the blacksmith and Shuna, that fetching young lass. Beyond that, he had no confidence at all. The other four ogre

mages, his instincts told him, he couldn't even scratch.

Gruecith might have been on the low end of the Beast Master's Warrior Alliance totem pole, but even he could tell there was something unnatural about this. His instincts on that score—judging by the thrashing Hakuro just gave him—were right.

What in the hell? This entire town is sheer madness! I mean, they could even take on my homeland in battle, couldn't they?!

He had to breathe a sigh of relief. His master, the demon lord Carillon, was absolutely right not to challenge Tempest to war.

*

Yohm's team returned to town a few days later.

“Hey. Doing well?”

Gruecith smiled back at Yohm. “I am. Glad to see you are, too.” But what struck his interest the most was the beautiful woman among them. “So, who is that?”

“Oh? I didn’t think magic-born like you cared about women.”

“Don’t be stupid! All magic-born aren’t the same, you know. Lycanthropes like us are closer to demi-humans than full-on magic-born. It’s not uncommon for some of us to mate with humans and produce offspring, too.”

“Really, now? Well, here’s a word of advice for you: Don’t you dare cross that woman. I did, and lemme tell ya, I paid dearly for it.”

“What? Of all the ridiculous things to say...!”

This threw Gruecith. Yohm the champion, defeated by a woman who couldn’t look more out of place on a battlefield? It was a difficult story to swallow.

“Would *you* like to try your luck, then?”

“Ha! I like that! No point trying too hard for this one. Let me at her!”

Gruecith’s behavior was fairly easy to predict. A challenge like *that*, he’d never turn down.

So they traveled to the usual training ground, and Yohm brought with him the woman—his new military adviser, apparently.

“Why do I have to go through with this charade?” she asked, looking seriously reluctant.

“Oh, it’s nothing big, Mjurran. I just want you to show this guy how strong you are.”

“Yes, and I told you, I don’t see why I have to.”

“There’s a good reason for it! He’s already put you down. I *hate* it when people put my team down!”

Gruecith gave Yohm an exasperated look as he sized up the woman. *Hmm. Mjurran’s her name? She sure is a sight to see. But why’s that bastard Yohm trying to trick me?* There was a kind, gentle air about her. *Strong* wouldn’t describe it at all. He couldn’t believe the thought of her defeating Yohm.

After a few more pleas to his cohort, Yohm at last turned toward Gruecith and smiled.

“Heh-heh! I finally convinced her. Gruecith, if you can beat this lady, I promise I’ll serve as your lackey forever. But if she beats you... you’ll have to be my gofer!”

“What?! What kind of nonsense are you spouting *now*?”

“Oh, don’t like your chances?”

“...You think so? Well, you’re on. You’re gonna be the one calling *me* ‘boss’ in a few moments!”

He accepted the bait all too quickly.

“Listen,” interrupted Mjurran, “you’re probably looking down on me because I’m a woman, aren’t you? It feels ridiculous being the subject of a bet like this, but I’ll be happy to spar with you. But let me warn you: I’m a wizard, so I hope you’ll fight me appropriately!”

“A wizard, eh? You sure you should be giving me so many details before combat even begins? Of course, with *that* getup, it’s pretty easy to picture you as a conjurer.”

The term *wizard* referred to those adept in at least three different systems of magic. It implied talent in these dark arts far greater than your run-of-the-mill sorcerer or mysticist. The magic they wielded was as diverse as it was powerful—several times more so, it was said, than the attack magic of a typical conjurer. What Mjurran had just said, in effect, was that she was a well-seasoned, battle-tested magic expert.

Gruecith got the hint—and it made him respect her more. But he still didn't take any special precautions. A higher-level magic-born like him had intrinsic magic resistance, and as long as limbs weren't flying off him, his Self-Regeneration skill could heal most wounds. Anything short of lethal magic could be safely ignored.

Plus, he thought, if she can cast magic powerful enough to kill me in one stroke, she'll need a vast amount of time to chant the spell. Conjurers like her leave themselves wide open—I can just finish her off then.

It was the exact same thought process Yohm had gone through back in the day. The results were similarly predictable.

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“Baaahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha! Woudja look at that!”

Gruecith found himself bitterly looking upward as Yohm held his stomach and laughed for a good long while.

Damn it...!! How's this even happening?!

His cheeks were red with embarrassment, not half because he was buried up to chest level in the ground. It took a lot to keep from crying.

“I know I probably should have begun with this,” he told Mjurran a bit later, “but my name is Gruecith. Perhaps it did not show very much earlier, but I am a lycanthrope and upper-level magic-born. And by that, I don’t intend to suggest I could have won if I transformed, let me assure you.”

They exchanged a few pleasantries with each other—pleasantries filled with sarcasm and excuses, although it would've sounded innocent enough to the impartial observer.

“Well, you two keep gettin’ along, all right? So, Gruecith, about the promise earlier?”

“Mm? Ah. Right. Yohm, from now on, I promise I will call you ‘boss.’ The demon lord Carillon is the only master I will ever truly devote myself to, but I see no reason not to show respect to someone I view as above me.”

“You sure about that? ’Cause I really meant it more as a joke to motivate you than anything...”

“It’s fine; it’s fine. But if I may be honest, if Lord Carillon ordered me to kill you, I would not hesitate for a single moment. My apologies, but that is how the rules operate between us.”

“Fair enough. I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

At least Gruecith was honest as he lived up to his end of Yohm’s bet. He had to appreciate the lycanthrope’s devotion to his promises.

“In that case, I’m going to join your band as well. I’m pretty used to things around town by now, and I’d like to see some other human nations while I’m at it.”

“You sure ’bout that?”



"I am." Gruecith laughed as he pulled himself out of the hole in the ground, grinning. "My job here is to explore the world. I'm allowed to do whatever I wish until ordered otherwise."



But now someone was stealthily approaching them.

It was none other than Gobta.

Hee-hee-hee... I saw them. If she can do that...

He was plotting and planning as he interrupted the pleasant atmosphere surrounding the group. "I saw that battle just now! What a marvel! I am *astounded*. I simply fell in love with that lady's moves, I did! And that's why I hope I can ask a favor of her."

He smiled eerily. Yohm and Gruecith both knew him well enough to grasp what this meant. He was scheming something again. Mjurran, on the other hand, raised a quizzical eyebrow at him.

"Ah, Mjurran, this is Gobta. He's... um, well, you could say he's a force all his own around here."

"Hee-hee-hee! No, I'm really not."

"No, seriously, Gobta here's a real performer," volunteered Gruecith. "He let that demon instructor beat the daylights out of him just now, but he always comes back for more."

"Ooh yeah, that was rough earlier..."

Gobta modestly turned away a bit before remembering what he was here for. His face stiffened.

"So, um, there's someone I'd like you to defeat, lady, using that same tactic. That demon—um, I mean, that old coot, um, I mean our *sage instructor* always goes around acting like he's king of the world, y'see? So—"

Yohm and Gruecith nodded their recognition. Gobta lowered his voice, looking around in case anyone was eavesdropping.

"I'll help you with this, Mjurran. If we can beat him, that'll force him to treat us with *some* respect, at least. Besides, I'd *love* to see how the guy'd react to that."

"Indeed," Gruecith agreed, "it is an excellent strategy. Even an ogre mage would be helpless!"

So Mjurran, outnumbered three to one, reluctantly agreed to the request. "But can we make this the last time, please?" she begged. "Something that simple isn't guaranteed to work every time."

"Oh, it'll be fine! The old man's a swordsman, fighting at close ranges. He prides himself on his speed. He's *got* to fall for it!"

"Yeah! He acts like he's *sooo* superior to us hobgoblins, so I wanna make him pay for it for a change!"

"It was enough to trick even me, after all. A close-range battle, reliant on quick footwork like that, would be much harder if the trap was sprung in the right place."

That trick worked, Mjurran said to herself, *because you're too simpleminded to spot it.* *It can't put up with that much heavy use.*

"But," she pleaded, "what pretext should I challenge him with?"

"Hmm... Any excuse should do," ventured Gobta. "Just tell him you want more instruction on dealing with magic-castin' foes."

"So this should be a scrimmage, then, not a real battle?"

"That's fine, isn't it? It'll just be one strike. Tell him whoever hits first wins, and I'm sure he'll be fine with it."

"Indeed, Yohm. Magic resistance plays no part in those rules—land a spell upon him, and you win. If he touches you first, he wins. A test of speed, you could say."

"...Um, do you really think I'll be willing to accept those rules? That puts conjurers at an enormous disadvantage. How can someone like that compete in speed with a swordsman who's clearly faster than they are?"

"...Ooh yeah," Gobta admitted.

"Accepting restrictions on your own abilities when you don't know what your opponent's capable of is like signing your own death certificate." Mjurran sighed.

To her, serious-minded at heart, Gobta's poorly thought-out ideas were enough to give her a headache. Suggesting rules like that was all but advising her foe to expect a trap of some sort. All the men here were too boneheaded to pick up on that.

"All right," said Yohm. "So Mjurran doesn't fight. We just want 'im to accept that you're good with magic, y'know? So since Gobta suggested this first, maybe we can use him as bait."

"A fine idea. He would certainly accept a challenge from the hobgoblin."

Gobta began to dislike the direction this was going. "H-hold on a second!" he barked. Yohm and Gruecith were too busy working out the plan to listen. It'd be hard to bow out at this point. Having Mjurran fight for him seemed like it'd bear positive results, but if it was *his* neck on the line, that gave him pause.

Oh no... If I mess this up, I'll be in big trouble, won't I? I guess I'll have to help think up a more serious plan...

"All right, guys. I have an idea. First, I challenge him to battle. When I do, I want you to put pitfalls in a big circle around us!"

"From that distance, a safer bet would be to liquefy the soil and keep him from moving."

"How will that work?"

Mjurran liquefied a small patch next to her to demonstrate the process to Gobta. He took a step, then marveled as his foot went right in with a *ploop*, resisting his efforts to pull it out.

"Ooh, *this* oughtta work!"

That was the end of their deliberations.

"Right," Mjurran said. "So my role here is to wait for the battle-start signal and transform the earth. Is that it?"

"Right you are!" Gobta beamed.

Now they just had to pull it off.

.....

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...

"So will I receive an explanation for this?"

Gobta, Yohm, and Gruecith had been made to kneel on the bare ground. Mjurran stepped up to join them, but Hakuro shooed her off with a wave and a grandfatherly smile. "You are fine," he said. "I'm sure these fools before me instigated it, did they not?"

"But I couldn't just—"

"Oh, think nothing of it. They got caught in your trap, so they reasoned that it'd have to work on me as well, no? It was an impressive spell, but their eyes telegraphed it from the start."

Mjurran sighed. She'd seen it coming the whole time, too.

After settling on their plan, the group had called their teacher, the elder Hakuro. That much, at least, went well enough. One look at the man was enough to make Mjurran recall that he split a megalodon in half with a single swipe. Between his foreboding demeanor and the sheer sense of presence, she already predicted doom for this silly prank. Had this been a no-holds-barred battle, she would have immediately suggested a hasty retreat—but this was just a game, and she reasoned that being defeated would help her cohorts mature a bit.

It's not going to work, I'm sure, but it might be a good idea to see for myself how this Hakuro character fights.

So she agreed to join in.

"Excellent!" Hakuro bellowed when asked. "That's the spirit, lads! I will base it on real

battle situations for the first time in a while. All three of you, take me on at once! And will the new woman be joining us? She seems to be a magic-user, yes?"

"Whoa, you old—I mean, *sage* master! Don't count us out too early!"

"Listen to the hobgoblin, sir. Ya sure you aren't being a little too confident for your own good?"

"Heh-heh-heh! As your guest, I thought it rude to horn in too much on the fun... but after what you just said, I suppose I'll *have* to go all in, won't I?"

The sight of the entire trio latching on to Hakuro's goading made Mjurran modify a key part of her prediction. *This was doomed even before the battle began. I have much to teach them after this...*

Despite her complaining, she was used to being Yohm's military adviser—really, *anything* adviser at this point. She was as strong and responsibly minded as ever, and she opted to just smile and treat this as a learning opportunity for her group.

Once things began unfolding, the match turned out just as wretched as she predicted. Liquefying the ground around him did nothing to slow Hakuro down.

"Geh! Why's he moving like normal?!"

Mjurran had laid out her magic in a circle around the area, dispelling it just enough to create a path for the panicking Gobta to escape through. As she did, she defined a position for her pitfall and set it in place. Hakuro acted like it wasn't there, as if running on thin air.

Ahh, he must have noticed. But nothing would change if he didn't. That looks a lot like Instantmove to me.

That was one of the more difficult skills in the arsenal of Battlewill, a set of Arts that only the most talented could ever hope to master. Seeing it unleashed so effortlessly made Mjurran fully aware of just how pointless her tricks were.

"Tch! Over here, old man!"

But Yohm pressed on, revealing his position with a shout as he slashed at his foe. He was being read like a book. Gobta, to his credit, tried to tumble his way back to safety.

He was rewarded with a wooden sword to the forehead.

"Not again..." He groaned as he sunk into the ground. Yohm joined him shortly—not to rescue him, exactly, but the real reason didn't matter much anymore. Hakuro was just too fast. Before Yohm could even stick the follow-through, Gobta was down and Hakuro was behind him.

"Whoa?! I didn't even see—"

"Fools."

One strike later, Yohm was down.

If the liquefaction trick didn't work, the original idea called for Yohm and Gobta to distract their foe while Gruecith snuck in a surprise attack. That proved a similar waste of time. Before Gruecith even realized what Yohm wanted him to do, Hakuro had defeated both his teammates.

And, in the midst of all this, Mjurran looked on at this beautiful demonstration of athletic ability. It required Magic Sense; the naked eye couldn't keep up fast enough to let her understand what was going on. And she wasn't *just* looking. She had the spell cast in advance to keep her magic-born roots a secret.

Still... If you're going to challenge a foe who requires Magic Sense just to keep your eyes on him, the only thing that'd work is ranged magic covering a wider area. That wasn't available here, so this was over before it began.

Really, *any* magic that required casting time wouldn't do a thing against a target coursing at supersonic speed. For a wizard, tackling a foe like that would require racking several spells in advance, chanting them beforehand so they could be summoned with a deftly woven trigger during battle. That, or using Cast Cancel.

But even if I used Cast Cancel on my own, it'd only work up to midlevel magic. Any serious attempt might be doomed to fail...

Mjurran's body contained more of the magicules that provided energy for all her spells, but trying to outclass him in strength seemed like a struggle to her. The sight of it all unfolding *did* make this nonsense seem worth it to her, though. Hakuro was targeting Gruecith, not the cautious Mjurran. Before neutralizing the magic-caster, he first wanted to defeat the biggest obstacle out of the group. In other words, Hakuro

didn't consider her magic to be an impediment.

A bit insulting, but so be it. Sir Hakuro could likely handle anything I could throw at him, here in my human form. I wish I could have hit him with something, though...

Following her pregame analysis, Mjurran had prepared three small explosive spells, meant to be triggered in a staggered arrangement. The first went off before Hakuro's eyes as he struck down Gruecith—not a lethal bomb but a blindness strike that plunged the two of them into darkness.

“Ngh?!”

It was enough to produce a surprised grunt from Hakuro. But he pressed right on, unwavering. Gruecith had a keen enough sense of smell that blindness wouldn't affect him in battle—that was the whole backbone behind this plan—but Hakuro didn't rely on that sense much, either.

So much for that. Can he read people's presences, or...?

Of course, Mjurran had guessed in advance that blindness wouldn't slow him. Without flinching, she launched her second magic. This was a Flashbang, a spell that created a flash of light and a deafening noise to paralyze the target's sight and hearing. It was one of her antihuman spells, effective in or out of doors, and she expected the blindness bomb would only accentuate the effect.

And again, she was right. Just before the magic took effect, she saw Hakuro edge backward for a brief moment in his darkness. He was within point-blank range of the light and noise, but he paid it no attention at all as he sprang back into action.

I knew it...! I suppose Hakuro knows Magic Sense as well...

The reaction to that Flashbang was something shown only by those who could read the flow of magic—the movements of magicules. The blast itself, too, had no impact on him whatsoever. Just like Mjurran, he based his decisions in battle off Magic Sense. That meant he could read all magic before it happened, and *that* meant Mjurran would've had to bust out the big guns immediately if she wanted to impact this fight at all.

Ignoring her and tackling Gruecith first was an extremely sensible decision. She had focused on keeping him safe from status ailments rather than trying to cast magic

directly herself, but Magic Sense made all that moot. The operation was upended at its very roots.

If anything, it hurt Mjurran's ego, seeing her magic be so dismissively tossed aside like that. *That was no fun*, she thought. *I was never too enthusiastic about this, but if he thinks he can pick on a wizard, let me show him what that costs!*

So she turned her eyes toward Gruecith—and then she lost all interest.

"Arrhhh! My—my eyes; my ears!!"

"What are you *doing*, you fool?!"

She could be excused for yelling at her comrade. That Flashbang had been pointed in a single direction. It shouldn't have affected Gruecith that badly. The idiot must have stared right at it. She *told* them all beforehand what magic she intended to use. She could conclude only that Gruecith was the kind of lycanthrope who, if you told him *not* to do something, would immediately try that out first.

Mjurran threw her arms up in surrender. *This is just ridiculous. I thought the way lycanthropes are so stupidly straightforward with people would make them easy to use. But it's the exact opposite, isn't it?*

"If that did nothing to you, then we have lost. I doubt Gruecith will make any further contributions to our cause."

"Ho-ho-ho! You are quick to read the tides of battle, my good lady—at least, much more than this rotten trio. So you will not use your final spell?"

"No. I doubt it would make any difference."

The final spell was Sleep Mist, her trump card. Putting Hakuro fully to sleep was likely impossible, but if she could slow his thought process *just* a bit as he locked swords with Gruecith, that would provide just the chip in the armor into which to potentially drive the sword of victory. Even if it didn't, Mjurran figured the surprise factor would throw off his game.

But the sight of Gruecith vaguely sort of floating atop the liquefied soil drained her will to continue. So she sighed and unraveled the spell.

“...Their eyes telegraphed it from the start.”

Mjurran rolled her eyes when he said it just now. All the prep work she'd done to ensure the magic could never be spotted, and Gobta and Gruecith had their eyes on the ground the whole time. *There you go, then*, she thought with a sigh. *It's all but opening your mouth and telling him, “Ohhh, hey, something's here.” Yohm was stout enough to resist the urge, at least, but he's only human. Nothing from him would work on Hakuro.*

“Ho-ho-ho! You may be a fine strategist, my lady, but without a keen insight into your allies' personalities, one can never hope for truly effective teamwork. No hastily put-together team could ever defeat me.”

Mjurran nodded at the condolences. “It's been a lesson for me, yes. I'd like to begin by examining them further in depth.”

“Mm. Yes. A good idea.” Hakuro nodded, then turned to his three kneeling opponents. “So may I suggest you answer me now? Before I decide to switch blades from wood to metal?”

The avuncular smile he'd given Mjurran was a thing of the past. Now he was back in full demonic form.

“Pah!”

“Whoa?! ”

“Waaaaait!”

Three hours later, they were still there, legs numb from all the kneeling. Hakuro was making them stay until he was *damn* sure they wouldn't pull any more malarkey like that. Mjurran gave them a passing glance as she returned to her bedroom, promising herself that she'd never join them on a “plan” like this again.



“Now, I say this just in case, mind you, but promise me you won't try to ‘test’ Sir Rimuru like that, please?”

“What’re you talking about?” Gobta pleaded to the rather concerned-looking Hakuro.
“No way any of that would work on Sir Rimuru!”

“...Oh? Because, to be honest with you, I think it might have more than an outside chance of working...”

“Ha-ha-ha! Come on, Gramps. Don’t you think you’re worrying too much? Someone like Rimuru, he’s not about to fall for a trick play!”

“Hopefully not,” Hakuro said. “If he did, we would all be in trouble.”

His three pupils shuddered at the thought.

“Y-yeah... We weren’t planning to, but definitely not *now*, no.”

“Gobta said it. He and that other girl, too. The violent one.”

“You mean Shion?” Gobta asked. “Or, wait, not Mili—”

“Whoa, stop right there, Gobta.”

The hobgoblin nodded at the panicked-looking Yohm. Gruecith failed to follow this conversation but understood well enough that he should stay out of it. A smart move, although he may not have realized it.

“All right,” Hakuro gravely intoned. “Soei is too prudent to fall for that, but Sir Rimuru and Sir Benimaru... They have their quirks, shall we say? Sir Rimuru seems to be restraining his Magic Sense, too, to some extent.”

“Why’s he doing that, sir?” asked Gobta.

“Who knows,” Yohm replied, looking at him. “I couldn’t even guess how that Magic Sense stuff works.”

“Well,” interjected Gruecith, “I certainly see why Lord Carillon accepted Rimuru as an equal. Placing limiters upon his own strengths like that... A constant, never-ending cycle of training!”

“Huh?!”

“Wow, is that it? Boy, Sir Rimuru sure is great!”

“Huh. Man, his mind works on a whole different plane from ours, eh?”

This, along with Hakuro’s later approval, led to a new fad around Tempest where monsters deliberately limited the release of their skills to better hone them. It had nothing to do with Rimuru, but if he were around, they hoped he would approve.

All that slogging through liquefied soil and getting rapped soundly by swords had made the three of them very muddy. It wasn’t long before they discussed entering the town’s famous bathing facilities together.

“Boy,” Gobta observed, “that lady sure knows how to use her magic. She’s pretty, too!”

“Yeah, ain’t she? And she’s got personality, too. It ain’t just looks.”

“I have no argument with that. Her name is Mjurran, right? It’d be nice if she could give birth to my child...”

“Whoa there, Gruecith. Ya can’t go talking like that. She’s one of my officers.”

“What does that have to do with anything, Yohm? When it comes to romance, I’m free to do whatever I want. First come, first served.”

“Wow, really? I’ll keep that in mind!”

“Don’t you start, Gobta!”

Gruecith snickered at the wailing Yohm. “Maybe I should talk to her myself, hmm?”

“Damn it, Gruecith, I go first! I’m your boss!”

“Are you crazy? I just told you: Romance is all about freedom!”

“Yeah, Yohm!”

It was turning into quite a heated argument by the time they reached the bathhouse. The moment they washed off and settled into the hot bath, Gobta’s eyes began to emit a sinister twinkle once more. “I just remembered Kabal said something to me when he

was here last," he began. "They say there are some baths in the world with a 'mixed gender' rule. He said Sir Rimuru told him about it... And, you know, Sir Rimuru's word is law, isn't it?"

"Hang on, Gobta. If that's an order from Rimuru himself, then we gotta make sure it's enforced, yeah?"

"Uh-huh! I think so, too!"

"What? Gobta, what do you speak of? Tell me more of this... mixed genders."

"Hee-hee-hee! You like it, too, huh, Gruecith? Well, it's like this..."

He went over the topic in detail, growing more excited with every syllable.

"So you mean... not only Mjurran but Lady Shuna and Shion as well...?"

"You gotta be kiddin' me, Gobta. I had no idea those were the rules around here!"

The pleasant sensation of the hot mountain-spring soak was putting the trio's minds at great ease. It also raised their voices high, their schemes echoing around the chamber.

Not all of it bounced back, however. Some of the sound waves wriggled their way right through the wall—and into the ears of Shuna and Shion, who had invited Mjurran to enjoy the women's bath with them.

"I wonder if we should develop a potion to banish the stupid from their minds?"

"Do not worry, Lady Shuna. I will beat it out of them until they cry for mercy and their willpower is retempered!"

"I'll be glad to help," Mjurran added.

Records, sadly, did not exist to say what happened to the men afterward.



"Mjurran, can we have a talk?"

Several weeks had passed, enough time for Mjurran to get fully used to life with Yohm and his crew, when her leader spoke to her.

“Certainly. What about?”

“Not... *here*, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh?”

That struck her as odd, but not queer enough to turn down his request. She followed Yohm out of town and toward a deserted patch of forest.

Hmm? Uh-oh. Did he find out who I am? I don’t sense any traps or ambushes up ahead...

The rest of Yohm’s team was still garrisoned in town; Mjurran knew all their exact positions. She didn’t much like the look Yohm had exchanged with Gruecith when he called her to him, but it still seemed like her cover was safe.

So what is it, then...?

She remained baffled right up to the entrance into Forest of Jura land.

“Have we walked enough, then? What is—?”

“Mjurran!”

The interruption made warning flags shoot up in her mind. *No! Really?! So had he found out after all? Had he told anyone else yet? Or was Yohm the only one to ferret her out so far? Either way, she had to come up with urgent countermeasures before—*

“I love you! I swear: I fell in love with you the first time my eyes met yours!”

Her mind stopped.

...What?! What did he say?

“Huh?”

Assorted questions popped in and out of her mind, but that was the only response she could muster. Simply returning Yohm’s gaze took all her mental fortitude.

Looking back, Mjurran *had* always felt a pair of eyes upon her. It was true ever since she'd infiltrated his force. It belonged to Yohm, and when their eyes met, she found herself averting hers out of awkwardness several times. It made her a tad nervous, perhaps wondering why he was so watchful of her. But maybe her misgivings were really about something else entirely.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. I promise I'll make you a happy woman. I promise!"

The sheer frankness of the confession made Mjurran's cheeks flush. The last time she was (chronologically) a young woman, it was a good seven centuries ago. Her memories of it were vague at best. No memories of anyone else back then. To her, romance was a completely novel experience. Unexplored land.

Anxiety won out over happiness in her head. That, and:

...He'll make me a happy woman? The demon lord Clayman's used Marionette Heart to make me his personal puppet. If I can't get my real heart back, I can never be free—and there's no way to do that. And how could a human ever love me? They all die far too quickly...

So she opted to delay her response. The logical part of her brain told her to say no and get on with life, but somehow, she didn't quite have the courage for that. Four hundred years of life as a magic-born, and it was the first time she had ever felt so anxious about herself.

Even after the confession, life went on as usual.

Yohm was usually fairly shallow personality-wise, but—perhaps out of respect for her feelings—he made no further advance upon Mjurran. The feeling was no doubt mutual. Whether circulating around villages on monster hunts or relaxing back at town, Yohm showed concern for her, but he never did anything to squeeze a reply out of her.

I... What should I even do? As long as Clayman lives and breathes, there's no way his dream could ever come true...

Somewhere along the line, Mjurran began to have daydreams of herself more closely

united with Yohm. The logical part of her brain denied it could ever be a possibility, but she just couldn't bring herself to abandon the thought. Her mind gradually began to open itself to it, enthralling her so deeply that she didn't even notice Gruecith staring at her, a troubled, lonely expression on his face.

Life was good—and now, within a week's time, it would be destroyed.

*

"It has been a while, Mjurran. Are you doing well?"

The magical communiqué from Clayman arrived out of the blue. It made her panic a bit.

"L-Lord Clayman! What motivates you to contact me?"

To her, Clayman was unworthy of her loyalty. If she could, she'd murder him in his sleep. She didn't because it was so obvious to both parties that she'd fail.

The last time she'd reported back to him, Clayman had been in oddly high spirits. The same was true this time. Mjurran's instincts sounded the alarm. It creeped her out. Clayman almost never showed emotion to his underlings—if he was so obviously enjoying himself now, things must be going exactly the way he wanted. It did not seem like good news to her—and it wasn't.

"Thanks to the intel you provided me," Clayman told the cautious Mjurran, "things are going quite well over here. You've done a superb job. Why, I'm even starting to think it's time to return this heart in my hand and set you free."

Mjurran paused, confused at the proposal. For just a moment, Yohm's face appeared in her mind. She could feel her spirit leap with excitement, but she still managed to keep her voice calm. Clayman must never learn of her true feelings. He was a demon lord, a devious Marionette Master perfectly willing to deceive his own servants.

"Thank you very much, sir. This sudden suggestion is quite a surprise to me. Does this mean you no longer require my services?"

"Haaa-ha-ha-ha! Ah, you never change, Mjurran. There is hardly any need for such modesty. Why would I ever want to do away with such a talented pawn? I do hope

you'll still be able to serve a role for me, yes."

"I see. I am glad to hear—"

"Mjurran," the demon lord quietly interjected before she could finish her wary answer. "There is no need for alarm. I simply want you to perform one final piece of work for me. You won't turn me down, will you? I'm sure you aren't ready to die yet, and I'm sure you don't want to see the man you love die before your eyes!"

She could feel the blood drain from her head.

"I—I have no love for...?!"

"For any man, is it? You give me far too little credit, Mjurran. All you have to do is follow my orders, and everything will be fine. I showed you the sweet dream of release there; I wouldn't mind a little appreciation for that. Just sit tight until I provide your orders, if you could?"

Then he shut off the link.

Mjurran, sadly, had nothing to counter with. No matter how unhappy it made her or anyone else, the only road to salvation was to serve him. The only thing that remained in her heart was the demon lord's final words: "When it is all over, I will release you. Your dream of living with the man you love may not be a dream before long."

Was this a trap?

—No, it had to be one. But all Mjurran could do was trust in his words. If she ever doubted them, it'd lead to potential tragedy for both Yohm and her. Far better for her to just do what Clayman said and hope for another passing whim in her favor.

Just as it always was, the only option available for Mjurran was to wait for her orders. But if it really *did* lead to her release—

Could I ever really accept him?

She had to explore the thought, no matter how much she knew it was unforgivable.

If this dream can come true, it'll likely mean selling my soul to the devil.

It was settled. Mjurran was resolute now. And then, as if nothing had just happened, she was back in action.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
2

PRELUDE TO CALAMITY

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PRELUDE TO CALAMITY

King Edmaris of Farmus winced at the report he was just handed. He had reason to. His kingdom's situation had just faced dramatic changes for the worse.

It all began when the seal placed on Veldora, the Storm Dragon, vanished from the Forest of Jura. It led to a flurry of requests for monetary and military support from Earl Nidol Migam and the many other nobles with parcels of territory out in the hinterlands. It wasn't a problem the nation could afford to ignore. Edmaris had ordered measures to be taken at once—but instead of providing what the nobility hoped for, he sought instead to further entrench his authority.

"I suggest that we could lay waste to the monsters only after they ravage one or two of our frontier provinces."

"That would certainly help prove the battle might of our Knight Corps, yes."

"Heh-heh-heh... Sacrificing a few of those yappy little Free Guild men won't hurt our budget at all. You can't pay a creditor if he ceases to exist."

"Very true, very true. And what better stage could we set to boost your political strength, Your Highness?"

The losses had been factored into the equation, as it were.

It was the job of a king to guarantee the safety of those who swore loyalty to him and followed his will in protecting their province. King Edmaris believed this. But there was no need to save the likes of Nidol Migam, some greedy knave more preoccupied with filling his own pockets than serving his people. Things *had* changed dramatically, yes, but Migam had failed to prepare for the future, and this was what he deserved for it.

An act like this may temporarily hurt Farmus's reputation in other lands, but once their knights proved themselves in combat, it would be a wash. Instead of trying to

keep the entire country safe, it was both cheaper and safer to attack only when attacked first. The outer provinces were a shield that protected the Farmus homeland. They were useful tools, easily replaceable if lost. And there was no need to risk one's neck trying to save a set of tools.

Still...

To Farmus's central government, which had fully prepared for a monster attack, there was something of a disappointment. A single champion, Yohm, had disrupted the entire plan. This man, rising up from the common people to form his own band, had gone so far as to defeat an orc lord and its entire force—so the rumors had it. And monster-based losses *had* been down from the usual rate so far this year. The king had no word about Veldora's disappearance causing the monsters to grow unrulier—if anything, it seemed to be the opposite. That, as well, made the story of this new champion more believable.

“A champion? Ridiculous.”

“Unbelievable. But the Free Guild said that an orc lord had appeared. Perhaps it is not *entirely* untrue.”

“Indeed. They might not have been a full-fledged force yet, but a brand-new orc lord would have several hundred orc soldiers serving it, perhaps. That would still be enough of a threat to the borderlands, but—”

“Ha! This is pointless. If that's all it is, I could wipe them out myself! And now this man goes around calling himself a champion...”

The core of the government—the advisers King Edmaris put the weight of his trust upon—had come to a conclusion.

“Well, if it means a threat has been eliminated, then very well. A pity it means our royal knights can't have their day in the sun, though.”

Folgen, head of the Knight Corps, looked less than happy with the chief royal sorcerer Razen's statement. For now, though, the topic was settled. He could tell well enough that Razen was simply telling the truth. There was no need to sally into battle just for the fun of it—an opinion King Edmaris seemed to accept.

The next issue to tackle, however, wasn't one they could afford to watch and wait on. Their tax revenues were falling.

Usually, figuring out the state of the national treasury required careful analysis over at least several years. Here, though, the downward trend was both looming and blindingly obvious over the previous fiscal cycle. Month after month, the figures spoke volumes. After a certain point in time, trade-based revenue simply fell through the floor.

The Kingdom of Farmus, thanks to its geographical location, had a hand in almost every international exchange with the Dwarven Kingdom. It was part of why it served as the front gate, so to speak, for the Western Nations. They had the strength of direct trade with the kingdom; no need for dangerous sea or land routes. The high taxes they levied on the goods they imported from there and sold elsewhere provided enormous profits for them.

But then, one day, the number of adventurers passing into the nation started to dwindle. Previously, Farmus had been rather bustling with adventurers, all bringing a tidy amount of cash to purchase Dwargon-made weapons and armor. The potions Farmus could provide literally saved lives; adventurers could never have enough of them.

After a while, though, the number of itinerant merchants fell alongside the adventurers. They were seeing similar crowds of them from the direction of Englesia still, but the flow from Blumund and other nations neighboring Jura provided far more profit to them—with the lack of any other competition, Farmus was able to sell potions to these merchants at practically usurious prices. And now those people were gone. With all these foreign visitors suddenly disappearing, of course, it didn't take long for the inns and taverns that served them to suffer.

The numbers were clear as day on paper within a month, so the economy minister hurriedly ordered his department to find the cause. The report that came back was enough to shock the entire cabinet.

"A new town has been established in the Forest of Jura—a town inhabited by monsters."

The news, provided by a spy sent into the forest, made King Edmaris whisper "It can't

be" the moment he laid eyes upon it. But he remained composed. He was the ruler of a nation, and he needed to project his authority as king.

I cannot believe it... but I must. The most important thing is: How will I connect this to our own profit?

His outstanding intellect pointed itself toward the future.



Before long, Edmaris ordered an emergency meeting among all the provincial lords of his kingdom.

"But, my lord, the merchants are keenly aware of their own self-interests. They are already traveling to this land of monsters, avoiding Farmus entirely."

"It is said the nation provides a safe route all the way to the Dwarven Kingdom..."

"I heard the same. They have these 'stations,' I hear—small guardhouses located every dozen miles or so, each with sentry monsters assigned to them..."

"It is a difficult tale to swallow, but several trustworthy merchants have confirmed it. If a traveler is attacked in the midst of their journey, they can apparently launch these flares provided to them in town to signal the monsters. Help arrives in five minutes or less."

"What?!"

The ministers and nobility called to the conference seemed ready to leap right out of their chairs as they exchanged the stories. Wild, seemingly unbelievable tales flew out of their mouths. None of them could hide their shock.

The Forest of Jura was teeming with monsters. Thanks to its vast size, only low-threat creatures lived in the borderlands near human civilization. But that wasn't always the case. You saw the odd B-ranked (or above) monster from time to time. The very idea of building a town smack-dab in the middle of this chaos—and even building links to it from Blumund to Dwargon? How much money, and how much military power, would that take? No one at the conference could begin to imagine. Even outside the forest, they had to expend a hefty chunk of tax revenue defending the border villages and towns. They were the nation's shield, but every shield needed the occasional upkeep.

And *monsters* lived in this town? That was unheard of.

The nation was apparently led by one calling itself the head of the Forest of Jura. It did not, however, call itself a demon lord; it even wanted to build friendly relationships with human nations. A monster building a nation-state. It was crazy talk.

King Edmaris raised a hand to silence the room, turning an eye toward one of his ministers.

“The nation,” he said upon the king’s order, “is known as the ‘Jura-Tempest Federation.’ The merchants refer to it simply as ‘Tempest.’ It is led by Rimuru Tempest, a slime who has apparently—”

“A what?! Are you kidding me?!”

The minister was cut off by a young man with dark hair and dark eyes who stormed up to his feet. Not a single minister or nobleman would dare to exhibit such rudeness before the king—but this man lived in a realm where politeness didn’t pay the bills. If anything, he was in a position to be forgiven for such outbursts.

He was, in other words, a champion of Farmus. An otherworlder. Thus, nobody took offense at his outburst—or, to be more exact, they didn’t voice any complaints if they did. Some of the more powerful nobles clearly looked down on him, but nobody needed the facts spelled out for them. Publicly revealing any enmity would put a dent in one’s own profits.

This was a human weapon, one of the people summoned by Farmus’s triennial “summon ceremonies” and a man gifted in battle skills. His name was Shogo Taguchi, a twenty-year-old Japanese man.

“Enough, Shogo,” chided Chief Sorcerer Razen. “Hear out the report to the end.”

“But a *slime*? That’s the lowest of the low. How can some vermin like that become lord of the entire forest? Or—what, is the forest *that* full of wimps? Are you guys training me day in, day out just to swat a bunch of pathetic little monsters?!”

As part of this “training,” Shogo had managed to seriously injure ten or so of Farmus’s most elite knights just yesterday. Razen smiled bitterly as he recalled the events. This young man, Shogo, undoubtedly wielded tremendous power—but his heart, his mind were too raw and immature to bear it. It had been three years since he was summoned

at the age of seventeen, and in Razen's eyes, his ferocity had risen by the day ever since. If he weren't being subdued by the controlling magic placed upon him during the summon, he'd be a bomb big enough to raze an entire nation. Lucky for Farmus, then, that the controlling magic was absolute in its force.

"I said, *silence*."

"Geh."

Shogo returned to his seat, humbly following Razen's trigger word. Anger still burned in his eyes, but Razen was too dignified in his role as head magician to pay it any heed.

"Sir Razen," a clear voice rang out, "I feel Shogo does not mean any ill will. In our world, slimes are notorious for being about the easiest monster there is to kill—well, it depends on the game, actually, but either way."

"Ah, Kyoya. If you are in attendance, please help us keep Shogo on his best behavior. We are sharing a room with His Highness. Do not place further shame upon me!"

The man called Kyoya was another otherworlder summoned from Japan. His full name was Kyoya Tachibana, and he had been brought here after being summoned into a small nation a ways from Farmus. This made him the newest face among the kingdom's otherworlders, and now he shrugged in a show of allegiance and glanced at Shogo. The other young man nodded, fell silent, and turned to hear the conversation. Razen, seeing this, asked the minister to continue.

This town called Tempest was apparently home to a large number of monsters evolved from goblins, orcs, and so on.

In the self-declared neutral Dwarven Kingdom, it wasn't uncommon to see creatures like hobgoblins, orcs, and kobolds, but that was the exception that proved the rule. An entire settlement of evolved monsters was something far beyond the realm of common sense for them all.

Occasionally, every few years, you'd see the leader of a pack or herd spontaneously evolve into a higher-level creature. Whenever one was found, they were largely hunted down at once before they grew any more powerful. In human eyes, the way Dwargon freely associated with such beasts was virtually heretical.

Here, meanwhile, *every* townsperson was evolved. You likely wouldn't see anything similar in history, no matter how many centuries you turned back the clock. But there was no doubting their spy's report.

With that in mind, suppressing this upstart federation would be everyone's likely first instinct... but it wouldn't be so easy this time. These were monsters with demi-human traits; they had access to knowledge and technology, clearing out the forests, building highways, and even using human language to conduct business. That, and the rumors of that "station" system along the road—another spy report. Each one was officially called a "substation," manned with monsters who worked in shifts day and night.

These substations, as the minister calmly explained, were positioned in relevant spots up and down the highway. They had served as temporary lodging for the crews who built the road before being repurposed for this role—and the monsters stationed inside were tasked with keeping travelers safe.

"Substations?" Shogo sneered. "What are these, cops?"

"Shogo—"

"Yes, Razen. Silence. I get it."

"No. What are these 'cops' you speak of?"

"Huh? Um, you know, a cop...?"

Kyoya snickered at the awkward exchange as he provided Razen a quick rundown of how policing worked on planet Earth.

"Hoh... An organization of sentinels, each charged with their own parcel of land to patrol. I see. But how could a horde of monsters keep this going?"

"Well, maybe there's an otherworlder like us with them. If he has the right abilities, maybe it's really easy for this guy to make nice with the monsters."

"Huh? Who would go through all that trouble, I ask? If this hypothetical otherworlder was *that* powerful, he would have no problem surviving in this world alone. Why would he go through all the trouble of drawing attention to himself like this?"

"Yeah, that's a good point."

Shogo and Kyoya quickly lost interest in the topic, but Razen was still intent upon it, face grave as he thought.

...An otherworlder? Could that be a possibility? Yes, that does sound rather more convincing now...

He nodded back at King Edmaris, noticing the ruler's eyes upon him. Having a potential otherworlder lurking in the shadows behind this problem nation was a concern, but he wanted to signal his leader that he didn't see it as a major hindrance to their plan. Razen and his apprentices had summoned far more otherworlders than just Shogo and Kyoya. A possibility was just that—a possibility, one they could weave into their plan of action. No problems to speak of.

Heh-heh... , thought Razen as the minister continued. *Even if they do have an otherworlder as a leader, they are nothing compared to Shogo, the greatest weapon in our arsenal...*



Farmus was hosting fewer merchants, and that meant the country's finances were looking grim. Once the minister finished explaining that, he went to the main topic of this emergency meeting—the news that there was a new town in the Forest of Jura, one that adventurers were using as a base to gather monster-derived ingredients.

This town offered potions for sale that were just as good as, if not better than, those manufactured by the dwarves, plus a blacksmith at least capable of performing basic weapons and armor maintenance. Some merchants had even taken up permanent residence, no longer having to travel the world over to sell the items they'd harvested. No wonder the place had become a magnet for adventurers. As far from the forest as it was, there was no longer any reason for them to travel to Farmus's capital.

And that wasn't the thorniest issue. The big one—the public reason why the king convened this meeting of nobility—was the stable road link now established between the Dwarven Kingdom and the land of Blumund. A brand-new highway, one patrolled by demi-human monsters who guaranteed its safety as a trade route. It meant that most merchants could now travel directly to Dwargon without having to circle through Farmus.

This they could not afford to ignore. If they let it slide, it could grow into a life-or-death

issue for the kingdom. Farmus, after all, had no real manufacturing specialties to speak of. It had no resources under the ground to mine. Having the Dwarven Kingdom next door meant its own industry was still pretty low-level. It grew enough crops to keep its own people from starving, but that wouldn't be enough.

The whole economy was dependent on the twin supports of tourism and trade. Without those, what could possibly refill the state's tax coffers?

The minister saluted King Edmaris as he wrapped up his report. The king nodded back, surveyed the nobility assembled before him, and asked a question.

"Well. What now, then?"

There was nobody to answer him.

The same report the king had seen was distributed among the nobility and ministers in the room, outlining the details behind the just-completed briefing. Everyone gathered was a high-level noble official, deeply involved with running the country and extremely well-heeled. People deep in the core of the central government. People who knew what was at stake if their homeland lost its competitive edge and tax revenue.

They had no answer for the king, but their thoughts were the same. If anyone dared to speak their mind, though, they might be forced to take responsibility for it all. None was brave enough to risk that.

The common thought: *Attack this town and burn it to the ground.*

Farmus was a vast nation. With the resources it had at hand, it could send a maximum of a hundred thousand soldiers into service. But they were dealing with evolved monsters. Regular infantry would be useless. Well-trained knights or experienced mercenaries would need to be deployed. Unlike battles between fellow human nations, this was an annihilation mission—kill or be killed. It was no place for amateurs. It'd just boost the body count and drag down the rest of their forces.

So how many of these hundred thousand soldiers were actually useful in combat like this?

First, there were the five thousand members of the Farmus Royal Knight Corps, the all-powerful army led by Folgen, its captain. Serving the king directly, it was a pack of elites, allowed to move freely under the king's orders. Each one of them rated a B in battle, and they boasted a reputation as the most powerful fighters among the Western Nations.

Next, there was the Farmus Sorcerer Alliance, a thousand-strong group of royal magic academy graduates led by Razen. Each one of them was an expert in magic, handpicked for their unique gifts in battle-oriented spells.

After that came the Farmus Noble Knight Federation, an elite corps of five thousand composed of specially selected soldiers (including some of the younger nobles) who served the upper levels of nobility directly. They were a force to be reckoned with, even if they were primarily career soldiers with only sparse experience in actual combat.

Finally, there were the six thousand members of the Farmus Mercenary Brigades. This group was normally charged with keeping the peace inside and outside Farmus with a bare minimum of members, but they could be conscripted for emergencies and have their full strength taken advantage of. Their ranks contained a wealth of ambitious young men and women eager to prove themselves in battle and earn a spot in the ordained knight rolls.

These 17,000 fighters were the standing force for the Kingdom of Farmus, ready to roll out at a moment's notice. It struck quite a presence, more than enough to dominate over any nearby nation.

But the reports said the monster nation had at least ten thousand inhabitants. If they were all in fact evolved, it likely meant they were a C-ranked force or more, and it wouldn't be amiss to expect some of them to reach B as well. Even if Farmus was still assured victory, they would have to pay in blood for it—perhaps even the blood of the royal knights and sorcerers, the nation's greatest treasures. Any casualties in their ranks would no doubt lead to questions and accusations later on. Farmus had spent a fortune cultivating these forces; wasting them in needless combat was out of the question, and "because we're afraid of losing our tax base" wouldn't be enough of an excuse to mollify the nobles.

Given that the mercenary brigades alone were unlikely to bring them victory, it was a must that Farmus devote all its forces to the effort. Everybody in the room came to that conclusion in an instant. If any one of them suggested war, however, they might be the one left holding the bag for maintaining all those armies—and any losses incurred along the way.

And how were they going to explain this to the Western Nations? Especially Blumund, which reportedly already had relations with this monster land? They'd put up a strong resistance, no doubt. Everyone in the diplomatic ranks was too conscious of that thought, and of the future, to dare speak without good reason.

Nobody wanted to lose access to their own interests, but nobody wanted to lose money, either. They didn't, but doing nothing would lead to unavoidable losses—it may even tip the nation over the brink, if it was weakened enough. Every one of them thought the same thing: *We have to do something. If only someone could get the ball rolling for us...*

They needed diplomacy to silence their neighbors. Power to make victory in war an assured result. And, more important than anything, a plan for the adventurers living in the monster town. Farmus had to make sure they wouldn't be hostile—or convince them to join Farmus's side, even.

All these problems at hand and no profit to be made from it. Keeping the Forest of Jura's status quo was difficult enough. If they attacked and destroyed an entire nation of monsters, they couldn't even claim the land for their own provinces. No wonder they were facing a severe lack of volunteers.



King Edmaris knew precisely what all his nobles were thinking. He had the exact same thoughts. The difference was, he was already taking countermeasures.

The moment he heard the briefing, he already had his closest aides on hand, working out how to react. They discussed how to make the most profit from this. The crux of the issue was how to handle it without affecting the national interest.

"If we leave the monster nation to its own devices," Razen conjectured, "its presence will become known to the Western Nations. Once it does, it'll be impossible to make any move against it. If we strike, we must strike now."

"Ha! Monsters?" Knight Captain Folgen half spat out before realizing he was in the king's presence and immediately regretting it. "Certainly," he continued in a more disaffected voice, "evolved monsters are a handful. The knowledge a demi-human has certainly makes one a formidable enemy. They are showing at least rudimentary levels of organization, and they number over ten thousand. In terms of the threat, we could charitably call them calamity-level and even boost them up to a disaster, depending. If the leader of such a monster group was hostile toward mankind... it could even mark the birth of a new demon lord."

"What?" the king shouted. "If it is really disaster-level, the mere idea of handling this alone is ridiculous!"

Nobody could answer him. Razen merely nodded his apparent agreement with Folgen.

"Do not worry, sire."

This was Reyhiem speaking, the most powerful religious figure in Farmus. As an archbishop sent by the Western Holy Church, he was (on paper, at least) on an equal position of power as the king himself, given Farmus's adoption of Luminism as its state religion. That was just a formality, however; in reality, Reyhiem was more of a trusted right-hand man, taking his cues from the king.

"Ah, Reyhiem. Do you have a proposal?"

The bishop flashed a smile that seemed a little too sinister for a member of the clergy. "I do, I do, of course. Regarding this land of monsters, our Church has already identified it as a very dangerous presence. I was contacted earlier by Cardinal Nicolaus Speltus, and he told me we plan to smite this nation, as it poses a clear threat to the heavens above. However, we have almost completely failed to damage them so far, and we've even encountered traitors among the human nations... Our Church wants to avoid making the Council our enemy, as he said, and he told me to keep my ears open for any nation willing to offer us assistance."

"He did! So the Church has already certified them as an enemy of the gods... But they seek the help of other nations?"

King Edmaris's eyes sparkled. Cardinal Nicolaus Speltus was a close confidant of the pope, the supreme leader of the Holy Empire of Lubelius, the man at the de facto seat of power across all the Western Nations. He was also Bishop Reyhiem's direct superior,

and he was an arrogant, coldhearted man, one occasionally appraised as a “devil under the sage’s mask.” He was a sharp-witted figure, ever ready to take action, enough so to give even King Edmaris pause—and this man had made his decision. Which meant the woman serving him was ready to move. It made the king smile a sincere smile.

“If—and this is just a hypothetical—but if citizens of Farmus were to come to harm in this monster nation, what would happen then?”

“The Western Holy Church would take full responsibility to provide rescue to its followers, I imagine.”

“Ah. Well, well! We are ever the devout followers of the faith, after all.”

“You are; you are. Very true.”

The king and the bishop shared a smile.

“If so,” interrupted Folgen, “I promise we would be delighted to march forward and smite these monsters. I believe the Royal Knight Corps would be enough to annihilate this nation, but I would like to be thoroughly careful. Archbishop, will the Church be able to provide further resources to us?”

Reyhiem, apparently expecting this question, deepened his smile. “We can, Sir Folgen. I understand your concern. Cardinal Nicolaus has already provided his approval to deploy the Temple Knights.”

The Temple Knights was a catchall term for Church-affiliated fighters sent off from its central temple to other nations. Said to number in the tens of thousands, they offered the manpower to back up the immense influence the Church had in the area, the most gifted among them forming the Crusader groups and calling themselves paladins. Farmus’s own Church sites had Temple Knights stationed in them, about three thousand strong—the largest number stationed in any nearby nation.

Even as an archbishop, Reyhiem didn’t have the authority to issue orders to them. Now, though, Cardinal Nicolaus was ready to give the command. They could all be sent into battle in the forest without a single problem coming up.

“You have permission to use the Temple Knights...?” Folgen nodded, satisfied. “The Holy Church must be quite serious about this, indeed.”

The king joined him in smiling as he pondered this. *Judging by how the Western Holy Church sees all monsters as the common enemy of mankind, there's no way they would ever allow this nation to exist. Still, without a just enough cause to stir men's minds with, they would have trouble filling their armies. And that's precisely why they want to use us, eh? Heh-heh-heh-heh... Well, the same works vice versa, you know...*

If both sides were of the same mind, it would be easiest for them to simply join hands in battle. Such was King Edmaris's conclusion.

"I would suggest," Reyhiem said to sum up, "that we take up the advance force at the same time as when the Western Holy Church declares the war to begin. You will enjoy the full glory of serving as the sword of mankind!"

The king was in agreement. Whether it was diplomacy or war power, there was nothing to fear with the Holy Church backing you up.

That left just one problem:

"Now, what bait can we prepare for the nobles to pounce upon?"

They needed to make the noble ranks cough up their soldiers, and they needed something to reward the mercenaries with. A worthy cause and some lofty speeches wouldn't sway them. It could even antagonize them.

"I imagine glory alone won't move them," a scowling Razen intoned. "If we put the Royal Knight Corps, the Sorcerer Alliance, and the Temple Knights within Farmus together, that's nine thousand troops. That should be enough to assure victory, but..."

With the exception of Reyhiem, everyone in this huddle wanted their approach to be foolproof. But it was Reyhiem who broke their silence once more.

"Oh yes, yes," he said with a smile. "Cardinal Nicolaus mentioned that in his message as well. As he put it: 'Monsters are not people. Therefore, the Church has no interest in their lands. Do as you will with them.'"

Monsters aren't people? Isn't that obvious? King Edmaris had to keep himself from asking out loud. Once they destroyed the monster nation, it'd be a waste of effort if they couldn't manage their land afterward. An extremely unattractive proposal. But *could* they manage it?

Perhaps if they blessed the land and then received the Church's permission to rule over it? The king had no qualms about ruling over monsters—monster slaves and the like weren't rare sights. If they were willing to negotiate with and submit to them, he could guarantee them protection under the name of Farmus—assuming they converted and became servants of Luminus. If not, they'd raze the land, enslave the surviving monsters, and annex the entire territory.

There might be certain issues with this if Farmus was dealing with demi-humans like dwarves. Simple evolved monsters, though? Those weren't people. They could even use magic to enslave them without a second thought.

"I see. Cardinal Nicolaus is a broad-minded man indeed, reading that far ahead in time..."

"He is; he is! And he wishes for nothing more than the continued prosperity of your kingdom, sir."

King Edmaris gave this a firm nod. Farmus would gain new territory, along with all the natural resources the Forest of Jura had to offer. No one would complain if he left the region's defense to them. The Council had already recognized monster slaves as perfectly legal.

Best of all, this would earn Farmus new trade routes—routes that'd let them leapfrog right over Blumund and continue their previous lucrative relations with the Dwarven Kingdom. Charging tolls for the highways already built in the forest could even lead to bigger earnings. Giving the nobility flashes of such potential fortune should be enough to make all of them sign on for battle.

And then... I'd love to procure and enslave that monster nation's engineers for us...

With all apparent problems solved, it was time to see what else was on the table. King Edmaris recalled a certain item that had charmed him not long ago—a bolt of silken cloth. It had been obtained from that monster nation, they said, and it felt more pleasant against the fingers than any fabric he had seen before. Magical fibers and cloth seemed like mere playthings compared to this. Upon further analysis, it was found to be intricately woven with fiber obtained from hellmoth cocoons. Hellmoths were B-ranked dangers, and the idea of using their cocoons was seen as beyond foolhardy... But just look at what you could make from them!

He simply had to learn how this was made then position it as one of Farmus's showcase exports. This wasn't the only wonder product from the monsters, either—others were circulating, according to the report. He had already ordered his government to procure as many examples as possible—but why even make that effort? Just exorcise the evil from the monster lands, and it was all there for the taking. It couldn't be simpler.

King Edmaris found himself struggling to maintain his composure at the thought of all these untold riches. It made him want to burst into a childlike smile. If he had the Western Holy Church's backing, this battle was now a *holy war*, one with him as leader and commander. The honor that victory would earn him suddenly took on an even more important meaning. It'd firmly establish him in the world scene, and it'd firmly put even the upper nobles in their place.

He *needed* to command this holy war, he thought—and once it was over, he'd be able to bask in the reputation of being King of Champions. Folgen, the champion who'd defeated a disaster. Razen, the sage who'd assisted him. They'd all have their glory. And with Cardinal Nicolaus looking on, Reyhiem could even get on the fast track to the next cardinalship.

Everyone had much to gain from this battle. And while the Western Holy Church would take their “alms” in return, it was a small price to pay for all the fortunes they'd be amassing. And—hell—any of the nobles who excelled in battle could be granted monster lands as tribute. The king wanted their industry and their technology; the land didn't really matter to him. As long as he retained the right to charge tariffs and tolls, he didn't mind sharing the leftovers a little. Compared to the small ransom he paid to defend the frontier lands, it'd be a huge money saver.

In short, King Edmaris wanted exclusive control over all his nation's riches. So he needed to create a situation where the nobility would have no room to complain if they didn't step up.

*

This entire emergency meeting was a charade to make that happen. A charade to make them all convinced the king thought, *Well, if nobody's going to volunteer, then I suppose it is my duty as leader to.*

The king looked around the room one more time, making sure none of the higher

nobles or ministers was about to open their mouth. Now he had the atmosphere he wanted. The king would *have* to come out himself. The time had come.

“I was hoping I could ask all of you, but perhaps it is too heavy a burden to bear...”

King Edmaris attempted to continue. Before he could, a single nobleman raised his hand.

“My lord, if I may dare to interrupt you! This monster nation, Tempest, has reportedly already made ties with the nations of Dwargon and Blumund. They have begun engaging in trade with adventurers. I thus wonder about the wisdom of making any rash moves...”

“Indeed,” said another. “And this talk of developing their own technology, with the full assistance of dwarven smiths... If we raised an army, who can say what sort of meddling our neighbor kingdoms would engage in?”

This was, in turn, the Marquis of Muller—himself a leader of one of the larger nobility factions—and Count Hellman, who generally followed his lead in court affairs. They both turned to Razen, resisting the urge to scowl at him.

“...You are correct. To be honest, I can certainly see the wisdom of letting sleeping dogs lie...”

“I am in agreement with you, Razen,” stated the king. “But—”

“Yes, I am aware, sire. If we leave that nation to their own devices, our authority in the region will plummet. Thus, we must strike them before that happens, regardless of the potential profit at stake... This is a competition for survival.”

King Edmaris nodded, eyes clouded with greed. As were Razen’s. They had practiced this exchange earlier. The king, ever thinking about his own nation, and the loyal retainer who served him. None of it was real, but the king’s trap was already sprung upon the audience.

“I also have an announcement to make,” Reyhiem stated. “We have not submitted public notice yet, but we have already received divine guidance on the subject. Our gods tell us that the land of monsters must be destroyed.”

This unnerved the nobles. It was now a holy war they were talking about, a Holy

Church-approved conflict. The will of the nation would be on their side now.

"I understand the concerns of our good marquis and count," the king said. "But I could hardly find it in me to doubt the words of the Holy Church."

"And consider this!" Folgen shouted. "Consider this a way of opening the eyes of the assorted nations who have been tricked and deceived by this country. No monster is worthy of trust—a lesson I feel we should teach them personally!"

"B-but..."

"That would mean we could potentially take the blame..."

"Hmm?" King Edmaris turned a gentle smile toward his two doubtful noblemen. "Then what do you suggest we do?"

Any concerns from neighboring countries would no longer be an issue the moment the Holy Church backed them up. Farmus was a superpower, one with major clout in the Council. If the cause was presented as just, both politically and religiously, it would be simple to spurn any outside interference.

The two nobles turned to face each other for a moment. "Could we perhaps send a messenger?" Muller suggested for them. "If we could negotiate with them, we'd be able to tell whether they are worthy of our trust or not! And if they seem ready to be allies, the monster threat would be a thing of the past. We would have nothing to fear. The Church has not made an official proclamation yet, I am sure, because it wants to discern their true motives first."

"Exactly." Count Hellman nodded.

He and Muller both owned domains that bordered the forest, making defense a constant worry. The marquis's lands also shared a boundary with Blumund, which they had good relations with. That must be what drove his opposition.

Well, well. Perhaps Blumund has been bribing you... but this is already settled business.

King Edmaris laughed a bit internally, reveling at how late this resistance was as he placed both of them on his watch list. His mind was already full of the fortune and glory he would no doubt acquire soon.

"No, my good marquis and count," Reyhiem interjected. "The divination has already been provided. Luminus refuses to abide the presence of any monster—especially monsters who dare to build a nation. Any such nation would mark the birth of a new demon lord! Allowing such a filthy thing to exist is an egregious and unforgivable sin!!"

Muller and Hellman both gasped, taken aback by this outburst.

"I understand your views," King Edmaris added solemnly. "Let me ask you: Can we trust these monsters? Who could guarantee that they will not attack people someday? Are you willing to take that responsibility? Are you willing to protect the lives and fortunes of my beloved people? We are dealing with monsters. Creatures we could never fathom. Creatures in eternal conflict with mankind. Don't you find the views you espouse to be rather imprudent?"

The overpowering performance caused both of them to turn white, unable to respond. How could they? The enemy wasn't even human. What could possibly bring anyone to trust in them? That unspoken implication was impossible to refute.

As far as King Edmaris was concerned, the so-called leader of this horde was nothing more than a softhearted pushover. The speech he reportedly held at the Armed Nation of Dwargon made that patently clear. When he read that ridiculously idealistic quote in the report—"as we attempt to build a nation in the Forest of Jura that serves as a bridge between the human and monster races"—he laughed. What a foolish, easily manipulated leader *this* was! Someone with no force of personality, a monster who found it impossible to tell a lie—that was the impression the king received.

That little tidbit wasn't included in the reports handed out to the nobility. It was a small trick, crafted to ensure there would be no dissenting opinions, and it could be easily defended as "not my fault" if someone found out.

If their leader is this softhearted, it might be easier to make them surrender than I thought...

In Edmaris's mind, this leader might find war so distasteful that a bit of a sales pitch on the benefits of life under Farmus rule might bring him right to the bargaining table.

And if so, we can resolve all of this in peace. If they provide their fortune, I could even allow them the right to self-govern...

He tightened his expression, now in danger of becoming twisted in avaricious glee.

Confirming that no further dissent was coming, he spoke.

"This is a holy war! We will begin by deploying a vanguard force to relay my will to our foes! If they acquiesce to us, then fine. If not, I will show them the will of divinity with our most loyal of forces!"

""Rahhh!""

And with that out in the open, nobody would dare voice their disagreement now. The effort to "cleanse" the land of Tempest had begun.

After the conference:

"But what if they *don't* surrender once our vanguard force causes an uproar in their territory? They might show their true colors and resist us."

"They could," Razen replied to Folgen. "That's why I believe we should send the otherworlder Shogo along with them to prove our strength..."

"Oh? I'm not sure if sending Shogo alone would be wise. He may spout a great deal of nonsense most of the time, but his strength is genuine. We can't allow him to go out of control and lose him for good."

"Indeed. Well, you know the number of monsters involved. *We* might be able to flee back home, but one bad decision and he might just be killed. With Kyoya along, I doubt we will run into any issues. Besides, we have the perfect person for a mission like this."

"Ah. Her, you mean? I see."

King Edmaris nodded his agreement.

The mission of this military strike was to sap the enemy's will to fight. If they could subjugate Tempest without any bloodshed, they could hope for nothing more. They had the numbers to guarantee victory if push came to shove, but as the king theorized, the fewer casualties they could get away with, the better.

"Yes," he said. "We may not need to target our full forces upon these creatures after all. But keep your guard up."

"Worry not, sire. We have taken every possibility under consideration. I ordered them to simply spread a little havoc and then return to us."

As the king hoped, Razen was planning to take a wait-and-see approach.

The three of them were then interrupted by Reyhiem and his near-inhuman smile. "My lord," he said, "if possible, would I be able to test out one of my secret spells?"

"Secret? What sort of spell is this, Archbishop?"

"What are you scheming now, Reyhiem?"

"Well—"

He gave them a full rundown, his smile growing ever more cheerful. It proved contagious, spreading to King Edmaris's face, then Razen's and Folgen's as he continued to speak.

"Heh-heh-heh... I like it."

"Your answer?"

"Very well. Go right ahead! I will allow it, Reyhiem."

"It gladdens me to hear that, sire. I promise it will bring you the utmost of glories!"

And so Reyhiem's pawns slowly, secretly began to move themselves.



Following King Edmaris's missive from on high, a vanguard force was quickly formed. It consisted of a hundred mounted cavalry, plus a breakthrough force consisting of several wagons. Three otherworlders were among them: Shogo Taguchi, Kyoya Tachibana, and a woman named Kirara Mizutani.

"Umm," Shogo griped, "I haven't been on a trip in, like, ages. If they chose me, does that mean, like, it's *that* kind of thing?"

"Yeah, no doubt about it."

"You hear anything, Kyoya?"

"...You were there, too, weren't you? The Kingdom of Farmus is stepping up to wipe out that slime."

"That's crazy. All these forces just to squish a slime?"

"Well, who can say? If it's got ten thousand or whatever monsters under its control, that's gonna be a pretty decent threat."

"Yeah, whatever. I mean, the knights in this country are just pathetically weak! Seeing that, it makes me think—like, the humans in this world are such massive wusses that even dinky little monsters are enough to make 'em crap their pants."

Kirara laughed. "That, or maybe you're just too damn strong, Shogo. I mean, that unique skill you got for battle is nuts."

"Ahh, I'm more scared of *your* skill than Shogo's."

"Yeah. Even I wouldn't like my chances against you."

Kirara was still young, aged eighteen. Just like Shogo, she had been summoned into Farmus-controlled land three years ago. Her skill—which involved influencing people's thoughts during negotiation—wasn't directly related to battle, which led to rough treatment and assumptions that she was just another failed summon. At first.

Then it happened. It was too much for her to put up with—and that had made her use the power *right*. "Stop screwing with me, you assholes!" she'd screamed. "I just wish anyone who messes with me would *die!*" The nature of the resulting Bewilder skill ensured that the effect was immediate. Anyone who'd failed to resist it immediately committed suicide.

A negotiation skill? No way. All she had to do was bark out an order, and she could make anyone do her bidding. It depended less on the actual words and more on what Kirara wanted on the inside. The results were nothing short of a massacre until Kirara's summoner managed to place a locking curse upon her.

All three of them had had their powers checked from the moment they were summoned. The first few months were devoted to magic-assisted language lessons, along with a wide array of testing. The locking curse could not be resisted. Any order

made with it simply had to be followed, whether you wanted to or not—and as part of that, Kirara was forced to reveal what her skill *really* was.

She revealed it, but she was inaccurate on a few of the details, thanks to her unfamiliarity with the language. As a fifteen-year-old at the time, for Kirara, learning a foreign tongue was a struggle. Even with the magical support, the mere act of studying was pure torture to her. The results led to that “I hope you all die” tragedy, and ever since, Kirara’s skill had been sealed away, restricted from activating without permission.

The same was somewhat true of Shogo, but (whether it was lucky for him or not) it didn’t take long for Shogo’s full strength to become obvious to all. That was what happened when you killed the thirty magicians surrounding you the moment you got summoned. It was the work of the unique skill Berserker, and as the name suggested, it simply provided a massive boost to the wielder’s physical strength and abilities.

He had been seventeen then, a delinquent from a failing high school, and his discontent and lust for violence had awoken the skill in him. Combined with the karate Shogo had studied since childhood, Berserker provided a massive boost to his fighting strength. That led to thirty massacred sorcerers. If Razen hadn’t been there, it would have been even worse.

It was never a given that people summoned into this world would just go quietly with their new guardians. They were taken from their own lives for purely selfish reasons; anyone could see the effect that would have, and the people on *this* world knew it well. To handle it, each set of summoning-ceremony spells came with a locking curse included that made the otherworlder do the summoner’s bidding.

“I swear,” muttered Shogo, “I wanna kill that old man. Just ordering us to do whatever he wants...”

“Yeah, seriously. One of these days he’s, like, totally goin’ down.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Kyoya replied. “At least if you do what he says, you’re guaranteed the best food and accommodation this world has to offer.”

They had gone through this conversation before. It was never enough to leave Shogo or Kirara convinced.

“Huh? Yeah, no shit! Especially when the ‘best they have to offer’ is garbage compared

to our world."

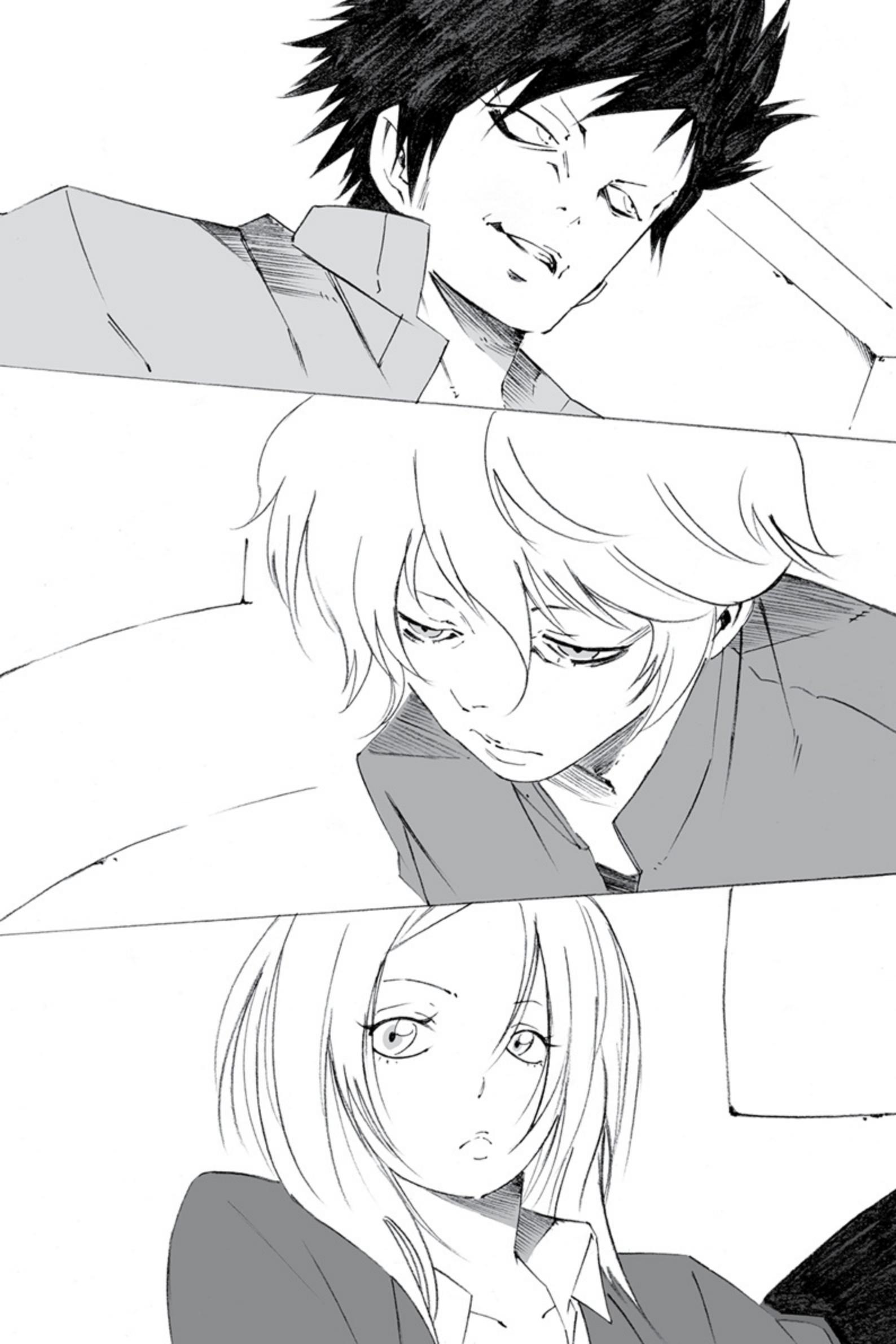
"Oh, totally," Kirara added. "There are no cute stores, no cosmetics... No TV, no Internet, no smartphones. This world's, like, completely devoid of entertainment. I'd be totally fine if this planet just exploded."

The complaints had piled up to the point where all three could blow up at any time. Being forced to carry out orders with no free will, in particular, was proving unbearable. And Kyoya knew that much—but unlike the others, he was willing to take a more flexible approach to his plight. There was nothing he missed about his old world; he was far more interested in the powers obtained on this one—Shogo's, Kirara's, and his.

He had observed them, researched them, and thought about what could be done with them.

And as he had, this current incident occurred—a monster-slaying quest, their chance to work in the open. Finally, after two years, Kyoya would get to see actual battle.

Maybe Shogo and Kirara don't like this, but I think this is our big chance. If it turns into a war, that'll keep the guys with the locking curses on us too busy to keep tabs. Maybe we could even kill them—or maybe they'll just go die themselves.



He couldn't discuss this much with the other two. There was too much of a chance they were being magically eavesdropped on. Which wasn't a bad thing exactly. But there Kyoya was—seeing this as a chance, waiting patiently for the exact moment he could strike and reclaim his freedom.

Soon, the wagon carrying all three of them—each with their own thoughts in mind—set off for Tempest.



Mjurran had received an emergency contact from Clayman. He ordered her to deploy a special sort of high magic.

This magic involved taking the entire area within a three-mile radius and converting it into an anti-magic zone. Spells like these took time, so he ordered her to begin working on it at once. The purpose was to shut off communication with the outside world—there was more to it than that, no doubt, but the demon lord offered no further guidance.

It was clear Clayman planned something big—something that he didn't want the people of Tempest to know about. It deeply concerned Mjurran, but she would never be allowed to ask questions. Orders were orders.

What's more, this magic was meant as a defensive spell against other magic. It was being specially customized to fulfill Clayman's request, and as a result, it would have to be launched around a circle with her at the center. There was the rub. To keep high magic going, Mjurran would have to reveal the identity of the high-level magic-born who drove it: herself. There was no way doing so wouldn't draw the attention of the locals.

In effect, Mjurran, a magic-user, was being faced with a potential angry mob of Tempestians in a zone that she herself had blocked all the magic from. It was essentially being ordered to die. The magic Clayman stipulated was positionally based, so once it was launched, it'd last for several days whether Mjurran was around for it or not. She was, in effect, a throwaway piece of the puzzle.

Receiving this order crushed her. But there, yet again, the figure of a single man in her life crossed her mind. If she refused this order, it would bring that man an all-too-tragic fate. Mjurran knew this better than anyone else, and that was exactly why the

only choice available to her was to accept it.

I knew this would happen. A suitable end for me, I suppose, but I wish at least he could be spared—

She recalled the face of Yohm, the man who claimed to love a woman like her, and smiled. For someone who had lived with the coldest of frozen hearts for the past several centuries, those words were as gentle as a spring breeze.

Those words are all I need...

Steeling her resolve, she began to walk off by herself.

“Where’re you going, Mjurran?”

“Oh, Gruecith. Did you need something?”

“Heh! Not exactly, no.”

But he was clearly trying to follow her.

She tried to get away, recalling how Clayman had acted around her just a moment ago. He was always so calm and collected, but his orders just now hid a twinge of panic behind them. “You will trigger the magic as soon as possible,” he had said before shutting off their link. Something unexpected must have happened.

“Hey, speaking of which, did you see the new dessert they’re offering at the dining hall? It’s called a ‘cream puff’ or something, and Yohm said it was the best thing he ever had. Wanna try it out with me?”

Gruecith couldn’t have acted more carefree. It annoyed Mjurran a bit. His smile was already starting to corrode her steely resolve.

“I appreciate the invite, but sorry. Yohm brought one for me last night. He said it was a present.”

“Pfft. That bastard... Trying to get a leg up on me again.”

“A leg up? What’re you talking about? I have a bit of an errand to do, so if we could talk later—”

“An errand? I’ll really get to see you later?”

“Er, of course. Why wouldn’t you?”

She did her best to brush him off, leaving Gruecith behind on the path.

“Well, I got the weirdest news just now, y’know?” He pointed his eyes at Mjurran. “Something about the demon lord Milim declaring war on my leader. It sounded insane to me, but *you’re* acting pretty weird, too, so I was just wondering.”

Ah. There we go. Now Mjurran understood. She had no idea why the demon lords Milim and Carillon were at odds with each other, but she was sure Clayman was pulling the strings yet again. He was pulling them—and then something happened that he hadn’t expected. Maybe Milim’s declaration of war was outside his prediction? Maybe *his* plan was to have Milim launch a surprise attack on the Beast Kingdom, with Mjurran launching a spell to coincide with that. But now that Milim was going off script, she imagined, the whole thing was falling apart.

But why does he want to cut off all communication from this country?

Englesia and Tempest had an agreement with each other, but against an angered Milim, they simply didn’t have enough war power. What would be the point of cutting their—?

Then it struck her like a bolt of lightning.

...Oh. He’s afraid of that slime Rimuru. That slime might just have the power to change Milim’s mind, after all.

The demon lord Clayman feared Rimuru, a presence increasingly becoming an X factor in his life, joining the fray. So he ordered Mjurran to prevent Carillon from contacting Tempest’s leaders, who’d then surely relay his SOS to Rimuru. The longer she dallied, the angrier Clayman would be with her. She needed to launch it at once.

“Plus,” Gruecith continued, “knowing you, I’m sure you’re already aware, but the top leaders in this nation are pretty damn busy right now. Do anything funny at a time like this, and it’ll be your life, y’know?”

He was right. The top staff in Tempest were, to say the least, flustered. Some mysterious armed group had been approaching their territory for the past few days,

requiring the full attention of Soei and his agents. There were storm clouds ahead, it seemed, and everyone could practically feel the tension among the leaders.

“Oh? I didn’t know.”

Something was happening. Something beyond Clayman’s expectations. It unnerved her. There was no telling what it could be. She had to launch that magic at once, or else Clayman, crazed with fury, might just kill her and everybody else in this town. And Gruecith just *refused* to let her go.

“‘I didn’t know’ ain’t gonna cut it, lady. I can’t let you do anything weird right now—you got that?”

“What kind of nonsense is that...? If you’re fighting against Milim, aren’t *you* in much more danger than any of us?”

“Oh? You talk like you know her. Don’t worry about me. Lord Carillon is invincible. I don’t care how strong Milim is; I couldn’t even *think* of my lord tasting defeat. What I care about more right now is *you*, Mjurran!”

“Look, really, what are you—?”

“Let’s stop playing games here. You’re magic-born, aren’t you?”

Maybe she’d be able to talk her way out of this. But right up to the end, Mjurran never considered the option of deceiving Gruecith.

“Huh. Your mind’s always the sharpest when it comes to things like *that*, isn’t it? Well, no point hiding it. I think the ogre mages spotted it, too.”

“So why?!”

“Because I have to. Listen, Gruecith, I like you a lot, too—as a friend. But if you’re going to get in my way right now... I’m ready to kill you.”

With that, Mjurran did away with her magic-driven human disguise, revealing her original magic-born form.

“Ah...?!”

Gruecith quivered under the pair of large eyeballs boring down into him, virtually roaring with flame.

"Why are you so ready to...? Are you preparing to die? What for? What...? You've got a master giving you orders, don't you?"

"I don't see any need to answer that."

For Gruecith, that was as good as a yes.

"Y'know, they said Lord Clayman's notorious for using his minions like throwaway cannon fodder. You aren't—?"

"Enough from you! Say one more word, and I *will* kill you, Gruecith!"

Seeing the normally immovable Mjurran descend into such a panic told him everything else he needed to know.

"Oh. I get it. If you're willing to follow him straight to your own death—"'

He was interrupted before he could finish.

"—Let me hear more about that."

It was Yohm, using all-but-perfect camouflage skills to trick them as he strolled out from underneath the trees. He usually took great pains to look out for Mjurran. There was no way he wouldn't notice her bizarre behavior.

"Yohm..."

She had revealed her secret to the one person she least wanted to—but, oddly, it filled her with a sense of relief. A relief that turned into surprise at what he had to say next.

"Mjurran, you have to believe in me. I swear I'll protect you."

"What are you, crazy? You can see perfectly well by now—I'm a high-level magic-born! How is a human weaker than me supposed to keep me safe?!"

Yohm ignored the frantic plea, growing unusually passionate.

“Human? Magic-born? None of that stuff matters, man! I fell in love with you. I love your face, I love your scent, I love your warmth. The way you live, the way you hold yourself all proud like that. I love all of it. And that means *everything* to me!!”

“...What are you saying? All that was just a fantasy created to trick you.”

“Don’t worry, Mjurran. I’m prepared to let you keep on trickin’ me... right up to the day I die!”

“Nh...!!”

What an idiot, she thought from the bottom of her heart. But it was such a bold, pleading declaration that it struck her completely dumb.

“Heh. I won, didn’t I? You’ve fallen for me?” He flashed her the biggest smile she had ever seen. “I swear I’ll believe in you until I die. If I do, then how’s that any different from it being the truth, huh?”

Mjurran still lacked the words. *You’re so stupid. So, so stupid. But if that’s how you are, then I...*

“Heh-heh-heh. What a pitiful man you are. I approached you because I wanted to take advantage of you. You’re so pathetic; it makes me laugh. This is ridiculous. Enough of this charade!”

And with that cold rejoinder, Mjurran began to cast. There was no more time left to waver. The tears she felt on her cheeks surely must have been her imagination.

“No! Stop, you fool! You’re really...?!”

“What’s going on, Gruecith?”

With a beautiful, lilting voice, the spell unfurled itself—and the laws of the world began to be rewritten. Yohm and Gruecith were already powerless to stop it. If they could, the only real way would be to kill her. And if that happened, she was okay with it. But she simply *had* to complete this spell.

She continued to chant, as if in prayer—with her heart and soul, aching to protect the man she loved.

The scene in Tempest was even more chaotic than Gruecith thought—even before everything went to pieces, just as Mjurran neared the end of her work.

Benimaru, drowning under a deluge of hurried reports, already looked sick of it all. The most worrying one had come from a sentry posted at a substation a few days ago, by way of Gobta. “Uh, Benimaru,” he’d said, “I guess there’s this bunch of humans in full armor, and they’re headed right this way. The sentry asked what they wanted, and they just said, ‘We have no need to speak with underlings!’ and marched on.”

Soei had quickly been dispatched to investigate. It was a group of knights, over a hundred in number, and Benimaru decided they could no longer be ignored. Soei kept gathering intel, along with Soka and his other men. Soon, they’d pinpointed the group’s origin: the Kingdom of Farmus.

As long as the Farmus platoon’s goals were unclear, working with them had been difficult. Thus, Benimaru had Soei’s team keep a close eye on them as he’d discussed the increasingly worrisome issue with Rigurd.

“Perhaps we should inform Sir Rimuru?”

“Ah,” Rigurd had replied, “after he left us to watch this town, is it really good to keep pestering him?”

“Perhaps. He makes frequent return trips at night, so we could inform him then.”

That brought them to now. Rimuru, after all, could use his Warp Portal to come back here any time he wanted. So Benimaru left his briefing for later and worked on the medley of other issues awaiting his attention. It was all very unfamiliar work, and being chased constantly by it made the days pass like lightning.

In the midst of all this, Soei’s team sent a report from Farmus itself. The kingdom was apparently engaging in rapid preparations for war. It made Benimaru wrinkle his eyebrows.

“This might be bad news for us, Rigurd.”

“I’m afraid so. Not something we can afford to take so casually. I think we had best

have Sir Rimuru back here at once."

The two looked at each other. They both concluded that handling this brigade of knights the wrong way could very well lead to war. So Benimaru tried contacting Rimuru—but before he could, he received an emergency magical communication from Alvis, the Golden Snakehorn and one of Eurazania's Three Lycanthropeers.

"The Beast Kingdom will enter hostilities with the demon lord Milim in one week's time. As a result, I want you to accept the citizens we are evacuating."

The delays Mjurran experienced in deploying her anti-magic zone allowed this message to squeak its way through. Although Clayman himself should take some of the blame—Milim's flight speed was so fast that she reached Eurazania far ahead of his planned schedule. Not that it mattered to Benimaru. No, the portent of this news was so vital that it seemed to change the very air around them.

"You must be joking!"

At once, the top leaders of Tempest were gathered—Rigurd and Rigur, Lilina and the other chief hobgoblins, Kaijin as a special adviser, Shuna as secretary, Shion as Rimuru's representative, plus Hakuro and Geld. Nearly a dozen people crammed into the meeting hall. Gabil was not in attendance, not having been appointed to this level of leadership yet. Instead, he was simply advised that an emergency was underway and to stand by until further orders. Kaijin also informed Vester of the news, telling him to maintain regular contact with King Gazel of Dwargon as needed.

And in the midst of all this, the very party of humans who had vexed Benimaru earlier arrived, disguised as merchants.



Dude! This town's more advanced than the capital of Farmus!

Shogo couldn't hide his surprise.

He and his otherworlder friends were trundling into town, a single knight serving as their coachman while the rest of the hundred-strong team kept their distance. The

unexpected sight of the town rendered him speechless. It was amazing. Nothing about the term *monster town* had prepared him for this. The sewer system kept all foul-smelling odors at bay—and, really, the monsters walking around seemed more identifiably human than any other species. They were clean, bathed, and wearing more proper clothing than many of the merchants and townspeople around Farmus.

One look was all it took to confirm that life here was far more bountiful than life over there. It was packed with adventurers, merchants briskly running to and fro as they carried out their business.

Goddamn! I've been ripped off this whole time! Why the hell're the monsters livin' better than we are?!

The initial waves of shock were wearing off. Now, within Shogo, a darker well of anger was beginning to rise. The same was true with Kirara.

“Um, what’s the deal with this? Like, why’re these guys living way swankier than we are? Something’s got to be wrong here.”

“Ahh, don’t get too angry,” Kyoya said—but even he couldn’t help but feel it was unfair. His eyes were squinted, brooding with resentment.

“And this whole place is run by a slime, yeah? If we kick its ass, we can take over this joint, can’t we?”

“That’s, like, the best damn idea I ever heard, Shogo! Let’s do it!”

“I’m fine with that, too, but we can’t stray from our orders too much.”

“Oh, it’ll be fine! I’m just sayin’—they told us to kick up a ruckus before the rest of the knights showed up, right? Everything’ll work out great!”

“Totally. Like, they wanna stage it like we’re a bunch of lawful citizens and the monsters attacked us out of nowhere, yeah? I can just use Bewilder to set up some kinda pretext, and all the non-monster adventurers will do whatever I want.”

Kirara liked her chances, and she had reason to. It was the main reason why the three of them were here. And neither of her friends saw much to worry about, either.

“Yeah,” Kyoya agreed, “that’s pretty much what Sir Razen told us to do.”

"Pfft. Quit callin' that asshole 'sir' around me!"

"Totally. I hope that dude gets a heart attack or something. Then we'd be, like, free and stuff."

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, just a habit," Kyoya said. "We can't really dis him to his face, you know?"

His lighter approach had a distinct motivation behind it. Kyoya, unlike the others, was still hiding his true character in this world to some extent. For now, he felt, it was best to play the loyal student around Farmus circles.

As they spoke, Shogo mentally went over his orders one more time, growing increasingly impatient to kick some ass. "I don't care what kind of excuse you have to make," Razen had told them. "Just start some kind of trouble—then *you*, Kirara, use your power to get the adventurers on your side! We'll begin taking action once you do."

Farmus was currently engaged with a total of three otherworlders. That alone was enough war power to decimate a smaller country. It was rare to deploy three at once, but the government wanted to cover for the possibility that another otherworlder was aiding the monsters.

Once Shogo and his friends began their business, the coachman driving their wagon would send off a signal to begin the rest of the operation. The otherworlders weren't informed of the exact details, but nothing they'd do would be any hindrance to them, and presumably it'd make things even more favorable for victory. Shogo despised Razen, but even he had to praise his talents. If he *weren't* a gifted magic-user, all three of them would've been free long ago.

Now he ran a hand through his well-oiled hair, lifting it up like the comb of a chicken.

"All right. How 'bout we get things moving?"

Kirara was the first to take action.

"Aaahhhh!! You—you touched my butt just now, didn't you? You tryin' to do somethin' to me?"

She had deliberately bumped herself against what seemed to be the perfect target—a kind of dopey-looking sentry who was staring into space. This was Gobzo, a guard under Gobta's command and a hobgoblin known even among his own species for being a bit special.

“Unhhh? I—I didn’t do anything!”

He lifted up his arms, head swiveling around in search of some kind of support.

“Hey! Don’t, like, play dumb with me! Just tell me what you slapped me there for. All right?”

Kirara drew closer to him as she spoke—then, suddenly, she jerked her body backward and tumbled to the ground.

“Owww!! Help! Somebody call the guards!”

“Wh-wha—? No! I didn’t even do nothin’! I, uh... *I am* a guard...”

Gobzo was already starting to tear up a bit. He was the victim here, but frankly, he didn’t have a lot of allies nearby. The sheer dopiness of his act did little to turn the suspicion away from him—and Kirara was already deploying Bewilder, letting it sink in to the minds of human passersby.

“Whoa, the hobgoblin attacked that girl?”

“That’s a town sentry, isn’t it? What kind of sentry would pull that crap? I can’t believe it.”

“But he just knocked her to the ground, man.”

“Really? I thought the monsters here were supposed to be nice.”

“They *are*. Usually. So what’s the deal with this guy?”

The locals were still a bit incredulous, but few to none of the adventurers and merchant types nearby were willing to stick up for Gobzo. Nobody had a full grasp of the events, and it wouldn’t be long before Kirara’s skill had their minds completely under her control.

Shogo and Kyoya grinned at each other, then took a step forward to drive the dagger down.

"Whoa, dude, so this town just attacks its visitors without warning?"

"That's their plan, huh? Invite merchants and people over and then strike when they least expect it?"

They shouted as loudly as they could as they walked over to protect the frightened-looking Kirara. Their trumped-up charges were lodged. The *real* show would begin only when this sentry's supervisor showed up. If he was apologetic, they could just ratchet their beef up the ranks, with the crowd on their side. If he got angry and started throwing his weight around, that'd be a godsend. Even if he didn't, it'd grow into a huge hullabaloo, the rest of the knights would storm in, and then *they'd* serve as judge and jury.

Shogo was therefore hoping whoever showed up next was just as stupid as their first target. He was disappointed.

"So what's up?"

Gobta, apparent captain of the sentries, cheerfully strolled onto the scene—then did something Shogo wasn't expecting at all.

"Oh man, Gobzo, not you again! I swear, every single time something happens, *you're* in the middle of it!"

He gave him a bop on the forehead before turning back toward the otherworlders. "Hey, sorry about that, guys," he said with a friendly nod. "I'll try to educate 'im better."

"G-Gobta, I, but, I..."

"You didn't do it? Doesn't matter. If you're under suspicion, you've already lost." He ominously raised an eyebrow. "Remember what Sir Rimuru said about the horrors of being falsely accused of assault on the street?"

This raised some eyebrows among the onlookers as well.

"S-so you believe me, Gobta?"

The sentry's boss sighed. "Why d'you have to ask me that? You wouldn't have the guts to do anything anyway."

Gobzo rewarded him with a hug and a hearty "I'll follow you wherever you go, sir!!" as tears streamed down his cheeks. This didn't particularly delight Gobta, judging by the look on his face, but he still patted his sentry's shoulders to calm him down.

It wasn't a sight that pleased Kirara much.

"Whoa, what the hell? Are you saying that I'm, like, lying or something?"

"Oh, it didn't sound that way?" a surprised Gobta asked. It was more than enough to set the girl off.

"Don't give me that, you piece of shit! You got a lot of balls, tryin' to pick a fight with me! Why do you trust this guy right off? You weren't even here to see it!"

The shouting did little to affect the unbothered Gobta. "It's simple," he said. "It's natural for us to trust our friends."

"What?! You want me to accept *that* lame excuse?!"

"Well," he calmly explained, "if you want me to explain further, the only girl Gobzo's got a thing for is Shion, y'see. Everybody in Tempest knows this, so there's no way he'd try puttin' his hands on a young girl like you, no."

There was a moment of silence as everyone digested this.

"Oh, that's just *mean*, Gobta!" Gobzo's face turned bright red.

"Yeah, yeah. Everyone already knows, remember?"

"*Everyone...?*"

Gobta shrugged. "Yeah, everyone. Deal with it, Gobzo."

"I—I think I *won't* follow you wherever you go anymore, Gobta!"

Now Gobzo was almost as angry as Kirara. Almost.

“Will you *stop* with this stupid crap?! I’m still *here*, you bastards! All of you should just *die!!*”

There was no longer any plan of action. All Kirara wanted to do was take everyone making her into a laughingstock and kill them. Shogo and Kyoya would be the only ones left standing in this street intersection, probably, but Kirara was too furious to care. It wasn’t like *those* guys cared about Razen’s orders that much. So she screamed it out without reserve, half smiling as she did. Thanks to living fairly restricted lives in Farmus, the three otherworlders were near the ends of their ropes mentally—and now the rebound was happening.

Already, Kirara could picture the stabbed, mangled bodies that would litter the street shortly.

But nothing happened.

“Wha...? Huh...?”

“—?!”

The adventurers and merchants looking on were too busy laughing at Gobzo to die for her. It visibly unnerved Kirara, as it did Shogo and Kyoya.

“I see,” a gentle but firm voice said to them. “Your skill converts your voice into streams of force that interfere with your targets’ brain waves. That’s quite a powerful one, so I’ll have to prohibit you from using it in our territory.”

It was Shuna. A pair of hobgoblins had reached her to relay the events just before the conference began. It had sounded like bad news to her, so she’d run over with Shion as her bodyguard.



Shuna revealed a breezy smile as her eyes focused upon Kirara. Her unique Parser skill provided a complete analysis of the girl’s ability, letting her unleash an aura that matched and neutralized the waves of force. One look from her discerning, fearsome eyes was all it took.

“You do not appear to be suitable for this nation. Please take your leave at once.”

She smiled again—but her eyes were frigid. She could tell Kirara had meant to kill with that attack, and she wasn't about to take that lightly.

“Like... no way...”

Kirara sat weakly upon the ground. Now she knew it. She was completely outside her element. *This woman was different. Not just another face in the crowd. She was a real monster.*

Her two companions, however, had yet to pick up on this—or they did, perhaps, but didn't find it worthy of note. Kirara had lost, but the violence her friends could mete out wouldn't be suppressed by any weird mystic force. They had absolute confidence in their powers, and now they had the ideal opportunity to test them out. Besides, the plan was in full swing, and there was no canceling it at this point.

“Hmm...”

Shuna's beauty attracted Shogo's eye for a moment. Then he recalled why they were here. To enslave them. And if a woman as beautiful as this was a monster, there was no reason *not* to treat her as a slave.

“That's your attitude, huh? Well, all right. If you're up for it, I'm ready for you!”

His desirous eyes turned to Shuna, analyzing how best to tackle her. He looked forward to bellowing with laughter as she lay on the ground, bruised and crying, and continuing the torment until she begged for mercy.

Then a quiet voice broke his concentration.

“Your licentious thoughts are written all over your face, lowlife. March straight out of this town, and we'll let you live. Refuse to obey, and your life will be forfeit!”

Shion's slim, well-proportioned body was attired in a business suit, the epitome of cool beauty as she stepped in front of Shuna. Her eyes were furious as she strode forward.

Shogo flashed a ferocious smile. He stood strong, never even contemplating defeat. “Ha! I like it! Get in my way, and I'll crush you!”

“I see. It appears you will not understand until you are smashed to the ground. Very well. Allow me to engage you!”

Then the two of them collided.

Kyoya couldn't wait for this moment. There was no meddling referee overseeing this sparring match and thus no need for him to play the star-pupil role. And with Shogo wrecking things first, he had no reason to be patient any longer.

"If that's how it is," he said with a twisted smile and drawn sword, "I get free rein, too, don't I? I was hoping I'd get to test this out sometime."

Ever since he'd come to this world, Kyoya had been waiting for the tides to turn in his favor. Now, the time had come. Before his eyes was Shuna, with Gobta and Gobzo behind her.

Heh-heh-heh... I can't wait to see how much I can do!

"Hoo boy. Gobzo, protect Lady Shuna for me."

"Yes, sir, Gobta!"

Gobta drew his dagger and lowered himself for combat. Kyoya did the same, sword straight ahead of his eyes. He was a talent in kendo, and his unique skill—known as Severer—was focused entirely on slicing and dicing.

It was backed by his natural-born fencing talents and the extra skill All-Seeing Eye. The skill allowed him to fully grasp the situation around him, as if watching the action from a video game's camera perspective. It blasted this information straight into his eyes, boosting his reaction time—and thanks to Mind Accelerate, he could recognize and address threats three hundred times faster than normal.

With these three skill powers in hand, Kyoya had become the greatest swordsman in both Farmus and the rest of the Western Nations. Razen had ordered him to keep these powers hidden, but that order was no longer valid. Kyoya finally had his chance to unleash them all, and it made the blood surge through his body.

"Haaa-ha-ha-ha! With these kinda skills, not even that old lady Hinata could challenge me, much less some wimp like you!"

With a final hearty laugh, Kyoya descended upon Gobta.



* * *

The conference began in the meeting hall, minus Shuna and Shion.

"All right," declared Benimaru. "Are we all ready? It is time to call for Sir Rimuru!"

He launched the Thought Communication.

Nothing happened.

The line was silent.

"I—I can't connect to Sir Rimuru...?!"

The whisper from Benimaru plunged the meeting hall into silence. Silence then gave way to panic. The hall bustled with worried faces and hurried speech. Even Benimaru, who was scarcely ever rattled, instantly turned pale. That was how much Rimuru's silence filled them with a sense of impending doom.

It was around that moment when Mjurran's incantation reached its completion.

In an instant, all magic disappeared, throwing the entire town into a state of chaos. The townspeople moved to evacuate their panicked guests, but the effort didn't last—or, really, wasn't even possible. Because alongside Mjurran's high magic, another secret spell launched itself—Prison Field, the result of extended research on the part of Archbishop Reyhiem. It worked on the same principle as Holy Field, the spell used on an official basis by the Church's crusader teams, but modified so even the less-experienced Temple Knights could set it off if several of them worked together.

The buildings sagged down, creaking painfully. The merchants ran for cover, the adventurers trying to protect them. Some basked in the mayhem; others tried to save the town from it. The multiple factors tangled together to spread chaos, creating a day of disaster unlike any Tempest had seen before.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
3

DESPAIR AND HOPE

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Ensuring the magical field was dispelled, I crept back outside, breathing a sigh of relief. I could feel my Replication-driven other half disappear.

Ranga half threw himself out of my shadow. “You are safe, my master!” Being cut off must have alarmed him beyond belief, his hair standing on end from all the nerves. I gave him a pat, trying to reassure him that everything was okay.

This time, though, it was like... Holy crap. That bit of insurance I took out at the start wound up saving my hide, but man, talk about a hairbreadth. When I was locked up in that Holy Field, that put me at one hell of a disadvantage. Trying to hold my own in combat there, with no idea who I was fighting or how strong they were, would’ve been idiotic.

Realizing that, I created a Replication and got my core slime self the hell out of there. My human-form Replication was a full magical corpus of sorts, created by slapping a whole bunch of magicules together; it couldn’t move too quickly, but it was a small price to pay if my “main” body could escape. Looking at it that way, it was a small miracle I kept that corpus going as long as I did. I wanted to pat myself on the back. *That’s* how rough that Holy Field was.

But hey, at least I made it. Now I was kinda glad I’d treated Hakuro’s training in the Formhide skill so seriously. If that lady Hinata had considered the possibility of a Replication in the mix, it would’ve been all over... But I guess she wasn’t *that* wary of me. Few people would be. And that wound up saving my life.

It sure taught me a lesson, though. I had to keep a closer eye on myself, no doubt. Oh, and I almost forgot: I was hiding my aura, since I was in combat until just now, but it might be seeping out by this point. *I’m pretty sure I’m able to keep it perfectly hidden these days, but let’s just be doubly careful about buttoning that up.*

With that in mind, I crafted a new mask within my Stomach. It was a copy of the first Mask of Magic Resistance I saw, but I got rid of all the traits I didn’t need and boosted its core magical resistance instead. Then I shape-shifted into human form and put it

on. That *should* keep Hinata from picking up on my presence. I think.

Still—that Hinata lady was just *way* too powerful. Off the charts. If that Holy Field wasn’t there and she put her full force into it, what then? I had the creeping suspicion that, nine times outta ten, I would lose.

Such were the thoughts in my mind as I looked back at how the Glutton had fought for me back there.

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When I awaken the Glutton inside me, it is, to put it broadly, kind of like executing a program. A highly destructive virus of sorts, one that consumes everything within eyeshot. That was why her rapier caused no pain as it slashed into my body.

The Glutton had been transforming my own physical body, as Hinata looked on in astonishment. This was a freshly harnessed “complete” form of Universal Shapeshift in action. It let me transform my body such that it boasted only the most useful aspects of every monster I had consumed in the past, creating a well-oiled battle machine. The Glutton absorbed the grass, the earth, the air around me to rebuild myself into this new physical form.

Inside the Holy Field, I hadn’t even had the magicules to create a new magical corpus for myself. But the Glutton pretty much forced it to happen, taking in regular physical objects and using them to power myself up.

Hinata brought her rapier back a bit, no doubt sensing the danger. That wound up saving *her* life. As out of control as it had become, the Glutton was lunging upon both the rapier and Hinata herself, using sound, heat, and scent to track down her position. If she reacted any later than she did, she would’ve been torn apart by that ravenous appetite, maybe.

As Hinata looked on in fright, the Glutton completed the transformation. Standing there now was a beast in the shape of a person. The only signs of my former self were the golden pupils and the slightly bluish-silver hair. My body rippled with malice,

looking every bit like a demon from hell.

"I can't believe it," Hinata whispered. But the surprise was already gone from her face. She was peering intently at me, like an excited scientist making a new discovery. Her Dead End Rainbow skill slashed right into people's spirits—but since it didn't kill me, she understood now that the Glutton *had* no spirit, no will of its own. It was a soul in its purest form, the origin of the power that lies at the root of man and monster.

A soul *is* a consciousness, by definition, but that alone didn't provide the consciousness any way to express itself. It still needed an *astral* body to operate upon and begin the thought process—but that wasn't enough, either, since any thoughts produced would just dissipate into the wind. That's where the *spiritual* body came in, to record and keep those thoughts captive. Even *that* was still a virtual memory, though, not any kind of permanent storage—and so we come to the *material* body.

If one had enough mental fortitude, they could recover all their memories even if their brain was permanently damaged. The fact that you saw spiritual life-forms among the monsters was proof enough of that. But if the *spirit* is damaged, that likely wounds the astral body deeply, even if the brain is left intact. If that wound reaches the soul, resurrection is no longer possible.

That applied equally to every living thing in this world—from the weakest creatures all the way up to dragons and elemental monsters.

By this point, Hinata fully understood what the Glutton was capable of. A sweet smile crossed her face, her piercing eyes shining brightly as she considered her countermeasures. She had lost her rapier now, but not even that seemed to bother her much. And then she removed an amulet from her pocket and threw it at me.

"Astral Bind!"

A skill that restricted the astral body, the vessel of the soul, instead of the material one. It still couldn't stop the Glutton.

Realizing this, Hinata gave me a scornful frown. Before the Glutton, its limbs morphing and transforming in unpredictable ways as it lurched toward her, she showed not a single moment of agitation. If anything, she was still calmly observing me. Through all the Glutton's twists and turns, she kept dodging every attack by mere millimeters. She

predicted every move.

"I see," she whispered. "So you're already dead." She shook her head. "You're going to be obstinate right up to the end, aren't you? Why are you pestering me like this? Continuing to have it attack your foe, even after death... If someone doesn't completely wipe this thing out, it's gonna threaten the whole world someday."

Hinata's face remained taut as she summoned several non-elemental spirits from thin air. They followed her orders, mobbing the Glutton. The effort did little apart from sacrificing the spirits to stop it in its tracks temporarily.

The only magic that could be used within a Holy Field involves amulets, Battlewill, spirits, and the like. Among them, Hinata now chose one of the greatest of holy magics, a powerful attack that she usually kept as one of her last resorts. Tracing complex shapes with her outstretched hands, she crafted a geometrical design in the air, stretching it out into a layered, physically present magic circle. In the middle of it was the berserk, spirit-consuming Glutton, unconscious, unthinking, and pitiful.

"Let me provide you a prayer to the divine. I hope and desire for the power of the holy spirits. Listen to my appeal and overcome all in your way! Disintegration!!"

The request, delivered in Hinata's beautiful voice, was granted. The resulting show of force was literally divine, enough to crush all physical and spiritual presences within its defined space. It was the ultimate in targeted, destructive magic, emitting flashes of white light as it poured from Hinata's hands to the circle. It sped out at thousands of miles per hour, almost at light speed, as its holy power made cells and souls vanish without a trace. It was more than enough to make the Glutton disappear, not affecting the space around it at all.

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That's what the battle record told me. I was watching from the side, as if it was on TV or something, and it was simply breathtaking.

One thing I earned from this battle was Hinata's broken rapier. I was able to run it through the Stomach to take it for myself. More important than that, though, was the

info I gleaned about her magic and skills. I had deliberately set the Glutton out of control, linking it to the Great Sage itself without going through my own spirit. I had no spiritual link to it myself; it was operating purely on its own volition. That was why, even when it took Hinata's final Dead End Rainbow strike, it didn't affect me at all.

I didn't think I could win with it. Not from the start. That's why I ordered it to gather data for me, so I could come up with a better solution—and that's what I was poring over now.

That Disintegration, though... Wow. It was enough of a threat to send a chill up my spine. If I had taken that strike first thing, I would've been defenseless. It would've gone right through my Multilayer Barrier and made me vanish instantly. Its only weakness was the amount of time it required to cast, but with that kind of force, it was only a minor quibble. Hinata made excellent use of it.

It was definitely no joke. I wondered why Hinata even bothered with that magical barrier at all if she was that strong. I hate dealing with a foe who's both powerful *and* careful. With my Replication, I couldn't do more than slice a few hairs off her head. No wonder she was so confident, not even bothering with armor or anything. If *that's* what she brought to the table, I was correct to focus on escaping that barrier from the very beginning.

Are all otherworlders and summoners that strong, the way Yuuki said? If so, I'll have to assume that every one I encounter has a unique skill and prepare appropriately for that. I was under the impression that I was pretty strong myself, but after that experience with Hinata, my confidence was completely shattered. Maybe the wound to my pride was exactly what I needed.

Getting to experience Disintegration for myself was a windfall, too. The moment she deployed that layered magic circle, it was all over. There was simply no way to deal with it, apart from fleeing or interfering with her before the circle was complete. Would've been nice if I could have Analyzed and Assessed it, but I was too busy trying not to die to consider that. It can't always be *that* easy. The moment I saw it, after all, my data link with the Sage cut right out and I (my non-Replicated self) got dizzy in the head. It's impossible to avoid once you see it, and the layered barrier it emitted had a heat-seeking property as well—if you can't get out of its trail, you can't avoid a direct hit.

Could Milim have handled it? I'll have to ask her next time.

I told Ranga about everything that happened as I checked up on my own body. I was physically fine, no longer affected by the Holy Field. What was *up* with Hinata, though? She refused to listen to me, breaking out the big guns with no provocation whatsoever. Maybe I shouldn't have taken the bait, but I only did because I thought I could win. Sure proved *me* wrong. Not that I *lost*, exactly. Sometimes the best winning strategy you have is to run, you know? And that's what I tried to do from the start, so if I made it out, I won.

You could, if you squinted hard enough, call this a tactical victory. Plus I gathered all this valuable data. It wouldn't be going too far to call it a win. A tie, at least, if I wanted to be generous.

I'm definitely *not* being a sore loser, all right?

But enough joking around. I was worried about everyone in town, so I decided to head over at once.

*

Attempting to teleport myself to Tempest, I caught wind of something odd. I had tried to take a Warp Portal back to my own place, but the magic failed to activate.

Report. Impossible to specify a target location. The cause is believed to be some kind of barrier isolating the area.

Uh-oh. It sounds like someone's trying to destroy Tempest, just as Hinata said. Better get back quick, or else I'll have nothing to go back to.

Even as I thought that, the Great Sage was searching for places still available for teleportation. Soon, it tracked down the magic circle inside the cave that Gabil was guarding.

“Let’s go!” I shouted to Ranga as we hurriedly made the warp.

Gabil and the others were assembled at the Sealed Cave’s magic circle, waiting for us.

The moment he saw us, Gabil ran up, looking visibly relieved.

"Ohhh! Sir Rimuru, you are safe!"

He then briefed me on events. "...And then, just after we received word that Lady Milim would wage war against the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania in a week's time, I lost contact with Sir Benimaru. Concerned, I made contact with Soka, but apparently no one outside the cave could reach our leaders, either."

"I told King Gazel as well," Vester added, "but it was hard for us to make any concrete moves, given the lack of information at hand..."

Certainly, the king of dwarves would've had too little knowledge to provide any real support. He must have been terribly concerned. He had last made contact via communication crystal about an hour ago, but nothing beyond that, despite a second call being expected. Thought Communication didn't work, either, and just as they were discussing among themselves what to do, I came back.

I guess the bad feeling I had about all this was right. No doubt about it; something terrible was taking place. But why couldn't we even contact anyone in town?

As I thought about this, Soei leaped out of my shadow, just as Soka and his other men had jumped out of Gabil's.

"Sir Rimuru, it is a tremendous relief to see you safe and sound."

He had apparently lost contact with me just as I was using Replication to save myself from Hinata, causing him a great deal of consternation.

"Whoa, Soei, I'm a lot more worried about you than me at the moment!"

He was both wounded and exhausted. Vester jogged off to fetch him a Full Potion to drink.

"Forgive me for interrupting, but Sir Soei was injured attempting to escape the barrier deployed around Tempest."

"Silence, Soka. I am fine. Sir Rimuru, I am afraid the situation does not bode well for us..."

The story he had for me was a shock. There was a military force from Farmus marching straight for Tempest. Soei, learning this, hurried back to tell Benimaru but was blocked by a barrier placed around town, preventing access. Bashing right into it, his “real” body got away with “just an injury” (he said in his oh-so-Soei-like way) and all his Replication copies were expended. Anyone else would’ve died in a hurry. Regardless, his men were just about to attempt to break through the barrier when they noticed I was back.

Soei’s apparent nervousness was entirely due to my disappearance, it seemed. A lot of things must’ve happened in the past half hour or so, Hinata’s attack on me being one of them.

“Well, sorry I made you worry, Soei.”

“Not at all, Sir Rimuru. As long as you are safe, there is nothing to complain about.”

I appreciated the thought, but if I had returned to Tempest faster, I might never have run into Hinata at all. I had left for my own selfish reasons, and I had better make up for it.

Before that, though:

“So if the Kingdom of Farmus is moving against us, was it them who built the barrier over town?”

“It is likely so, yes.”

“In that case, everyone in town is in danger?!”

The thought made my mind begin to race. Hinata had cost me a dear amount of time. We couldn’t sit here talking all day, I decided. I needed to head to town, fast.

“Gabil, you guys guard the cave. Keep Vester and the dwarven potion staff safe! If any intruders come in, try your best to capture them alive.”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Sir Rimuru, what should we do about contacting King Gazel?”

“Ah... Wait until I get a grasp of the situation. Right now, all we’d do is worry him

further!"

"Very true. All right. Be safe!"

I could understand Vester's concern, but there wasn't much I could say to the king yet. He already had his preliminary report; he would have to wait a bit for more.

"I'll go on ahead."

"Yes, sir! We will follow soon behind."

I attempted to use Shadow Motion to head for town, only to remember the skill had evolved into Spatial Motion.

"Hold on, Soei. Let's go together, actually. All of you!"

"Huh?"

I launched Spatial Motion without further explanation, connecting our current location with a point just outside the barrier. There was a hole in the air, just large enough for a person to shimmy through, and our target point was on the other side. Talk about convenient.

"The cave's in your hands, Gabil!"

"Yes, my lord! I will await further orders!"

He and his men nodded at me as I stepped through the portal. In another moment, we were outside of town, Soei and his team behind me. Soei seemed calm, but Soka and the others were pretty wary of traveling this way. I guess I couldn't blame them. Wish I'd had the time to explain things in detail, but... you know.

Now I had an ominous-looking barrier in front of me. If someone as powerful and talented as Soei couldn't bust through it, it must be a pretty damn strong one, too. I brought my left hand up to it, absorbing part of its surface, and ran Analyze and Assess.

Understood. The effects of Great Magic: Anti-Magic Area are detected, albeit with a reduction in magicule density. It runs on the same principle as Holy Field but is not

uniform in composure, some areas being less dense than others. It is impure, likely an inferior version. Anyone inside it will be affected, but the effects can be resisted with Multilayer Barrier.

Well, if it's inferior, then no worries. Let's head on in. I had Benimaru and everyone else to worry about right now. Plus, the way the Great Sage put it, any "great magic" needed to have its caster in the middle of it, but this barrier was activated from the outside. It was a large-scale casting, likely requiring several people—more than one or two—taking care of it.

"Soei, track down the guys casting this barrier so I can take them out. Do not engage in combat with them. Just bring all your men to them and gauge their strength."

"Yes, sir. How should we contact you?"

I produced a string of Sticky Steel Thread and wrapped it around his neck. "How about this? Run it through this strand, and we should be able to pick up on each other."

"I see. That should work..."

Upon testing it out, we found that Thought Communication worked as long as you cast it through the Thread, inside and outside the barrier.

"Right. Get going! I'll head over if you run into trouble. If you think you can beat them, neutralize them, but don't kill anyone."

"Yes, sir!"

Then all five of them—Soei, Soka, and their three trainees—disappeared without a sound. Man, they really *were* like ninjas. They'd easily hold their own against a high-level magic-born, no doubt, if Soei was leading them.

But right now, we had to be careful. A single mistake could kill us. Every possibility had to be addressed. Along those lines, I had the Sage continue its analysis, hoping it'd find a way to remove the barrier from the inside. Soei had his orders, and I had mine. It was time to break in.

*

There were magicules left in the air around town, although not as much as before. If it wasn't for the Anti-Magic Area over it, you'd be able to cast magic to some extent. The Sage was right; my Multilayer Barrier made me feel no ill effects at all. This was far weaker than the Holy Field, which was a relief.

Running through town, I headed toward our main office off the central plaza. The space was filled with people, the atmosphere tense and panicked. Something definitely *did* happen. It worried me.

Realizing I was there, the crowd opened a path for me and fell to their knees. A few of them ran toward me. There was Rigurd, sprinting at top speed, with Rigur, Lilina, and the hobgoblin elders following behind.

"Sir Rimuru! It is wonderful to see you back. I am so glad you're safe..."

He kneeled, practically clinging to my legs, looking about ready to burst into tears.

"Yeah. Sorry I made you worry."

"Oh, not at all!!" he said in abject relief, before he did indeed burst into tears. The rest of them also knelt, keeping a polite distance away from Rigurd and me as they celebrated my return. I guess losing contact with me worried people a lot more than I thought it would.

Not everyone there was bawling over me, though.

"Nice to see you back, boss," Kaijin said, his voice taut. It sounded like he was painfully trying to keep the worry from showing. I could feel emotions a lot more instinctively from the monsters, but I had a feeling he was hiding his at the moment as well. Garm and his two dwarven brothers were there, too, blocking the way to the plaza as if trying to prevent me from going there.

"Follow me to our meeting room, if you could," Rigurd said as he calmed down from his crying jag and stood up. "There are things I wish to report and discuss with you." Now he was back to his usual bold self—no time for sobbing here—and his voice was firm and unyielding. He was ready to do what needed to be done. The building he led me to was away from the plaza; I guess he didn't want me in there, either. What was going on? It worried me a little.

“Here, Rigurd, you and Kaijin get out of the way. What’s going on?”

“Oh, um, just a small hiccup...”

“No talking your way out of it. Let me through.”

The Coercion skill I interlaced with my words made them all give up, opening the way for me. Just as they did, an explosion rumbled a little distance from the plaza. Even with the lowered magicule density, I could recognize the aura as Benimaru’s—and judging by the sounds of things, he was in battle.

“Is he fighting someone? Let’s go!”

I ran for the area. Rigurd and the others followed behind me, expressions of relief on their faces (not that they noticed).

As I expected, Benimaru was in battle—well, not a battle so much as him heaping one-sided torment upon his opponent. There was a team of high orcs surrounding him, all clad in black armor, led by Geld and watching the proceedings instead of helping Benimaru out. Geld was usually cool as a cucumber, but just like Benimaru, he was fired up right now.

His opponent was the beastman Gruecith. I wondered why someone serving Carillon was drawing Benimaru’s ire like that, but then I noticed Yohm behind him, lying limply on the ground, and a beautiful woman I had never seen before cradling him. It seemed like Gruecith was trying to protect them. Benimaru had yet to draw his sword, but his aura was practically gushing from his body, making it clear he was struggling to hold back his anger.

“*You seek to protect this woman, too?*” he asked. “We don’t have time for this right now. Get out of here at once.”

“Heh-heh! Can’t do that. No way I’d hand her over when all of you are so worked up like this!”

“Oh, ‘worked up,’ you say? If I was ‘worked up,’ I would have turned you into a pile of ash long ago, trust me. Just give it up and—”

“Not gonna happen! I’m on her side, no matter what!”

Then Gruecith sprang into action, zooming toward the still-unarmed Benimaru. He transformed in an instant, turning into what looked like a gray-furred werewolf. His speed was far beyond what he showed in the fight with Yohm as he rushed ahead, confronting him with a dagger in each hand.

“I told you to give it up!”

The daggers instantly vaporized the moment they made contact with the aura protecting Benimaru. It made Gruecith freeze in his tracks, just enough to let Benimaru catch him, pick him up with a single left hand, and hurl him against the ground. There was a dull thudding sound as cracks appeared in the earth. Blood flowed from his head.

It was the first demonstration of Benimaru’s force I had seen in a while, and it was on a completely different level from his opponent. Without even really trying, he had victory in hand from the start. But Gruecith refused to give up, springing right back to his feet.

“Ngh... But I’m still...”

“Pfft. Enough of this nonsense. If you continue to resist me, I will be forced to kill you, you understand?”

He tried lifting Gruecith again, a look of resignation on his face.

“Benimaru, stop!”

It was then that I finally shouted and put an end to this.

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Noticing me, Benimaru promptly let Gruecith go, and he fell to his knees, the aura flowing out of him coming to an instant stop, and the intensity in the air faded. Geld and the rest of the audience did the same, celebrating my return—but Yohm and Gruecith needed attending to first.

“Benimaru, what is going on here?”

“Well, my lord...”

He ran down the story for me as I had the two injured drink some potion. As he put it, a group of people disguised as merchants attempted to attack the town. They were quite a bit more powerful than expected, creating some serious chaos. “Then,” he said, “we were no longer able to use magic, and we could feel the strength ebb from us. Thanks to that, the people in town were—”

“Sir Benimaru!”

Rigurd shouted down Benimaru before he could finish. They exchanged glances with each other as Benimaru awkwardly nodded.

“Let us discuss that later... Regardless, however, we were weakened thanks to whatever magic that woman over there cast.”

Geld nodded deeply at this, telling me about how he tracked down this caster and attempted to capture her. Yohm got in his way, and they were forced to fight it out. The rest of Yohm’s force was not involved; they were still confined in their barracks for the time being. Things had definitely gotten a lot sourer than I thought.

Just then, a rejuvenated Yohm threw himself down at my feet.

“Rimuru, man, I’m sorry! I had no intention whatsoever of betraying you. All I wanted to do was protect Mjurran’s life!”

Mjurran, the mystery woman who had simply looked on dejectedly so far, stepped forward. “Enough, Yohm,” she said, looking a bit sad—somber and perhaps afraid of losing something dear to her. “Just go ahead and abandon me. There’s no need for you to be involved, too.”

“Please, Sir Rimuru,” Gruecith added, similarly prostrating himself before me. “I fully understand that, as your guest, I have no right to speak about this. But still... Please, could you at least hear her out?”

Benimaru and the others looked disgusted at this, but my return had at least calmed them somewhat. Geld was normally coolheaded; as freaked out he was, it must have been something pretty deep... But I couldn’t make any decisions on this until I heard the whole story. *Best to get both sides of this*, I thought as Mjurran quietly spoke once more.

“No, Yohm. No, Gruecith. I have no right to be protected by you. Who can say how much

this town has lost, thanks to me...? I was the one who engineered this tragedy..."

Rigurd winced at this. Benimaru averted his eyes. Kaijin just closed his and stood there awkwardly. This tragedy...? It *did* seem like something was being hidden from me, yes...

"Um, what do you mean by 'tragedy'?"

The silence my question conjured hung heavy until Mjurran stepped forward. Geld warily sized her up, requiring me to stop him.

"...Follow me," she said as she boldly walked off, apparently ready to accept all responsibility for the crime she committed. There was something beautiful about it, in a way. She was headed for the plaza in the middle of town, the place they'd tried to keep me from reaching earlier.

There, before my eyes, was an untold number of monsters on the ground—men, women, even children. I approached them. Every single one of them laid down there—

—was dead.

...How the hell did this happen?!

I felt my legs go weak. *What's going on here? Damn, my mind's racing on me.* There was about a hundred of them on the ground. *Huh...? And they're all dead...?*

You're kidding me!!

I heard one of the hobgoblin elders speak as I tried to take it all in.

"We followed your wishes, Sir Rimuru, and treated the merchants with kindness and civility. We had no idea there was evil among their ranks—"

"S-silence!" Rigurd shouted. "You make it sound as if Sir Rimuru is at fault!"

It was too late. The words battered harshly against my mind.

"I—I apologize. I had no intention of that..."

I could hear the apology from afar, but my heart wasn't open to it.

He was right. My orders, my words, were the cause.

I may be a monster... but I used to be a human being. I just wanted to be nice to people. Now, reality's setting in.

So what the hell's the right thing to do, then?!

...Who knows? That's what I'm supposed to figure out.

My irresponsible mind attacked me incessantly, but I couldn't let it dictate my actions. This was my fault, and it was up to me to shoulder the consequences. It felt like a torrent of regret, a wellspring of anger with no place to go, was gushing out of me. It was hard to think. I felt like I was breathing more rapidly, even though I didn't need to breathe in the first place. I had no physical heart, but I could still sense it racing.

It just didn't seem like reality. I almost splattered against the ground, unable to retain my human form. But that wasn't allowed. All I could do was grasp the situation and make sure I didn't pile mistake on top of mistake.

"What is...? What happened here?"

My voice was far away, cold and remote. It felt like all emotion in my mind had frozen.

"If I hadn't cast a great magic," Mjurran said as I attempted to stay on my feet, "I'm not sure any of this would have happened."

So this woman's... the cause of it? And that's why Benimaru was so riled up...?

...I've got to clear my head!!

Report. Great Magic: Anti-Magic Area does not weaken its targets in and of itself. In terms of a cause, it is believed the people who the individual Soei was investigating are

more relevant.

My mind echoed with the voice of my partner, someone never swayed by emotion.

No, but... Right. Calm down. This woman Mjurran was attempting to rile me up to the point that I'd kill her—and only her. She was diverting blame away from Yohm and Gruecith. I knew that, as long as I could keep my head cool...

Giving in to my rage and killing Mjurran wouldn't solve anything. It'd just be venting my anger.

It was only thanks to the Great Sage that I didn't make another mistake.

*

Thus we decided to get ourselves together and discuss matters somewhere else. On the way, I asked Rigurd if there were any other victims.

"No, my lord," he said, "we assembled all of them here. There are other injured, but Lady Shuna is taking care of them."

I was wondering why Shuna wasn't around, actually. That explained it. Our potion storage was all concentrated in the cave, so she was probably using her own healing magic for the job.

"Should I give them some potion, then?"

"N-no, I don't think that's necessary. I hate to put it like this, but our attackers were rather formidable... And surprisingly few people emerged only with injuries."

In other words, they were all killed off in one shot. I could feel my anger coming back. *Can't have that. I need to stay calm.*

"All right. Let's talk this over first."

.....

.....

...

Once we were all in the meeting hall and a bit more relaxed, I received my briefing. I put my mind to work, even as the shock made the whole thing feel like an out-of-body experience.

The first attackers were a trio who targeted Gobzo and got him into a conflict. That dopey face of his definitely made him look like an easy mark, and I bet it didn't take much to shout him into submission. Not that it was his fault, but he sure was unlucky to have this riffraff notice him.

The conflict seemed to make Gobzo look like the bad guy, but Gobta stepped in to resolve it quickly. What happened next was the problem—that was when the attackers revealed their full strength and conflict began in earnest. They were astonishingly strong, it seems, enough so to even give Hakuro a run for his money when he stepped into the fray. From how it was described to me, at least, they were the real deal.

"...If he hadn't been weakened," grumbled Benimaru, "Hakuro would never have been defeated."

He and Gobta were injured in the midst of all this, and now that made sense to me. They avoided death only because they gave their all in the fight. I'm sure neither of them was a fan of being told they lost, but if they survived, that was all that mattered. I was having Soei check out the energy-sapping barrier. He'd provide a report before long, no doubt, and all we'd have to do then was deal with that and take on the next fight fully prepared.

"After that," Rigurd continued, "a group of one hundred regular knights from the Kingdom of Farmus visited town. The attackers requested help from them, and the knights agreed, stating they would take on the task under the laws of humanity and the name of divinity. They refused to listen to our words. It was all too one-sided."

As he put it, the head of the knights shouted, "We came here to investigate reports of a nation of monsters, and what manner of chaos do I find?! In the name of humanity, we promise to provide aid to our defenseless comrades!" Then they all drew their swords and joined in the fracas, attacking both the monster soldiers and the residents looking on. This included children, indicating that they saw us as little more than

animals.

I'd told them to try their best not to be aggressive against human beings, and I guess that put them at a big disadvantage. It took time for Benimaru, Geld, and the rest to tackle the threat in earnest. "We should have made them give up their weapons before entering town," Benimaru commented—but there's no way these guys would do something like that of their own volition and without an order from me.

I figured they would contact me via Thought Communication about anything like that, and I paid dearly for that error. In the end, the cause all goes back to me.

One of the Farmus knights left a message before leaving. It went like this:

"This town is contaminated by the presence of monsters! As protectors of the law of humanity and as faithful followers of the One God Luminus, we refuse to acknowledge the existence of a monster nation! We have therefore signed an official pact with the Western Holy Church to consider how to deal with this country! We will return one week from today, commanded by our leader himself, the wise and noble King Edmaris. If you surrender and agree to fall under our rule, then by the name of our god, we will guarantee your continued existence. Give up your pointless resistance and surrender at once. If you do not, then in the name of Luminus, we will eradicate all of you from the face of the Earth!"

It was clear they didn't care at all about what we would do. Soei had already reported that the country was preparing for a military operation. All that stuff about "investigating" our nation was a big lie. Maybe they *were* doing that, but they had already decided that wiping us off the planet was the only option.

"What a charade."

"It certainly is." Rigurd nodded.

I recalled what Hinata had said: "Your town, you know... It's a bother to us. So we've decided to crush it." Farmus and the Western Holy Church must have been conspiring against us from the start. Instead of one taking advantage of the other, I imagined they teamed up because they shared a common interest.

So I told everyone about my battle with Hinata and the words we exchanged.

“...The head of the paladins?”

“Wow, boss. Nice job surviving that.”

Benimaru and Rigurd seemed unfamiliar with the woman, but Kaijin and the dwarven brothers were fully aware of her, and my story gave them a shock. Considering the dealings they’ve sustained with monsters, the Dwarven Kingdom and the Western Holy Church weren’t really on good terms—not bad enough that they were off to war tomorrow but more like each pretending that the other didn’t exist. They did keep some tabs on each other, though, as any nations would.

“Really,” Kaijin said, “even with the full might of the Dwargon military, it’d be a bad idea to make the Western Holy Church your enemy. But the Dwarven Kingdom is built kind of like a natural fortress, and they carefully check everyone who goes in and out of it. It’s that kind of protection that makes it hard for the Church to declare them an ‘enemy of god’ or whatnot. They both have a lot of history, though, and they’ve had hostilities in the past.”

I figured the Western Holy Church had it in for us because it saw monsters as these horrid things that could never be abided. But what about Farmus?

“Sir Rimuru,” a tentative voice said, “about that...”

This was Gard Mjöllmile, the merchant I met when he helped with our first large-scale potion sale; he had listened in silence up to now, seated alongside a few other merchants and adventurers. I had called in several people from the kingdom of Blumund so I could get a second opinion on all this; I just wanted to learn the truth, so I decided having them listen in wasn’t a big deal. It seemed to pay off, as nobody in the hall suspected us of being anything besides the victims here.

The rest of our visitors currently in town were being cared for in the guesthouse. The fact that none of them was hurt was the only silver lining, really. Rigurd suggested it, figuring that the ornateness of the place would calm their frayed nerves. I love how much I can count on him. It’s a far cry from his goblin days, definitely.

“Ah, Mjöllmile. Go ahead.”

I tried to address him as informally as possible. All of our other leaders—Benimaru, Rigurd, Geld—were still seething with anger, so the atmosphere in the hall was rather taut. I was pretty emotionally spent myself, making it hard to be my usual open-

minded self. I knew it was a bad thing, but I couldn't shake out of that cycle. It was no doubt rubbing off on Mjöllmile, making him oddly silent.

"I know this is heartbreaking for all of you, but with the situation being what it is, I felt the need to speak up."

I appreciated the thought.

"At this point, we have a brand-new trade route that runs through Tempest. It has already begun to change the way merchants distribute their goods. It is still not broadly known about outside of Blumund and its neighboring nations, but once word begins to spread, it will become known across the Western Nations in the blink of an eye. As a result..."

"As a result?"

"...Well, I imagine it wouldn't be out of the question for someone to think about conquering this nation before word gets out."

As Mjöllmile put it, any perceptive leader wouldn't fail to understand the importance of this trade route. The income from tariffs alone would be a likely fortune. That, and Farmus—the gateway to the Western Nations, as it were—was prospering in no small part thanks to just that kind of income. If a new trade route opened here, Farmus stood to lose the most from it.

To them, no doubt, they didn't want any of this to exist; they'd have no effective way to stop people from coming here instead of there. You'd figure the best way to tackle that was to shore up their own infrastructure and make travel easier, but that required a vast amount of money. Building roads from scratch took time as well. There was no ready response they could take.

I didn't intend to be the kind of leader who pursued only what was best for Tempest, ignoring how other countries profited or lost from it. If we were seeking to coexist with the rest of the world, I figured, I wanted everyone to profit from us. But I was still such an amateur at this. There's no way I could perfectly understand how this world was connected, and I must have stepped on the tails of one too many tigers here.

"Indeed," stated a merchant whose name I didn't know, "the king of Farmus is notorious for his greediness. Even if he didn't take a military solution, I could see him looking at the profits being made here and reaching out for a slice."

"That's a good point," I replied. "I'm not a genius at this, but even I think this approach is a little strange."

"It is. Taking action like this, without going through the Council..."

"As an adventurer, I can't say how Blumund's gonna respond to this, but this move on Farmus's part makes no sense to me. Pulling such an obvious trick and attacking women and children, even..."

"Yeah. We like this place, you know? And if they're gonna attack in a week, I'm willing to help if you're fighting back."

"But the Church called you all enemies of their god...? That's not exactly good news."

Mjöllmile's observation opened the floodgates for more feedback from the merchants and adventurers. I appreciated all the helpful advice. It really felt like they were looking out for us—in other words, unlike the Farmus knights who dismissed us as monsters, these people really saw us as their friends. The fact that some of them were even willing to take up arms for us surprised me quite a bit. I thanked them for the sentiment but turned them down. The reason was simple: I didn't want to get them caught up in this.

"I appreciate how all of you feel," Rigurd said, "but this is a problem that we need to wrap up by ourselves. What I want you to do instead is return to your native lands and spread the word about this as quickly as possible."

"Oh? We could just send out a wagon."

"Staying here might not be a good idea for all of you, though..."

"How do you mean?"

I explained it to them. Maybe I was overthinking matters, but the worst-case scenario in my head seemed all too believable. The way I saw it, Farmus and the Western Holy Church no doubt wanted to declare to everyone in the Western Nations that Tempest was a den of evil. If and when they did, having our local residents advocating for us would be a hindrance to the propaganda effort.

If Blumund wasn't siding with them, would Farmus consider residents like these just a hindrance? Because if they *did* spread the word, Farmus's act would become

notorious nationwide. The Council might even pursue the matter. How would Farmus prevent that? Well, they were the type of nation to make militaristic threats from the get-go instead of negotiating. To them, the hundred-ish Blumundian residents here meant nothing. They'd kill them, make sure they could never talk, and maybe even blame it on us. It'd help further the impression that we were a ferocious threat, and it'd provide the Holy Church just what it wanted. Two birds with one stone.

That's why I wanted them all back in their native nations and pleading our case for us. They were the best character witnesses we could ask for.

"I see. So we're lower than dogs in their eyes, eh...?"

"Killing us and pinning the blame on Tempest..."

"It does sound possible, yes."

"Especially if it's a human's word against a monster's, if you'll pardon my rudeness."

"But in that case," Rigurd replied, "I'm not sure how we would transport everyone out of here. I would like to lend you guards, but in essence, we're pinned to within our own borders for now."

It was a valid question, and I already had an answer for it.

"That's no problem. I'd like all of you to go back to your quarters and prepare to leave for now. I promise safe passage to the outskirts of Blumund."

Then I began my own preparations. The Blumundians were confused, I'm sure, but they followed my request without further questions and filed back to the guesthouse.

*

So. Time to switch gears. Rigurd and Benimaru briefed me on the attack; our Blumundian guests explained their position and opinions. Now it was time to speak to the woman herself: Mjurran, who had sat silently and watched up to now.

"All right," I began. "Can you explain in detail, please, about the events that led to your meddling with our nation?"

She explained in a calm voice. "I am one of the 'five fingers,' the closest servants of the

demon lord Clayman. As his nickname ‘Marionette Master’ hints, he uses his subordinates like puppets, making them do exactly what he wants. I am one of those puppets. He assigned me to spy on this nation, and I used Yohm to gain entry into it.”

She went on in detail. It sounded like the cold, hard truth to me, no lying or excuses mixed in. Clayman, it seemed, was the kind of boss who used and abused the crap out of those under him. Mjurran was the so-called “ring finger” of the group. She used to enjoy a position of favor, providing essential information to Clayman on a variety of subjects, but now he saw her as used up and not particularly worthy of attention, although he claimed he would free her upon completing this mission.

Milim told me that Clayman loved scheming behind the scenes, attempting to outwit his opponents. It sounded about right. I was sure nothing Clayman did would ever bother Milim very much, but to the magic-born who served him, every day must have been a life-and-death tightrope walk.

Magic-born like Mjurran served Clayman for a number of reasons, but most of them were either threatened by or magically bound to him. Her own mission in life was to complete her research and peer into the deepest depths of magic, and she had taken Clayman’s offer for immortality and an eternally young body. In exchange, she had lost herself, living purely to follow Clayman’s orders.

“I know it was stupid of me,” she added with a regretful look on her face, “but my heart was taken from me with a secret skill known as Marionette Heart. I no longer have control over my own destiny, and carrying out his bidding is the only thing I can do.”

So she was just following orders. Apparently, she learned from Gruecith that Milim had declared war on the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, and she surmised that Clayman sent her here to keep us from interfering. Now, though, she realized that a mission like that could be carried out simply by blocking magical communication; there wasn’t any need for this massive (and non-hidable) magic barrier.

He had said that doing this would guarantee her freedom, but she knew the chances of pulling the job off successfully were slim. She had to do it anyway, though, or else Clayman threatened to strike at Yohm and his team. So she decided to take him at his word, that this was his last command. She didn’t really have any intention of surviving, as she put it; her death would ensure that Yohm and friends wouldn’t have to face any consequences.

"Things are starting to grow interesting," Clayman reportedly said to her in his last message. "There's going to be an enormous war! Certain unexpected events have led to developments I did not anticipate, but who can say how it will turn out?"

Mjurran had thought—erroneously, as it happened—that he meant a war between the demon lords Milim and Carillon. Now it looked like he was talking about *this* conflict, the one between Tempest and Farmus. Which sounded right to me. Clayman's part in this was to work alongside Farmus's moves and block any outside contact from Tempest. It certainly *would* be difficult to avoid war that way—and Mjurran's great magic pulled one hell of a job on us. This wasn't just plain old jamming magic. It was position-based, and since it was meant to block all contact, it couldn't be easily undone.

Killing Mjurran at this point wouldn't release the magic. It took time to disappear—nearly a week. Even if we wanted help from other countries, magical communication didn't work. It would take time to make contact with Blumund or the Dwarven Kingdom without magic. There was just too little time to address Farmus, which already had their boots on the ground.

We were behind the eight ball here, for sure. But ah well. I can get out from under the barrier, and there's a communication crystal waiting for me in the cave. That's where Clayman's plan begins to fall apart.

All the same, I didn't want to get Dwargon or Blumund involved in this. I just wanted people there to be on our side, so to speak. Really, if it wasn't for the Western Holy Church's involvement, I would've had both countries conduct some large-scale battle exercises or something to keep Farmus in check. With the Church backing them up now, I couldn't get those nations involved for no reason.

In a war, each side has certain advantages and disadvantages, but each battle is also a test to see how long each side can hold out. If Farmus didn't fall back under threat and continued with their military activity, it'd involve Dwargon, Blumund, *and* the Western Holy Church, turning the whole thing irreversibly into a major war. If the Church declared our allies and us to be their enemies and spread the word across the entire world, I couldn't deny that it'd be a world war for all of us. That's exactly what Clayman would want; he'd naturally use the chaos to carry out some nefarious secret plan of his.

Even if it was Milim against Carillon, I had no way of stopping it. If only my own nation

wasn't in so much trouble... Although, that's thanks to Clayman, too. Throwing me into confusion, mixing things up... I suppose I'll just have to trust in Milim and put my own priorities first.

It all made me realize, for the first time, that between what Milim and Mjurran told me, this demon lord Clayman was one dangerous enemy. It was a hunch, but it seemed to be a correct one. Mjurran told me that Gel mud was one of Clayman's other agents, too—unlike what Milim said, she claimed that he was being fully controlled by the demon lord. Any of the other demon lords who worked with Clayman on that endeavor were being tricked. He had a knack for moving his pawns to the right place at the right time and never leaving any evidence behind. I couldn't say how strong he actually was, but he was definitely a master at maneuvering under cover.

Mjurran also suspected that Clayman was behind the battle between Milim and Carillon... but I didn't have any evidence of that. Someone as, um, straightforward-thinking as Milim could be easily goaded into something like that, it's true... but between his misleading words, the careful way he never revealed his true intentions, and the slyness it took to break promises without a second thought, all signs showed that Clayman was a demon lord who could never be trusted.

And if you go even further down this rabbit hole—the Great Sage suggested that Clayman might have planned to leave that communication crystal in the cave the whole time. You know, just to make me think I outfoxed him and call for reinforcements from my allies. It wasn't an unthinkable scenario, so I filed it away in my mind.

With Mjurran's story all told, I now knew how we all wound up where we were. Her heart wasn't given back, of course; she was seen entirely as a throwaway piece—a mere pawn.

Whether I would forgive her or not was another question.

"Look," Yohm said, "I know you're angry and everything, but I *really* hope you can let Mjurran off the hook for this!"

"I have the same request," Gruecith added, eyes pleading with me. "There's just no way she could defy Clayman, that's all!"

Turning them down would make me look a bit like a villain, wouldn't it? Now what do I do?

"I'll think about your fate once all this is over. For now, I just want you to stay in your room. Don't think about escaping."

"All right—"

"Rimuru..."

"Sorry, Yohm. My mind's all mixed up right now, too. If you're worried, you can always stay with your men in their rooms."

So I saved the question for later and ordered Yohm and his band to remain in their own quarters, asking Rigurd to appoint guards to watch them. I doubted they were going to betray me at this point, but you could never be too careful. I was doing this in part because, if they *did* try something funny, that would seal Mjurran's fate for good. Yohm, realizing this, agreed to the order and returned to his quarters.

*

After all that briefing and interviewing, I went back outside. The visitors from Blumund were milling around, waiting for me.

"We're ready to go, Sir Rimuru, but what should we do, exactly?"

I had them outfitted with all the extra wagons we had in town, so they finished up quicker than I thought. I nodded at them and guided them a little ways outside of town, all one hundred or so of them following me in orderly fashion.

"I wanted to provide guards for them," a repentant-sounding Benimaru said, "but none of us can get past this barrier..."

"Not a problem. Now's not the time to be stingy with my magic. It's gonna take a lot of energy, but I'll figure it out."

So I left my monster cohorts within the barrier and guided the human visitors past it.

"We will hurry back home as quickly as we possibly can, Sir Rimuru."

I raised a hand in response. “Before that, Mjöllmile... Can I have everybody here promise to keep what I’m about to do a secret?”

“Hmm?” Mjöllmile raised an eyebrow, already well aware of the kind of nonsense I occasionally pull off (much to my chagrin). “What are you planning to do *this* time...?”

“This time? You’re always expecting the worst from me, aren’t you?”

“Ha-ha-ha! No, no, you’ve provided me with so much, Sir Rimuru!”

“Heh. You said it.”

Mjöllmile and I slapped each other on the shoulder.

“I hope you will keep yourself safe.”

“Ah, I’ll be fine. I’m not a fan of fighting battles I can’t win.”

Then I activated Spatial Motion, deploying it across a wide swath of land. Everyone looked on in shock. Benimaru and Geld watched from within the barrier, both surprised and exasperated.

“The outskirts of Blumund’s about the best I can do for you all. It won’t last long, so hurry up and hop in there.”

The visitors nodded at me, faces still frozen in disbelief, as they filed on ahead. None of them asked any more questions, which I appreciated. Magic exists in this world—everyone knows that—so it takes more than a little pixie dust to really alarm these guys.

I made them promise to spread the word and provide as much support for our cause as they could. But would it have much effect? We were already at war. We couldn’t make any really brash moves—not against the Western Holy Church. They’d have to provide military support if I asked for it, as our pacts with them stipulated... But I didn’t want that, and there wasn’t much else they could do as a nation, I don’t think.

Better not expect much... and there’s no need to, really. This was our nation’s problem, and I intended to make the Kingdom of Farmus pay amply for it—by my own hand. If I didn’t, I knew, I’d never have a chance to make up for the anguish all those dead felt.

*

I watched our visitors go as I mentally pored over my situation. I had been delayed a bit longer than I thought, but now I decided to help out Shuna with the wounded. Rigurd mentioned an errand or something he wanted done, but I figured he could handle that without me.

Heading over to the building that served as our hospital, I found two people laid up in beds, Shuna providing nursing care and Kurobe helping her out.

“How are they looking?”

“Oh, Sir Rimuru!”

“Sir Rimuru, I don’t know what I can say to you...”

Shuna looked tired, and Kurobe was a lot more hesitant than usual. I told them to relax a bit as I examined the patients. These were Hakuro and Gobta, both sporting large and bloodied wounds.

“Whoa, these are some serious slash wounds! Why don’t we just use these...”

I whipped some potion out of my pocket and sprinkled it on both of them. Nothing in particular happened in the healing department.

“I apologize,” Rigurd said, lowering his head. “We have already made the attempt. I’m afraid we will have to rely on Shuna’s care...”

As leader of our nation, I had to decide on our future direction. I was also responsible for handling the remaining resident visitors from other countries. That’s why Rigurd didn’t want to worry me further.

Hakuro, despite looking like he stepped off a horror movie set, still gave me a smile. “Nh... Do not concern yourself about me, Sir Rimuru. I am fine. This injury was likely brought about by a skill invoked by the attackers. In time, the skill’s effects will fade, and I will heal up then. Gobta is a well-trained apprentice of mine; he won’t die like a dog over something like this.”

I should’ve expected nothing less from him. It almost made me cry, but I held it back and returned the smile. No way the master of all these monsters could show tears to

anyone.

"Ha-ha! Well, glad to see your spirits are high, at least. Let me see this wound. Maybe I can do something about it."

I checked over his body.

"Sir Rimuru," Shuna said, "the wound is caused by an air-type attack. We need to keep him stable and full of stamina until it heals naturally over time."

She had already used her Parser skill to figure out what was up with him. I was of the same opinion as her; it sounded like the right thing.

Air type, though? That sounded like something I might be able to harness for myself. I've already analyzed a high-level spirit. Let's see if this works...

Understood. The effects of the air element have been confirmed. Use Glutton to acquire this effect?

Yes

No

The Great Sage followed through more than I expected. I thought YES and sprinkled some more potion on Hakuro's wound.

"Oh... Ohhh! Amazing, Sir Rimuru..."

I left Hakuro to marvel by himself as I attended to Gobta.

"I should have known," Shuna said with a light smile—one with just a twinge of gloominess to it. A sort of *hmm?* level of doubt. And that reminded me...

...Or it would have if Gobta didn't choose that moment to leap right out of bed.

"Gobzo! You all right?!"

"Hey! Gobta!"

It took Rigurd yelling at him to make him realize where he was. He blinked once or twice.

“Oh wow, so... am I good?”

I scoped him out as I decided to ask Shuna about the thing that bothered me just now. Someone I expected to be here with her wasn’t present. If she was, I’m sure she would’ve been carrying on about me to no end.

“Hey, where’s Shion, by the way? I haven’t seen her lately...”

The question made everybody in the room—Rigurd, Shuna, Benimaru, even Hakuro—freeze. *What’s with that reaction? Whoa, whoa, there’s no way...*

“Don’t tell me,” I said, “that idiot’s gone to get revenge all by herself?”

“Oh man!” Gobta nodded warily at me. “And maybe Gobzo, too? He’s so absentminded; he’s probably running full-speed without realizing how badly outmatched he is...”

“N-no, it’s not that... Um...”

Huh? This was getting weird. Nobody was looking me in the eye.

“Okay, so where’d she go?”

No answer. I looked up to find Shuna turning her face away from me, eyes growing watery. I had a bad feeling. Gobta looked just as concerned. *No way*, I said to myself. *That could never happen.*

“...All right. I’m not going to be angry, so can you tell me where she is...?”

“...Very well,” Benimaru finally replied. “Over here. Follow me.”

I nodded, and we began to move...

*

Our destination was the central plaza.

And there she was, lying right in the middle of the neatly made rows. There was a

white cloth covering her, ensuring she wouldn't be easily spotted—by me or anyone else. Ha-ha. As if I'd just never wonder about where she went... It wasn't funny.

Open your eyes—

I couldn't believe it.

Open your eyes for me—

I didn't want to believe it. *Why? Why did it turn out like this...?*

Next to me, I could hear Gobta sobbing and shouting, "Gobzooooooooo?!" as loudly as he could. I paid him no mind as my ears turned toward the voice providing what sounded like a faraway explanation.

Shion had been protecting a child targeted by one of the attackers.

With her own body, weakened by the plummeting magicule level.

She couldn't move, and then an attacker came...

Gobzo had been trying to protect Lady Shuna.

He didn't have anywhere near the strength for the job.

The attacker just laughed at him as he swung...

The words were meant for me, but I didn't want to hear them. Each syllable gouged its way into my brain. *Open your eyes, Shion...* I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. My heart felt like it was going to burst, but this body didn't feel any need to shed tears.

Yeah, I thought. I guess I really am a monster. Somehow, it seemed so incredibly convincing now.

"I'm sorry. Leave me alone for a little while..."

Silence enveloped the plaza. I could feel everyone edging away from me. Shuna was the only one to give me a tearful hug before she joined them alongside Gobta, Hakuro

placing a hand around his shoulders. *Sorry, Gobta. I know you just want to say good-bye to Gobzo, but...*

...Yeah. I wanted to be alone. I no longer had a grip on myself. I felt like I was going insane, but my mind was sharp as a tack. There were tempestuous levels of sadness, regret, and anger, all crashing against one another in a mad contest to find an exit.

—*Why did all of this happen?*

Report. Cannot calculate, comprehend, or reply.

—*What would've been the right thing to do?*

Report. Cannot calculate, comprehend, or reply.

—*Was getting involved with human beings a mistake?*

Report. Cannot calculate, comprehend, or reply.

—*Come on... Was I wrong?*

Report. Cannot calculate, comprehend, or reply.

That's right. Even with the untold powers of the Great Sage, there were some problems that just didn't have an answer.

—*Goddamn it. If this wasn't our town... If it wasn't our town, I could've just flown into a rage, mowing down everything in my path. Goddamn it all. Taking so many people dear to me...*

Looking back, this was the first time I was there to see someone close to me die. I had never gone through a loss like that, and now I understood the sadness involved. I felt it vividly, with a pain more intense than being slashed ear to ear. Cancel Pain wasn't

cutting it for this one—not against the all-too-strong currents of magic and emotion within me.

It was maybe too much for my new mask. A crack appeared on it, almost looking like a tear of sadness. I couldn't cry, so it seemed like the mask was weeping for me.

Somewhere down the line, night fell. I gazed at the moon.

What should I do?

There was no answer. My mind was clear, but I couldn't come up with a single thought. I looked up at the moon and kept asking myself, over and over, for an eternity. Even though I knew there was no way to find an answer. But I couldn't stop. It was so foolish, but I couldn't stop.

And I never noticed the small light, the reflection from the moon, that was upon me.

*

Three days passed. Shion didn't wake up. She's sleeping in *way* too late. I wish she'd knock that off.

.....

No, I know. I understood that she'd never open those eyes again. But I didn't want to admit it. I wanted her back to her usual stupid antics, making her terrible meals. Gobzo, too. I didn't know him well. We exchanged a few words on the way to the Dwarven Kingdom. But Gobta loved him as a valued sentry. He was his friend.

All the monsters who lay here had valuable relationships in their lives. No—it wasn't like these monsters lacked any kinds of feelings. They were my most cherished companions. My family. I wanted to enjoy life with them again... but it just wasn't going to happen.

There's no way to resurrect the dead.

What do we do?

Do monsters not count as people? Does that mean we'll be forced into subjugation without a passing thought as to our own feelings?

—*That better mean they're prepared to be subjugated, too.*

Dark emotions began to get the better of me.

And just then:

Report. Analysis and Assessment of the compound barrier and Great Magic: Anti-Magic Area covering it is completed. Removing the compound barrier will be difficult, but the great magic can be canceled. Execute?

Yes

No

No, we don't need to yet.

The Great Sage must've just wrapped up that request for me. As it did, I realized that Thought Communication messages had been coming in through the Sticky Steel Thread wrapped around my neck for a while now. I had been contacted almost constantly for the past three days. I made Soei worry for me, which I regretted.

“...Sorry. I didn’t notice.”

“Ah...! You are safe? I am so relieved.”

It was clear from Soei’s tone of voice. It also made me realize that everyone else must have been just as worried. I could whine and plead to myself later. We had a time limit, and I had things to do.

So I asked Soei how things were. Our enemies had set up battle encampments in the four cardinal directions around town, each one holding a company’s worth of knights. The magical machinations protecting each one were apparently projecting the same type of barrier that had weakened our townspeople. Sadly, the power of Soei and his

team alone wouldn't be enough to take down even one of these camps. He had also detected transportation magic at work; if we wasted time, they might call for reinforcements.

"All right. Don't stretch yourself too thin. Join up with Gabil and rest."

"But..."

"That's an order. Rest."

"...Yes, my lord."

I wasn't accepting any other reply. I couldn't make Soei's team do something reckless and get them killed as a result. I just couldn't.

So, about that barrier.

Simply canceling out the magic wouldn't do anything for us. What I really wanted to do was address the weakening effect it had somehow. Being a "compound barrier" or whatever it was made it a much thornier issue than I had expected.

But that could wait. What about the other search I had going?

Report. No search results found. Failed to find any magic related to complete resurrection of the dead.

...Ah. No, I suppose not. Nothing *that* handy can be found too easily. It makes sense. You never know for sure, though, until you check. As pointless as I thought it was, as useless a struggle as it must have looked, I couldn't stop myself.

Shion didn't open her eyes. Neither did Gobzo nor the rest of them. Of course they wouldn't. They weren't sleeping.

But I still put all my skills in motion to find some kind of measure I could take. All the bodies here, Shion's included, were being preserved by my magical force—to keep them from decomposing, from reverting back into piles of magicules and

disappearing. I knew it was pointless, but I was still betting on the possibility.

But nothing.

There were no resurrection spells in the magic books I scanned through back at that library. I guess there wouldn't be. I had to stop grieving like this. *Let's just give them the rest they deserve in my body, as I pray they'll wake up someday.*

With that decided, I prepared to absorb them all—and that's when my Magic Sense told me about several figures approaching.

*

It was the trio of Kabal and his friends. It made sense. With the order I gave, it'd have to be someone from out of town if anyone was coming near me right now. I guess they had been traveling night and day on the wagon I gave them to come here.

“...I’m sorry we’re late, boss.”

“Rimuru, um, I gotta admit I really don’t know what to say here...”

Kabal and Gido no doubt wanted to say, *Hang on, you’ll get over this*, that kind of thing. Elen stopped them before they could.

“Rimuru, I... I can’t say this has much of a chance of succeeding... or, like, *any*, really... but there are several fairy tales about coming back from the dead...”

Now was no time to be depressed. The statement made all the diverging thought processes in my mind snap back into place.

“Can you tell me more about them, Elen?”

I turned toward her. If there was any chance, I wasn’t about to refrain from betting on it. She nodded and began to speak.

.....

.....

...

A story about a girl and her pet dragon.

Through assorted events, the girl's dragon was killed. She grieved over the loss of her only friend, and with her head full of anger, she destroyed the country that had carried out the killing—along with several hundred thousand people who lived there.

The girl evolved into a demon lord, and then a miracle occurred—the dragon connected to the girl evolved right alongside her, regardless of its death. But that was the end of the miracle. The dragon had lost its soul at the moment it died, and as a result, it revived in the form of a chaos dragon. It still followed its master's orders but now brought nothing but death and destruction to everyone else.

Thus, no longer driven by anger, the demon lord shed tears for her pet, her best friend, as she sealed away the chaos dragon herself. That's where the story ends.

Elen's story was a fairy tale, but it had a suspicious amount of detail to it. There were also stories about vampires using a spell called Bloodraise, as well as necromancers using Raise Dead on the dead to make them their servants. The Great Sage picked up on those, too, but it wasn't what I was looking for. It changed the target too much, making them into a different person from when they were alive.

In the realm of holy magic, there *was* something called Resurrection, the so-called miracle of the gods... but there were tons of restrictions on it. It was no panacea. And what's more, all these magics (except for Bloodraise, which was species specific) were treated as "forbidden spells," passed on strictly orally and never written into a book.

But that didn't matter. The issue was that "evolve" thing. Monsters evolved all the time here, for reasons that were beyond me. Just giving them a name was a huge deal to them. Maybe there was some potential there? Maybe if *I* could just become a demon lord myself...

...just as that girl's pet evolved and revived itself...

But I didn't want creepy, soulless minions on my hands. And not even the Great Sage could use its analysis tools to determine whether their souls were still there or not.

But... hang on? Right now, this town was completely covered by a barrier that no

monsters can go through. Maybe that's keeping their souls in here, too, preventing them from flying to the four winds.

Understood. The chances of the souls of the individual Shion and the rest of the monsters being preserved within this space is... 3.14 percent.

Whoa! It's pi!

Well, okay, maybe not quite. It felt like a low number to me, but I had to think about it the other way around. It needed to feel like a big one. I mean, over a 3 percent chance of literally being able to resurrect someone. Plus, there's no way someone as tenacious as Shion or as dopey as Gobzo could die. I couldn't let it happen. They had to be doggedly clinging to this world, waiting for my help.

Now I had some hope. Next, I just had to carry it out. Of course, that assumed I could even become a demon lord, of course...

Understood. You currently satisfy the requirements for evolving into the demon lord type. In order to carry out evolution into a "true demon lord," the process must be nourished with the sacrifices of at least ten thousand humans.

Oh, that's it? Well, easy, then. Demon lord? Oh, I'm *totally* becoming a demon lord. *Way* simpler process than I thought. Hopefully all those garbage troops around the outskirts of town number at least ten thousand. But hell, if there aren't enough, I'll just add some more. If it brings Shion and everyone else back, I have absolutely no reason to waver.

Then I came back to my senses.

"Thanks for telling me about that, Elen. Are you sure about what you're saying, though? I mean, you're basically telling me to become a demon lord."

I looked at her. She stared down at the ground silently, but just for a moment as she made up her mind. She returned my gaze, face resolute.

"Well, you know, I come from the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, and... You know, I really looked up to adventurers and the freedom they had. But you know what? I'm done. I want to help out Shion, too, besides. I can't let Farmus and the Western Holy Church get away with what they've done. I hate people who think monsters are evil just because they're monsters. I know that telling you about this isn't something I can ever go back on, buuut... I don't know. It's just terrible, I think, leaving things like this."

And with that, she went on to explain that continuing to be adventurers would put undue strain on the Free Guild, so she wanted to change her band's "home" to our nation. Live here, even, if possible.

Elen's real name was Ellwyn, apparently, and she came from a noble family in Thalion. After being trained at the royal academy, she left the country in search of an adventuring career.

The confession made Kabal shake his head silently and Gido turn upward toward the sky, eyes closed. "Ah well," Kabal said. "If that's what the lady wants, you'll see no complaints from me as her bodyguard."

"Me neither. Guess it'll be 'Lady Elen' from now on, huh?"

The other two, it turned out, weren't exactly standard adventurers, either. Upon further questioning, Kabal and Gido revealed that they had followed Elen out of Thalion to serve as her personal guards. They were also good friends, obviously, given how they trusted her without question just now. Talk about a great trio. I was a little jealous of them.

"So, um, probably, when you become a demon lord, Rimuru, it's gonna be totally obvious pretty quickly that I tipped you off. Thalion's spy agency already knows that I'm involved with you, so it won't take long for them to connect the dots. So... you know. Until then, I want to help you out as much as I can here. I want to see how it all works out in the end."

She knew she wouldn't be living a life of adventuring freedom for much longer. And she wanted to spend that last bit of freedom here.

All three of them looked at me, faces stern. If I allowed them to live here, it might force me to tangle with Thalion in the future. I didn't know what kind of impact their reaction would have on us, but they couldn't just ignore one of their nobility in the

custody of a foreign nation. It didn't seem like she was in any real danger, though, and all she wanted right now was to be around for this battle... I wasn't exactly sure what I thought about it, but it was a question we could safely save for later.

"All right. Well, let's leave that for the future. I'd kind of like to avoid making any more enemies than I need to..."

"Oh? Aw, but it's all right if I stick around long enough to see if you can save Shion, isn't it?"

"All right. You're the one who tipped me off. You can stick around until it's over. But you realize that my becoming a demon lord might change me. I may even wind up attacking you guys. I can't take responsibility for it if I do, but are you okay with that?"

"Hmm... I wouldn't like that too much, no, but a little too late to worry about that now! I'll just have to believe in you, Rimuru!"

"Whoa! Is *that* how much we're involved now? Hoo boy. A little too late, indeed!"

"That's right, Gido. A little too late for that. That's Lady Elen for you, isn't it? It's always like this with her."

The two bodyguards sighed. It didn't seem to harm their loyalty at all, though.

Thanks to all this, I finally had a plan. I could save Shion, and Gobzo, and all the rest! And if it meant becoming a demon lord, then I was all in. The enemy forces were attacking in four days. I had a firm grasp of the situation. Now it was time to take action.

*

With the decision made, things could proceed faster now.

Step one was keeping all these monsters' souls from dissipating. For that, I adjusted the great magic I'd acquired with Analyze and Assess and used it to strengthen the barrier around town. It wasn't clear exactly how much longer Mjurran's magic would last, and I was afraid it'd flip off like a light switch and send their souls flying. It cost me a surprisingly vast amount of magicules, but it was nothing I couldn't deal with now.

If anything, compared to the utter despair up until yesterday, I was practically elated.

Good thing I thought to analyze that barrier, even though I didn't see much of a point. That connected everything together really well, opening up our big chance to get Shion and the rest back.

My casting that great magic sent Benimaru and the others running toward me in shock, of course.

"Sir Rimuru, what have you...?"

"Benimaru, get everybody together here! I'm gonna hold a conference to outline our future plans!"

"Wha...?! Yes, my lord!"

They ran right back off, my orders putting a spring in their step.

"Elen, Kabal, Gido... I'm sorry I made you guys worry. I'm a lot better now."

"Rimuru..."

I smiled at Elen as I placed my cracked mask back in my pocket. The show seemed to relieve them a little, too.

"If there's anything we can do to help," Elen said, "just say it!"

"Heh-heh! Yeah, you've been a big help to us. Now it's our turn to step up!"

"You said it, Kabal!"

It made me happy, hearing that. I appreciated it, but I didn't want the trio actively participating in the war for me. I'd have them explain the situation one more time at the conference, though. I wanted all of us, not just me, working together.

"All right," I said before leaving them. "Would you guys mind joining me in the conference, then? I've got something to handle in the meantime."

I then walked directly toward the quarters being used by Yohm and his team. Yohm looked flustered to see me as I walked in the door.

“R-Rimuru?!”

“I’ve decided upon Mjurran’s punishment, Yohm. Where is she?”

“Um, resting upstairs, but...”

The word *punishment* disquieted him even further. I felt bad about it, but what I had in mind just wasn’t something I could tell him. Not yet.

The moment I was up the stairs, I faced Mjurran and spoke.

“Mjurran, you’re going to die for me.”

“Hey?!” I heard Yohm yelp. I ignored him. Mjurran looked at me, eyes full of surprise, but gave me a resigned nod. She was prepared for this eventuality.

“Sir Rimuru, that—”

Gruecith tried to cut me off, but I wasn’t about to let him. Then Yohm stood between her and me.

“Well, I’m sorry, pal, but I’m here to protect her!”

He knew he had no chance at all, but he still tried to resist me. He’s such a nice guy that way. I mean it.

So I bound both him and Gruecith in Sticky Steel Thread.

“Rimuru, *please!!*”

Mjurran gave them a light smile. “I loved you, Yohm. You’re the first person I’ve fallen for in all my life. If there’s such a thing as reincarnation, I hope I can live together with you in my next life, so... Good-bye, then. Try not to fall for a bad woman next time, all right?”

Another smile, and then she closed her eyes. I love that resolve. You don’t see women as good as her too often. To be honest, this act was making me feel tremendously guilty... But hey.

So, without hesitation, I plunged my hand right through Mjurran’s chest in a chopping

motion. Her head lurched forward, powerless, as Yohm and Gruecith screamed their heads off. Then—with a look of utter confusion and puzzlement on her face—she opened her eyes again.

“Um... I’m not dying. That didn’t even hurt.”

Well, yeah. I know I said she’d die for me, but I wasn’t planning on killing her. You hear stories about people dying and coming back to life all the time, don’t you? I had a bunch of people I needed alive again, Shion included, and I figured I’d try my luck at padding the probabilities a little here.

“Oh, um, yeah. You *were* dead, for maybe, oh, three seconds?”

“...Huh?”

“Wha—?”

“What does that mean?”

Report. The individual Mjurran’s “pseudo-heart” has begun regular operation.

Nice. Came off without a hitch. With the Sage’s confirmation, I removed my hand from Mjurran’s chest.

“Well, the operation’s a success, I guess, so let me explain what I did. You don’t have to look at me like *that*, guys. Have a seat and kick back if you want.”

“Whoa, pal, what kinda crazy talk are you giving me?”

“There better be a good explanation for this,” Gruecith grumbled. Look at them! Crying just a moment ago and now whining and complaining. Mjurran, meanwhile, was just as calm as always.

“Shut up, guys! Mjurran’s gonna laugh at you if you keep carrying on like that. So the deal is, the temporary heart inside Mjurran was being used so Clayman could listen in on her. It’s a form of encrypted communication that runs on electric signals and natural magnetism, so it doesn’t use up any magicules at all.”

In essence, alongside providing a pulse and electrical signals for the body, her heart also emitted encrypted signals that ran across the Earth and made it all the way to Clayman. He was forcing her to file detailed reports with him anyway, just to make sure she never noticed.

It was an underhanded trick worthy of a demon lord. Those rumors about how he treated his staff were true. But you had to hand it to him, too. If he was pulling something similar with all his people, that's a vast amount of encoded information he was receiving and unraveling in his head. No wonder they called him the Marionette Master. It's that huge network of data he collected that served as the invisible "strings" on his puppets.

Funny coincidence that I managed to notice that. Or maybe not so much actually. You could call it proof that Shion's still helping me out. When I cast that great magic to prevent all those souls from fading out, the Great Sage discovered an all-electronic signal that the barrier reacted to. It was easy for it to decipher the coded message, so I figured I could just use that device to fool Clayman into thinking I killed Mjurran.

"...And so it was all just a prank on my part! Sorry!"

"Just a prank?! Goddamn, pal!!"

"Whoa, Yohm! It wasn't something he could deal with *that* easily! I mean, that's the whole secret behind the demon lord Clayman's power! Something nobody else knows about!"

And now they're carrying on again. What a pain.

"But let's not sweat the details, all right, guys?... So! Mjurran! Guess there *is* such a thing as reincarnation, huh?"

"...What?"

It was at that moment that Mjurran finally realized the curse upon her life had been lifted.

"You're a free woman now, Mjurran. Well, sort of. Before that, I have one favor to ask."

She turned toward me, still not fully cognizant of what was going on. "Say anything. If you wish me to swear my loyalty, I will, gladly."

"Nah, that's fine. Actually, it turns out there's a possibility that we can resurrect Shion and all the others—just like how you died and came back, you see? And I want you to help me pull that off."

"Huh?"

"Resurrect?"

"How?" Gruecith asked. "Raising the dead isn't even possible for high-level magic-born like me."

"It's just a hypothetical for now. But I'm gonna make it happen."

Yep. Just a chance. But I couldn't ever allow myself to mess it up. I'd do everything I could to boost my chances, and to do that, I needed Mjurran.

"But," I said, "if I *do* pull that off, what'll you do after that?"

"Well... I may be free, but if I'm limited to an all-too-short human life from now on... maybe I don't mind being a little confined after all."

She gave Yohm a look that made him blush in the most darling fashion. Her own cheeks reddened a bit. I had to feel bad for Gruecith, though. He had been turned down, pure and simple.

"C'mon, cheer up!"

"Don't give me that smile of yours!" he protested. "Besides, Yohm's human, so he'll live *maybe* a hundred years. After that, it's my turn!"

"What the hell're you talking about? Was *that* the dirty kinda crap you were thinking of, you deranged wolf man?!"

"Shut up! If you don't like it, just try to outlive me!"

"You dog turd! You can howl all ya want, but would your master Carillon even allow that?!"

"Ha! Lord Carillon's a generous leader. He's asked me to broaden my horizons here. My loyalties are with him, but it's not like I'm forced to stay in the Beast Kingdom,

y'know!"

"How is something like *that* okay?!"

"Shut up!"

"...Actually, I take back what I said. I just lost my head for a moment there."

"Oh, come *on*, Mjurran!"

It was a pretty chaotic scene, but it did make the smile return to my face a little, too. I'd offer more of a celebration if it was any other time, but right now wasn't it. I braced myself and returned to my other main priority.

"By the way, Yohm, I've got a favor to ask of you, too..."

"Say it! I'll do whatever you want, pal!"

Good. I figured he'd say that. I was kind of counting on it, and that was why I helped out Mjurran. I wasn't usually as calculating as this, but ah well. I couldn't afford to make any mistakes here. So:

"I need you to be a king for me."

Yohm gave the offhand remark a puzzled look as I explained.

Basically, it was like this: We were going to kill the entire army attacking us. That was a must, and I wasn't going to compromise on that. That led to the next question—what to do with Farmus. Should we kill all the people in that country? No, there was no reason for that. I mean, I wouldn't hesitate to if I didn't have enough sacrifices to become a demon lord yet, but let's just concentrate on their military first.

Soei had reported that their total number likely did exceed ten thousand. That, honestly, was a huge relief. Kind of funny to be thanking the enemy for providing such a huge force. If it was a given that we'd kill 'em all, there was no reason to go easy on them. That made things simpler for me. I didn't want to hurt any civilians, as much as I could, so having a nice big crowd of career soldiers to work with served my needs well.

So what would happen once this army was annihilated and I was a demon lord? That

was the problem. If Farmus kept attacking me, I would have to kill them, but if possible, I would like to arrange an armistice somewhere along the line. Everyone in the Kingdom of Farmus's executive levels of government would die, though. They had to take responsibility. Of course, that meant the central core of government would be wiped out—and that'd put the people in a bind.

"You see? And that's where *you* come in."

I gave Yohm a domineering look. His role, in essence, would be to clean up the rotten government. I'd kill anyone who came out of the country, and he'd take care of the garbage left inside it. He'd also lead the people and take on a role as the new king—and then we'd build formal relations with each other.

"Heh. You make it sound so easy. I mean, me, a king?"

"It *is* easy. I mean, hell, *I'm* a king. You oughtta try it out, too."

King, demon lord, same thing.

"Yohm, Sir... Rimuru believes you can do it. I promise you'll have my full backup, so why don't you inject a little excitement in your life?"

Mjurran apparently wasn't a fan of boring men. Her words pushed Yohm forward.

"I'll help out, too, Yohm."

"Uh, weren't you busy waiting for me to die a moment ago, Gruecith?"

"Ha-ha! What're you talkin' about? Like I said, just outlive me and you'll be fine."

"Pfft. All right. You got me. I'm signin' on to this thing!"

He nodded firmly at me as we shook hands over it. Something told me we were gonna get along just fine.

We could work out the details once this was all over. First, I had to become a demon lord. I had to get Shion and the others back alive. When a life's lost, it never comes back, but *they* weren't lost yet. There was a chance.

I'm an atheist. I don't think there's a God, or a god, out there. Right now, though, I was

willing to pray. Pray to the figure that controlled all miracles. Before, I'd probably laugh at senseless stuff like that. And maybe it *was* senseless. But, you know, while I'm praying, I feel like I can believe in it. I can believe that Shion is all right.

That glint of moonlight illuminated me, flickering faintly in seeming approval of my prayer.

ROUGH SKETCHES



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
4

THE BIRTH OF A DEMON LORD

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THE BIRTH OF A DEMON LORD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right. Listen to me, all of you.”

I felt all eyes upon me as I began.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wait a moment, Benimaru,” Rigur replied. “If you put it that way, then I am responsible

for the town's security. I am the one most at fault!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, no, I mean... You don't mind having an ex-human as your leader?"

"Huh? You are still you, aren't you, Sir Rimuru?"

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

"Yeah. What we know for sure is that you're here for us, is all."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“...But that’s just my hope for the future. If we trust in them unconditionally and run into this kind of situation again, we’re wasting our time. That’s why I’ve concluded that, for the time being, it’s too early to shake hands with humanity. The most important thing right now is to put on a show of force and make them recognize our

presence. We need to build a position where they can no longer afford to ignore us. As it is, we're probably being downplayed, treated as something they can use and exploit. We had been dealing with nations like Blumund and the Dwarven Kingdom, decent kingdoms that looked out for us, so we forgot about the darker side of being a nation. Even if individual people are good, the moment they form a nation, that's when they expose their cruel fangs to us. Any nation is basically a bunch of weak people grouping together to become stronger, so I guess you can't avoid that if you want to keep all the decent ones protected. That's exactly why we need a show of force for people like that. My ruling this land as a demon lord will make them realize that trying to coerce us with military might will accomplish nothing for them. I can keep the other demon lords in check, too, serving as a shield for the other human nations. If we can make them think it's better to be with us than against us, that's all I could ask for."

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

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

And with that, I wrapped it up.

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

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

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

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

"If you *do* manage to become a demon lord"—Benimaru laughed—"I hope there is a

role for us in it all.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They all shouted their agreement, harmonizing like a choir.

*

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

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

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

"Yes," Benimaru stepped up to state. "According to Soei's investigations..."

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

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

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

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

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

But:

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

"...How do you mean?" Benimaru asked for the crowd.

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

I wasn't being entirely honest here. There wasn't any need to go it alone, according to the Great Sage—as long as the souls were connected to me, no worries. My own will

needed to align with theirs, and that's all it took. The exact conditions, however, were allegedly a little hard to engineer—it wasn't just a matter of killing ten thousand and Bob's your uncle. But I didn't care.

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

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

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

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

.....

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

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

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

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

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

“Ohhh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't have to go easy on them, keep in mind."

"Heh. In that case, victory is assured."

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

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

"Okay. So: Hakuro, Rigur, Gobta, and Geld..."

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

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

"Can you win against them? There's a very good chance those otherworlders are among them."

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

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

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

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

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

""Yes, my lord!"""

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

There was one other thing too important to forget.

"Now, Shuna..."

"Yes?"

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

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

"Exactly. Can you do that?"

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

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

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

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

“Hey, Shuna...”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, my lord!”

“I—I can do that, too?!”

“You got us here, too, pal!”

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

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

“You are in good hands, Rimuru.”

“Yeah, you heard ‘em, boss!”

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

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

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



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

"Someone approaching ahead! All troops, prepare for battle!"

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



And yet—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of!"

"““Raaahhh!!””"

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

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

"Shhh! You want him to hear you?"

"Yeah, well, that's one of the good things about our general, after all, isn't it?"

"No doubt. You said it."

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

"Oh, we do not, General!"

A quick laugh.

"Right! Forward!!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't panic! These are dragonewts! They're not as common, but they're nothing we can't handle!"

"Dragonewts?! I can't believe it! Such great numbers, and working as a team..."

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

"Curse them! Contact our headquarters and call for reinforcements!"

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

"Hngh!"

His spear plunged straight through the knight's heart.

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

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

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

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

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

"Stay strong! We have the protection of Luminus upon— Gehhh..."

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

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! Victory is mine!!”

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

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

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

“N-no! Where did they...?!”

“Grahhh!”

“Aaahhh!!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, my lord! I believe you are right."

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

"...But who can say," he whispered as a smile crept onto his lips, "who the unlucky ones *really* are here?"

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

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



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

There was, of course, a reason for this.

"Hey. Hasn't anyone fled yet?"

"Oh, er, Shogo! No enemies sighted today, either, sir!"

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

"Pfft. How many days are they gonna waste planning their escape? Or did the merchants

and adventurer bodyguards decide to share their fates with the town?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's irresistible!

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

Then they heard a messenger provide a report.

"Enemies up ahead! They number... four?!"

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

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

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

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

"Nice! Direct hit!"

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

"Enemy of God! What sorcery is this?!"

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

"Well done, Gobta. Keep diverting their attention, but don't let them capture you."

“Roger that, sir!”

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

“Heh-heh! Yeah, wasn’t I?”

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

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

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

“Got it!”

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

“Whoa?!”

“Ngh!”

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

“Boy, that sure was something...”

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

Rigur and Gobta looked at each other and grinned. Then the three of them sprang into action anew, maintaining their impeccable teamwork as they beat the knights at their

own game. Before their overwhelming numbers, the trio couldn't have looked less concerned.

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

"Ha-ha-ha! Nice! I like it! But now you gotta take *me* on!"

"Ah, ahhh! Sir Shogo!"

"Please do something about these monsters!"

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

His spirits soared as he began running toward the trio.

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

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

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

"Hee-hee! Just Gobta is fine, Geld!"

"Understood. Allow me to handle the rest, Gobta!"

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

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



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

Kyoya.

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

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

"Oh? You aren't talking about me, are you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah? Well, great. So let's have a sword fight, all right? Fair and square."

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

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

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

“You ready?”

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

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

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

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

“No way?! ”

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

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

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

“...What?”

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

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

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

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

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

"Shut up! Shitty little monsters, acting all tough and crap...!"

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

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

"The time has come, I see. Perhaps your 'eye' is not so *all-seeing* after all..."

"Huh? What did you—?"

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

—A flash.

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

"...Uh?"

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

“Goddammit...!”

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

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

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

“I don’t know what you mean. This is war. Cheating or not, it is only polite to bring out

“... everything you have against your foe.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Haaah!!”

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

“Eeeeeeyaaah!!”

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

“One more! Hraaah!!”

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

His Berserker unique skill had the special effect of breaking the weapons of his opponents. Of course, a unique piece of equipment was hard to break with one or two strikes—that was why Shogo was acting like he had no strategy but was actually

attacking the same spot over and over again. He might have looked like a simpleton, but Shogo had a uniquely honed talent for battle—and that skill was perfectly suited for his martial-arts approach.

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

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

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

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

“Huh? What the...?! That’s *dirty*!”

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

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

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

“I am not a pig... but fine.”

“Shut up!”

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

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

"Now I'm ready. This is how I *really* fight, and I'm ready for you. Try to make this fun for me, all right?"

"That goes without saying. Come at me!"

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

"Shyahhh!!"

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

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

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

"Whoa—what's...?! Goddammit!!"

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

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

"R-rot? Shit! Get—get this off me!"

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

"Let me end the pain."

"Ahhh! W-wait! Wait a second!"

Geld's slow approach made the orc look like a man-eating demon in Shogo's eyes. He

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

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

"You still aren't done, Geld?"

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

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

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

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

"Ah, aaahhhhhhhh!!"

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

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

The pain was as intense as the terror and confusion.

Shit... If this keeps up, I'm dead...

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

*

Raising the tent flap, he found Kirara relaxing inside.

"Hey, you done? 'Cause you sure took your sweet time with—"

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

"Huhhh? What're you talking about, you dumbass? Why're you picking a fight with me—?"

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

Clench—

"Nh... Wha...? You're choking me..."

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

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

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

"...Mom...!"

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

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

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

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

And then a transformation occurred.

Confirmed. Unique skill Survivor... successfully obtained.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shall I lend a hand?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Orgggh!"

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

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

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

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

“S-stop, stop! Pleathe, thtop!”

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

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

*

“I suppose it is over.”

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

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

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



And it had led to this.

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

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

"Nh...! R-Ratthen, you came to thave me...?!"

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

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

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

Geld attempted to give chase. Hakuro stopped him.

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

"...What?!"

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

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

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

"You sly fox. You've been cautious of me from the very start..."

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure it was best," Geld said, "to leave that sorcerer Razen be...?"

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

"He did...? And the magic was that much of a threat?"

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

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

"I see..."

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

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

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



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

"Th-thanks, Razen. I'm sorry."

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

"Y-yeah... I lost this time, but not in the next round. I'll show 'em!"

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

"Sure. Sounds good."

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

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

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

"Rather earlier than planned, isn't it, Sir Razen?"

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

"Heh-heh-heh... Still a pitiful sight, though. He really believed he was the strongest man in the world, didn't he?"

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

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

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

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

"That's fine. There's always next time."

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

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

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

The two shared a laugh.

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

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

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

"You sure you're all right? There's no chance of it failing?"

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

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

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

"Ahhh... It does feel so nice to be in a younger body again."

"Heh-heh-heh! You're *sounding* much older than you look right now."

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

He slipped back into the robe he had discarded earlier, staff in hand. There was a new

spring in his step as he boldly sauntered off, brimming with confidence and aspiration over the new strength he had. It was enough to amaze even Folgen, reinforcing his confidence in his friend and partner.

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

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

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

The suspicion made him stop in his tracks.

“What?”

“Oh, ah, nothing.”

He immediately started walking again.

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

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



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

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

These were the ones who got Shion and the rest. Normally, I suppose I should give some kind of warning or indication that I would attack. But I already knew these guys

had declared war on us, and if they were marching for town, I imagined they were ready to die for the cause. Besides, this wasn't even a war. I was planning to consume every single one of them. *Fair and square* kind of lost its meaning if I intended for there to be no survivors.

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

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

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

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

...Shall we, then?

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elemental magic, on the other hand, rewrote the laws of physics with the powers of spiritual intervention. It didn’t work on such large scales of force and distance, and the barrier had been built to block that type of magic as well. It was a pure test of

strength between elementals, which made it easy to block your opponent if need be. As long as you were prepared for ambushes, it'd just devolve into an arm-wrestling match.

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

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

*

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

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

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

That was the really scary thing about this magic, actually—how little energy it cost me

to orchestrate. The convex lens that served as the final launching point was vaporized every time by the heat, but I could instantly provide another one. That was what the water elementals were for. And gathering water vapor from the air didn't take much work.

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

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

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

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

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

Now ought to be a good time...

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

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

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

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

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

"Sounds like a job for me. Let me drum up my knights' morale for a—"

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

"Ah...?! What was that?"

Razen found himself shouting out in surprise.

"Stand strong! Protect His Highness!!"

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

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

“Gahhh!! My arm—my arm’s....!!”

“Help! Help meeeee!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your Highness! Are you all right?”

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

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

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

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

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

The ninth wave of light struck.

“Aaaah!!”

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

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

“...Shogo? No, is that... Razen?”

“That is correct, sire.”

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

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

“What?! ”

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

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

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

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

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

“It shall be done!”

“Yes! Godspeed to you, Sir Folgen!”

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

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

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

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

“Yes. I am ready.”

“Understood, Sir Razen!”

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

“Now!”

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

"How is it going?!"

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

"Folgen? Folgen, what is wrong? Answer me!"

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

"Ee, ee, *eeaaahhhhhhh!!*"

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

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

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

The feel of the battle had now changed.

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

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

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

...It's a demon lord!

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

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

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

The voice of a dumbfounded Razen echoed in his ears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

“Aaah, help, help me!”

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

It did take some time to get used to things, but now I could control the beams of light like second nature. The key was in the angle of refraction. You could fire all you wanted

for the barest minimum of energy. Focusing your heat source on a single point cooked it up to several thousand degrees, and that was more than enough to take down a man or two.

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

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

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

Confirmed. The unique skill Merciless is... successfully obtained.

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

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

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

It was some scruffy-looking old man.

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

"Oh? You a body double or something? Don't worry. I won't lay a hand on the real

thing.”

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

“That—-that is no body double!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Which left the other one...

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

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

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

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

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

Then I shot his arm off.

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

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

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

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

"Gaaahhhhhhhh!!"

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

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

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

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

"You get one chance," I threatened through the mask. "There's no next time, got it?"

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

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

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

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

Uh... Wow, is this guy a genius or what? How much does he need to talk down at me,

making me as uncomfortable as possible, until he's happy? And why's he working under the assumption that I'd gladly pay him anything? Does he really want to piss me off that much, just so he can taste more pain during his inevitable death? Is he one of those?

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

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

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

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

Question. Use the unique skill Merciless?

Yes

No

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

YES, I thought. My heart was calm. There was no pain, no real sense of guilt I could find lurking in some corner. And an instant later, everyone except for Reyhiem and that guy with him (whom I had specifically defined as out of range) was exposed to the

tyranny of Merciless. The knights all fell, unable to pose any resistance, and with that, the nearly ten thousand soldiers still alive all breathed their last.

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

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

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

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

Then the World Language echoed anew.

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ranga, you there?”

“Yes, my master.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I shall, Master!"

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

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

"Come to me, demon! I have something for you to eat, so... come on up and serve me now!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

I needed to get somewhere safe...

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



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

"We'll talk later. Just prove you can be helpful to me first. Go."

That was all I could sputter out.

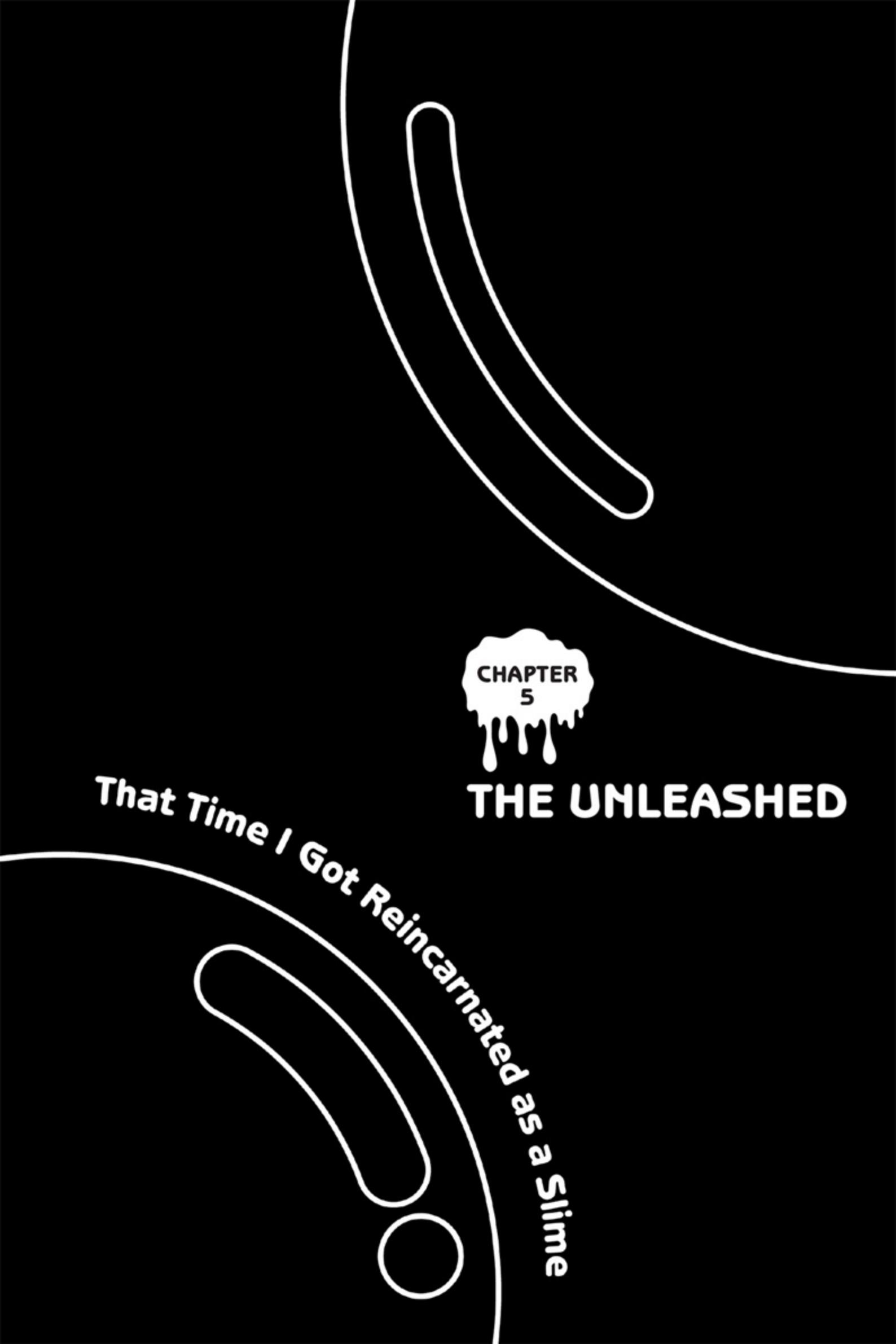
"It shall surely be done. Do not worry for a moment, O great Master..."

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

...and the birth of a new demon lord.

ROUGH SKETCHES





CHAPTER
5

THE UNLEASHED

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 5

THE UNLEASHED

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

what it was someday.

"I just hope he doesn't turn into a different person as a demon lord. Going berserk on us..."

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

"It's because you keep on sleeping there, Shion," Benimaru whispered before returning to his prayers. "Just wake up already..."

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

Just then:

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right," he'd suggested at the conference earlier, "I will ask you, 'What do you think of Shion's cooking?'"

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

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

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



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

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

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

Cancel Ailments, Resist Spiritual Attack, and Resist Holy Attack acquired. Evolution is now complete.

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

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

Failed.

...Re-executing.

Failed.

...Re-executing.

Failed.

.....

.....

...

—ENDLESS—

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

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

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

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

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

The evolution continued.

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

But the Harvest Festival still wasn't over.

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



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

He was lucky to have died once back there. Having fully commandeered Shogo's skills, he was brought back to life over time by Survivor. Before his brain could even comprehend the unbelievable events taking place before him, his instincts understood and made the right call. They told him: Here was a foe who no one in human form

could ever beat. Folgen, his sworn friend, was rendered helpless and killed—not even able to stand before the monster, much less shield King Edmaris.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A large wolflike monster was summoned to the scene, gingerly carrying the monster (which had turned from a human form into a slime) in its mouth. Using a pair of forked

tails, it snatched up King Edmaris and Archbishop Reyhiem, placing them on its back before running off at extraordinary speed. All that remained were three Greater Demons.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now that demon was alone, in front of Razen.

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

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

“Oh? You’re here to take me on?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Enough of your lip! Nuclear Cannon!”

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

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

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

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

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

"Hmm? That was an impressive piece of magic."

"What did you say?! It's pointless if the effect of it doesn't work."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But:

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

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

"...it is too young."

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

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

"You're kidding! That was a spirit! A greater spirit!!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hnh!!"

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

...Wait! No!

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

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

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

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

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

Wait. Is this... a—a Primal...?

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Keff... keff... Ah, ah, ahhhhh...”

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

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

If... if this is one of the Primal Demons...

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

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

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

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



Before the eyes of Benimaru and the rest, Rimuru’s body repeatedly transformed itself from a slime to all kinds of irregular shapes. After a while, it calmed down, settling

into its usual droplet form—but then it began to glow, eerily flickering on and off. Red, blue, yellow, green, purple, white, black, all kinds of colors.

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

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

Then they, too, were greeted with intense exhaustion.

“Ngh! What is going on?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

As he watched this unfold, the figure with Rimuru's form checked to see if anyone else

was awake.

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

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

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

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

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

Report. By the name of Raphael, Lord of Wisdom, I command Belzebuth to consume all

the magicules within this barrier. Do not leave even a single soul fragment behind.

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

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

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

...This just can't be!!

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, yeah..."

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

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

"...Hope they all get resurrected."

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

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

"Yeah. I think it'll probably turn out fine, but..."

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

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

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

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

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

"Man, though, I wasn't expecting to see a demon lord evolution with my own two eyes..."

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

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

"The seed...?"

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

"Oh? So Rimuru will become the eleventh demon lord?"

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

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

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

"Heh-heh-heh. I agree."

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

for a while longer.

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

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

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

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

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

Not half an hour later, they appeared.

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

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

"Whoa, whoa, I've never seen the likes of you before. You an Arch Demon?"

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. That is correct, magic-born."

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

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

"Chore work?"

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

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

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

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

"Treating him well, huh...?"

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

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

"Wouldn't that be spoiling him a little too much?"

"...I thought you were treating him well."

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

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

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

"What on—?!"

"Mm? I-is this...?"

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

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



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

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

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

The demon had teleported right next to Rimuru.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The words flustered the demon.

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

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

“Please use these two!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I think, therefore I am...

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Awe and fear swirled in equal measures.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Thus, the hope was fulfilled.

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

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

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

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

"Whoa, whoa," observed Kabal, "they're all sleeping? What happened?"

"Did Shion get resurrected and all that?"

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

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

Everyone on-site breathed a hefty sigh of relief.

"Yeah, there's the boss for ya! I knew I shouldn't have worried."

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

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

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

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

"Fine by me, but every single monster in town? That's kind of a big project."

"Yeah," Gido chimed in, "we're talking over a thousand of 'em in the plaza alone..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Rise and shine!

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

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

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

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

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

No. It is your imagination.

Oh, all right...

Hey, wait a second!

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

“Ah! Sir Rimuru! You are awake!”

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

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

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

“You came back to life!”

It was Shion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...I got it! Time to have the Great Sage come to the rescue. I'm sure it'll have the most

wonderful solution to all of this...

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

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

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

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

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

Understood. My calculations did not find any relevant results.

You piece of crap!!!

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

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

“Hmm? What about my cooking?”

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

Someone needed to stop Benimaru before this got any worse. Damn it. That bastard wanted this to happen from the start! And he even made damn sure in advance that

he didn't get caught up in it. What an asshole! This great sleep session I had, and he's threatening to have Shion put me in the kind of sleep you never wake up from!

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

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

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

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

Wha—?!

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

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

"...Um?"

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

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

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

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

"Very well," Shion flatly replied. "Sir Benimaru... No, just Benimaru. I serve Sir Rimuru directly; I have no need to use noble titles to refer to you. But if you had wanted to try

my cuisine *that* badly, you should have said so. I will gladly feed it to you until you're ready to burst!"

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

"Wh-what did you do *that* for?!"

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

"This isn't funny, my lord! I have been testing her new creations so long that I've developed Resist Poison recently, too..."

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

"Yeah, well, as they say, you reap what you sow..."

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

*

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

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

Complete Memory allowed you to directly tap into the target's soul. Normally the power could be possessed only by spirit-type life-forms, but somehow I had stumbled upon it, too. They said something about souls that shared the same "genealogy" with

me and all that, so I guess it technically applied to me. That's what the "gift" thing was, probably—it got everyone back, and I couldn't be happier with it.

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

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

"Ah, before we discuss Shion's cooking, I have something important to tell you."

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

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

"Yes, yes, but what's going on?"

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

"...Yes. I saw it all for myself."

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

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

Dang.

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

Phobio was himself gravely injured but still managed to take a Warp Portal over and

regroup with Alvis. Gabil's potions saved his life after that.

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

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

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

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

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

"Her bearing would have taken her straight for the demon lord Clayman's domain."

The other two Lycanthropeers shuddered.

"I—I need to go out for a moment."

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

"Yes! If you're going, then we all need to join forces in our attack."

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

"Well, hang on," I ventured. "We need more information before anything else. The way

you put it, Phobio, Carillon is still alive. I don't know what Frey is like as a person, but there's no way Milim would let someone just horn in on her fight without getting *damn* angry about it. There has to be more behind this."

"I feel the same way," Benimaru said.

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

"Understood."

"All right..."

"Yes, Sir Rimuru."

They all nodded, regaining their composure.

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

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

*

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

"So, um, good luck at dinner, okay, Benimaru?"

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

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

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

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

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

No! Not at all!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course, Sir Rimuru. What do you think? It looks scrumptious, doesn’t it?”

“You damned fool! You got carrots, potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, onions, and all kinds of other vegetables—but you just tossed all of them in whole! I shouldn’t be able to

recognize every single one of them in the bowl like that, all floating in the broth or whatever! You're supposed to peel them, or cut them, or do a whole lot of other crap with them!"

I was shouting, straight from the heart.

Then I turned to Benimaru. "What is the meaning of this? I thought I left Shion's care in your hands. She hasn't learned anything at all from you, has she?"

He gazed back at me, as glassy-eyed as a dead fish. "I just couldn't do it. I've never had a setback in my life, but with her, I've hit a wall—the wall of my personal limits. Since childhood, I always assumed that nothing was impossible for me, but now I see just how shallow-minded that was."

How brazen of him. The wall of his personal limits? Bullshit. I'm eating this, too, remember?

I glanced up at Shion. She was quivering, on the brink of tears. I began to feel like maybe I was the bad guy here... Ah well. Like a monk experiencing enlightenment, it was time for me to brace myself, treat this as training, and have at it.

"All right, all right. I'll take it, okay? But at least try to actually prepare your ingredients before putting them in next time."

"Umm, but whenever I try chopping up food, I wind up chopping up the rest of the building I'm in, too..."

"Huh? The whole building? Not just the cutting board?"

"...Right. My Goriki-maru is so wonderfully sharp, but it's a little long as well, so..." Shion pointed at the longsword strapped to her back.

Uh, she *cooked* with that?

Benimaru threw his hands in the air, as if in surrender. Talk about someone you can't rely on in a pinch. My esteem for him was in free fall right now.

"Listen," I attempted, "a katana isn't meant for cooking. All right? That's what they've invented cooking knives for"

"No, I work strictly with Goriki-maru. I wouldn't want to cheat on it with other blades..."

"Oh. I was planning to give you some kitchen knives as a present actually, but I guess you don't need them?"

"Wait! I was wrong! My mistake! Goriki-maru just told me I was allowed to play around with other knives after all!"

"...Good to hear. So yeah, use those knives to cook from now on, okay?"

She sure knew a gift horse when she saw one. Ah well. It certainly beats chomping into whole tomatoes in what was supposed to be soup. If he ate nothing but food like this (not that I was acknowledging it as food, mind you), no wonder Benimaru acquired Resist Poison.

Now it was my turn... but, hell, I was a demon lord now. Ingesting something like this couldn't kill me, right? So I resigned myself to my fate and went into my human form. Closing my eyes and steeling my resolve, I brought a spoonful of some kind of mystery goop to my mouth.

Just as I was about to swallow it as quickly as possible, I noticed something odd... *Huh? This is, like, super good. Almost like she's fully re-created Shuna's home cooking...? You're kidding me!* It tasted nothing like it looked.

I opened my eyes wide as I slowly, carefully ferried another spoonful of ingredients to my lips.

This is good!

Benimaru watched, half praying, his eyes asking *Are you all right?* to me. I motioned him to give it a shot as well. I guess his experiences with Shion's food up to now were just as bad as I imagined.

He dejectedly took a spoonful—then his eyes burst open in surprise. Guess my tongue wasn't lying to me. I almost thought something got screwed up with my evolution for a moment.

Shion watched us with the biggest cheese-eating grin I ever saw in my life. It kind of pissed me off, frankly.

"Shion, what... What is this? Why's this so much better-tasting than it looks?"

"Hee-hee-hee! Well—"

It turns out—and I had no idea about this—that when the moment of evolution arrived, Shion wished deeply in her mind to become good at cooking. It would take a dumbass like her to wish for something like *that* as her gift. What was she even thinking? It was exasperating, but I supposed it was also supremely Shion-like of her.

"Hee-hee! So there you have it. I've obtained the unique skill Master Chef!"

Yeesh. What a sight. Earning a unique skill because she wanted to get better in the kitchen... How badly did she wish for that anyway? And the way she described it, the skill let anything she made taste exactly how she pictured it in her mind, no matter what kind of dish it was. No wonder it tasted like Shuna made it—that was exactly what she was aiming for.



Shion's efforts, as always, were pointed in the completely wrong direction. And nothing could've been purer Shion than that.

So the rest of the day turned into a wild party, a feast that continued well into the wee hours. There was none of the grim pathos of the past few days. Shion, and everyone else, was back, and their presence brought joy to the town.

There was Gobzo and Gobta, showing off assorted tricks to their audience. One of them had a knife stuck in his head—wonder how they pulled *that* off. It looked like it was bleeding, too, but maybe I just imagined it. They were laughing so much that I'm sure there was nothing to be concerned about.

Yohm was there, too, along with Elen and her bodyguards. He and Gruecith were staggering around, which was still a better showing than the totally passed-out Kabal. But Mjurran was the clear winner of the night. She didn't act a single bit drunk—an experienced partier, I suppose. Sufia, noticing this, became the latest challenger to fall victim to her in a drinking match as the party descended further into chaos. It was a wild scene, but at least it helped the lycanthropes forget their worries for a while.

Starting tomorrow, we'd have a lot of cleanup work to do. I'd need to consider what to do with the Beast Kingdom refugees, as well as how we'd rescue Carillon. Plus, there was the Western Holy Church to consider. We'd need to pay careful attention to how they reacted, assuming we wanted to keep on the Western Nations' good side.

There was a mountain of issues to deal with, but—for now—I supposed we could have a little fun. And maybe it was just for today, but this was turning into a real fest, I'd say. Japanese people love their festivals, after all. No excuse is too petty to kick one off, no reason too trivial for someone to plan a drinking party for his friends. That's how we lived around here. No need to keep things tense *all* the time.

I should also mention that this party wound up becoming a yearly occurrence in this land. They named it the Tempest Resurrection Festival.

*

Deep into the night, while everyone was sleeping off their epic benders, I was pondering over our future direction when an unfamiliar person greeted me.

"I am glad you are awake, my lord. Allow me to express my heartfelt joy at seeing you become a full-fledged demon lord."

The figure bowed deeply before me.

"Uh, who're you?"

"I...?! Surely you jest, my lord. Nothing could damage a demon's heart more than to hear that..."

The visitor seemed genuinely insulted. He looked like a pretty high-level demon, but I seriously had no idea who this was.

Then Ranga poked his head out from my shadow. "Master, this is one of the demons you summoned, using the knights as your bait."

Ohhh, right. This dude's still here.

"Ahhh, Sir Ranga!"

The demon turned thankful eyes to Ranga, as if in the audience of a personal savior. And, come to think of it, I *did* see him during the party, fidgeting and looking supremely out of his element.

"Well, thanks for all your help. I heard you rounded up the survivor for me, too, so Ranga and I could get back here safely."

"Oh, no, I am hardly worthy of your thanks. But along those lines..."

"Well, sorry to keep you here all this time. You can go back home now."

"...What?!"

That would explain his behavior. He wanted to leave, but I hadn't gotten around to giving the order. So I did—but this demon was acting all weird about it. He had rather handsome features—really, you'd almost call him beautiful, despite being male and all. And now that face looked bewildered, ready to cry at any moment. It worried me.

"Oh, um, did I not give you enough of a reward or something?"

“Nothing of the sort, my lord. As I asked you before, I seek the honor of joining your followers! What do you think? Will you please give it some consideration?”

Joining my followers? *Umm, I think this Greater Demon I summoned said something like that, yeah, but... Wait. This guy in front of me ain't just “Greater.”* We were talking like nothing was amiss, but this wasn’t any kind of Greater Demon at all.

“Huh? Ranga, did I really summon this dude?”

“You certainly did, my master!”

Hmm. All right.

“Upon receiving the knight corpses you offered as my summoner, I have earned my physical body. I can only hope that I may repay this great favor to you in some way.”

“Oh really? Well, neat...”

He did seem kinda strong, and if he wanted to be my follower that badly, then hell yeah. But that was a two-edged sword. If he ever went out of control, I worried that even Benimaru would have trouble stopping him.

And what about the other two demons with him?

Understood. When carrying out the Secret Art of Revival, you began to run short on magicule energy. When you did, the two demons rendered themselves into magicule form and disappeared in order to help you earn the energy required.

...Man. Raphael tossed that bombshell out like it was nothing. He was acting even more coldhearted than the Sage, showing off the kind of stakes he worked with. So the demons helped out with Shion’s resurrection, playing a role of their own behind the scenes? Boy, now I’m sorry I thought for even a moment that they were useless.

But what now, though? This guy’s aching so badly to help me out that he tossed his demon friends under the bus for me. It’d just be mean to ignore that.

“I can’t really give you a salary or anything. You okay with that?”

“The right to serve you will provide all the joy I need, my lord.”

Well, hell, if he’s willing to work for free, I like *those* terms a lot.

“All right. Well, sounds good to me. As of today, you’re officially one of us.”

“Ahhhh! I thank you, my lord!”

“Quit with the ‘my lord’ crap. It’s creepy.”

“I understand. How shall I refer to you, then?”

“Rimuru works.”

“Ahhh, Rimuru—such a sweet tone that name has. Sir Rimuru it shall be, then...”

Talk about grandiose. I had no idea what about me he found so attractive, but he just couldn’t wait to be my servant.

“Right, yeah, great. But what’s *your* name?”

“Being a nameless demon is more than enough for me, Sir Rimuru.”

Huh? He looked way too high-level to not have a name. But that’d be too much of a pain in the ass to deal with. Let’s do what I’ve always done, then.

“Okay. Well, in place of any other reward, I want to give you a name. You got a problem with that?”

“My word! No, no problem at all. This is the greatest gift a demon could ask for!”

His well-featured face burst into abject joy. I guess that’s just how I am, huh? There’s something about me that demons find irresistible. I think I had a right to boast about that a bit.

Right. So, a name. Time to fish into my grab bag of supercar models, maybe? Something that sounds nice and demonic? In fact, why not just throw a fastball straight down the middle with this?

“Your name is Diablo. May you live up to it in your service to me!”

And the moment I said it, I felt my energy drain. I was getting pretty used to this by now. It took only about half my magicules this time, too. The pessimistic side of me was expecting more, given how high and mighty this demon looked. Naming Beretta, that Greater Demon, took over 30 percent of my magicules, so he must've been greater than Greater after all.

Report. The individual Diablo was an Arch Demon. When his master evolved, he experienced a massive upgrade in magicule stores. As a result, making a comparison strictly on percentage of magicules consumed will not provide an accurate picture.

Um, all right?

But really, Raphael here seems a *hell* of a lot more informal with me than the Sage ever was...

Incorrect. It is your imagination.

Oh yeah? You seem awfully free with the advice you're offering, considering that.

But the Lord of Wisdom just said something I didn't want to ignore. My energy had gone up that much, and Diablo still took half of it? Like, how much of a boost are we talking here?

Understood. For reference's sake, the figure is over ten times what it previously was.

Holy crap.

What the hell did I just walk into? I've turned into some kinda monster.

Diablo, the demon before me, remained motionless on one knee. A sort of dark cocoon enveloped his body as he prepared for his own evolution. I am *so* careless sometimes. I guess there's no cure for stupidity, even after death, so I'll just have to grin and bear it.

No more casual naming for me! I mean it this time!

I swore it to myself, but something told me I wouldn't stick to it for very long.

The evolution completed itself as I mused over this. Within the dark form I was greeted with, I could see streaks of red and gold amid his black hair. His eyes were just as golden as before, his pupils shining just as eerie a shade of crimson. The areas that'd normally be white were instead a shade of jet-black, which made them stand out all the more. As he rose to his full slender height, I realized he was dressed in the very peak of classy domestic clothing, like a perfect butler. It was a new image for him, compared to the high-born prince he'd looked like before.

He used to be a ruler; now he served one. But, if anything, that arrogant aura that surrounded him had grown, not shrunk.

“Diablo. That is my name. My heart is filled with deep emotion, Sir Rimuru. From this day forward, I promise to serve you with all my heart.”

He gave me a respectful salute.

This transformation apparently reflected his desire to be my ever-loyal servant. Demons could use the intrinsic skill Create Material to whip up any kind of clothing they wanted, it turned out, so there was no need for a wardrobe. Pretty useful. I'm kinda jealous.

Almost immediately, he said, “Sir Rimuru, you appear to be fretting about something. What is it that troubles you? Because I would hope you can discuss it with me.”

It must've been obvious to him. I decided to explain the whole situation, since it'd help me arrange my own thoughts as well. Even if it didn't lead to an answer, it'd help keep my mind calm.

“It's nothing big... Well, it is, I guess. I'm thinking about the future.”

“The future?”

“Right now, we've got too many problems to deal with at the same time. I think we're already over capacity with all the plans we need to carry out.”

"Ah..."

I reviewed the circumstances for him.

My main concern was the demon lord Carillon and how Milim was involved with him. But the most pressing matter was how we'd clean up the Kingdom of Farmus and check the Western Holy Church's movements—both issues that could greatly affect our future relationship with mankind. If we made any misstep with the Church in particular, we'd wind up being the nemesis of every human being in the world. I wanted to do whatever I could to prevent that.

It would be ridiculous, though, to attempt to address all these problems at once. I needed to line up our enemies, our problems, one by one and secure victory against them.

"I see. All of that makes sense to me now. Allow me, in that case, to shoulder some of the burden! I will be happy to fine-tune matters so multiple problems never occur at the same time for you. Your orders, Sir Rimuru!"

Ahhh, ever the sly demon, isn't he? He understood my worries in a flash and was ready to take action against them. But I wanted to discuss matters with everyone else before deciding on anything.

"Well, hang on. There's no big rush. We'll decide on a direction at a conference tomorrow, so why don't you join us?"

If Diablo's that eager to pitch in, let him. He seems pretty shrewd, and it'd be a waste to let his powers go unflexed.

Report. I believe we do not need to worry about the Western Holy Church. The Analysis and Assessment of the Unlimited Imprisonment that has shut away the individual Veldora will be completed shortly. Releasing this individual is believed to provide a suitable restraint on the Holy Church's actions.

Ooooh. Neat. Yeah, if we could release Veldora, that'd sure keep the Church from pulling any funny moves.

...Uh, wait, whaaaat?! You're being way too engaging with me, Raphael!

Incorrect. It is your imagination.

Yeah, yeah, my imagination. Knock it off, man.

Let's get back to Veldora. We can actually release him?

Analysis is slated to finish by tomorrow afternoon.

Wow, Raphael. I guess you've gotten a lot more useful than I thought.

Well, *that* certainly opened up a few paths to a solution. As long as we could keep the Western Holy Church in check, that'd give us all the time we wanted to negotiate with the Western Nations. I was scared the Church was agitating them to believe we were evil, and if we kept that from happening, we already knew there were nations there willing to work with us.

Farmus, meanwhile, was no longer a threat. We had crushed the core of their military, and we held their king hostage. We'd help pave the way for Yohm to establish a new nation and focus the attention on him, and nobody there would even have the free time to meddle with us then.

So what problems did that leave?

“Right! I think something’s gonna come together after all!”

I would focus exclusively on striking the demon lord Clayman. Milim told me that anyone who declared themselves a demon lord would quickly face retribution from the others. Why not turn it into a big debutante ball—get my name out there with a bang and go onstage as the sassiest, brassiest demon lord out there?

“Ah, has an idea come to mind?”

“It sure has. I’ve decided to become a demon lord—in name *and* deed.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. That’s the spirit, Sir Rimuru. And I, Diablo, shall be faithful to

you for all the days of—”

“Hmph! And I, Ranga, am his most faithful of servants!”

I gave Ranga a pat on the head for that. The unexpected declaration was kind of endearing, I thought.

It seemed like we had a good playbook to work with tomorrow. And under a sky full of stars, atop Ranga’s back as he squinted in bliss, my own mind felt just as clear and glittery.

*

The next day, I informed everyone of my plan.

The following people were in attendance:

Shuna, my temporary secretary.

Shion, my official secretary. The temporary one was far better-suited to the job, but never mind that.

Rigurd and the other hobgoblin elders in government.

Rigur and Gobta from our security team.

Benimaru and Hakuro, representing our military.

Kaijin and Kurobe from the manufacturing department, along with Garm and Dold.

Geld and Mildo from construction.

Lilina from management.

Soei, Soka, and the other three members of our espionage team.

Ranga in my shadow as kind of an emotional support animal, I guess?

I also invited Gabil to join in, as well as Diablo, serving as a second secretary of mine. It’d be a good opportunity to introduce him, I figured.

Outside of native Tempestians, there was Yohm; his assistant, Kazhil; and Rommel the staff officer. Mjurran and Gruecith were there, of course, along with the Three Lycanthropeers of Eurazania. There were over thirty people in our meeting hall, all told.

“Thank you all for gathering here, ladies and gentlemen!”

“Why this sudden meeting, Sir Rimuru?”

I was trying to act all cool here, given that I was about to announce my presence as a demon lord, but Benimaru just cut me off. *Guess I'll keep it normal after all.*

“First, I have someone to introduce to you all. This is Diablo, who helped me out of a rough spot just a bit ago. He’s pretty strong, and we can all rely on him, so make nice, all right?”

“Hmm? He certainly seems well guarded... I imagine he is just as experienced as you say, Sir Rimuru.”

With Hakuro’s stamp of approval, everyone else safely assumed that Diablo wasn’t some also-ran strength-wise. Without any further complaint, he immediately became one of the gang. Moving on:

“Now—Gabil!”

“Y-yes?”

The dragonewt looked ill at ease in this gathering of top brass. He nervously shot to his feet upon hearing his name.

“Effective today, I’m going to name you head of our development department. That’s a provisional title, but it means you’re now in Tempest leadership. Make me proud, all right?”

“Y-yes! Yes, sir! I promise you that I, Gabil, will eternally put my nose to the grindstone for you!!”

He choked up midway as he accepted the offer. Research and development seemed to suit Gabil a lot more than I would’ve guessed. I was sure he’d do a great job.

Now it was time to visit the main topic.

“So I’ve decided on our direction going forward, and I wanted to relay it to all of you. This has everything to do with Yohm and the Three Lycanthropeers as well, so I want you to listen carefully.”

“Whatever you want, pal.”

“Does this have to do with rescuing Lord Carillon?”

All eyes were upon me. Without further delay, I turned into human form and faced them.

“I’ve decided to become a demon lord.”

“Right.”

...Huh? Kind of a tepid response.

“Um... Meaning that I’m taking the role...”

“You already have, haven’t you?”

Shion gave me an odd look. I guess she figured that was the whole reason she was alive now. And yeah, I was a true demon lord in terms of my rank or whatever, but...

“I don’t mean that. I mean, I’m going to declare to the world that I’m a demon lord, too!”

“Oh? Meaning that you’re going to challenge the other demon lords at their own game, Sir Rimuru?”

Hakuro was kind enough to say it for me.

“Right! Exactly! And not ‘the other demon lords’ exactly. I’m gunning straight for Clayman.”

Yohm, Mjurran, Gruecith, and the Three Lycanthropeers nodded their earnest approval.

"I see," said Benimaru, boldly smiling. "Seizing a seat at the demon lords' table for yourself, then? Interesting."

Nobody else had any objection.

"Right. Behind the scenes, as Farmus attacked us, it was Clayman controlling Mjurran and all the rest. I can't let that stand. There's a pretty good chance he's the one who sicced Milim and Frey on Eurazania, too. That's all the reason I need, isn't it?"

My audience nodded back.

I then discussed my thoughts further with them—about our future relations with the Western Nations, about the postwar cleanup with Farmus, about the need to keep the Holy Church from interfering with us, and about rescuing Carillon, as I promised the Beast Kingdom's denizens. I also passed out work assignments along the way.

"Rigurd! I'm leaving negotiations with the Western Nations to you. Evacuating all those merchants back to Blumund should be a pretty good bargaining chip to work with. Keep in mind the trust we've built so far and proceed carefully."

"Yes, Sir Rimuru! You can count on me!"

He sounded ready for the job. The other elders looked just as enthusiastic about it, practically bursting with confidence. I guess they were on pretty good terms with the merchants.

"Benimaru! I want you to tabulate exactly what happened to everyone who evolved in town. We're going to use every weapon at our disposal to crush Clayman, and to do that, I need to know what kind of powers I have to work with."

"Yes, Sir Rimuru."

He, too, was brimming with confidence. It was the expression of a true general, one worthy of being entrusted with all military matters. He sucked at keeping an eye on Shion, but when it came to *this* job, here was a man you could rely on.

"Shion! I'll have you interrogate our prisoners. Yohm and Mjurran, you'll help Shion out with that. Make them talk as much as you can about the state of things inside Farmus, and help us seize their country. Before we do that, we'll have to finish all the postwar cleanup work, too. There's going to be a new nation set in place, one with

Yohm as its king and leader, and we need all the intel we can to make it work. Don't kill any of them, all right? They might be useful to us later."

"I happily accept the task, Sir Rimuru!"

"Sure thing, pal."

"I will do what I can. Hopefully it will help me repay the favor a little."

Shion was ready. I made doubly sure to instruct her not to kill anyone, because I easily imagined her doing so otherwise. We should be fine now, hopefully, even as I sensed a sort of restless turbulence deep within her eyes that concerned me. Hopefully I was just imagining it. She was always quick to fly into a rage, so I figured this would be a good way to let her get back at 'em, but maybe I was being a bit too rash.

Ah well. She wouldn't be alone, ever, so I figured it'd be fine. I had future work for Yohm and Mjurran, so it'd be best if they helped her for now. I made sure to have them contact me should Shion begin to act unstable. That ought to be enough caution to cover my ass.

"Soei!"

"I will gather information on Clayman as quickly as I can."

Ah. Right. Good. Soei's certainly a man who can work. He guessed at my motives before I could even give him his orders, and Clayman was the only prey in his eyes right now. Scary dude. Glad I could rely on him—and before I could finish the thought, all five members of our espionage team had disappeared, already carrying out their duties. Once he was back, I was sure we'd have another strategic conference to carry out.

As for the others:

"Now, as I've said, I'm going to crush Clayman. I'd like the Three Lycanthropeers to help me with this if possible?"

"I would expect nothing else, O great leader of Jura."

"Just say the word! We're running on your orders for now!"

"We are all of the same mind. We lycanthropes reward trust with trust—we repay our

favors with our lives. We trust you, and you have given us a favor we could never repay. Now allow us to stake our lives on paying you back!"

"All right. Well, here's the order. I want you to rest up, recharge yourselves, and prepare for the decisive duel!"

“““Yes, Sir Rimuru!“““

All three of them kneeled and acknowledged that they were under my orders. That'd be a huge boost to our war power, not to mention some extra provisions to use against Clayman. That was a relief.

"Good. So, I want everyone else to evaluate the damage to our town and repair it. We also need some living quarters set up for the lycanthropes—help them maintain a decent quality of life while they're here. And keep up your security patrols to make sure we don't have any fights or trouble!"

Everyone nodded their agreement. That marked the end of this salvo of orders.

"Excellent. Now we'll just wait for Soei's report before we hold another conference. Until then, I want all of you to figure out the main issues with the work you're assigned and put together a plan we can execute against them!"

“““Yes, sir!“““

The audience stood up and saluted me. I nodded and gave them a little smile, putting on my mask as I sat down.

"Get to it!"

Every one of them immediately sprang into action.

*

The only ones left in the room were Diablo, Shuna, and me. Shion griped a bit about being the "real" secretary and all that, but (luckily for me) she put the orders I gave her first. She lectured Diablo a bit on what the job of secretary entailed, but he was perfectly safe in ignoring all of that. Already he was eagerly nodding and giving thoughtful looks at what I said, so maybe that made Shion get all stuck-up with him. If I hadn't stopped her, she might still be yapping at him now.

I had given her three prisoners to interrogate. She had to take that job seriously or else it'd be pointless. It wasn't an interrogation so much as torture at Shion's hands, truthfully speaking. I had given permission for her to deal any kind of mental anguish she could think of, as long as physical pain wasn't involved. The victims I resurrected were allowed to join in, too, and I was sure they'd be more than eager to make them sing like canaries.

The anger swirling within me had largely calmed now that they were all back. It meant I had no real drive to kill that seedy-looking old man and the guy from the Western Holy Church. The main perpetrator already had his heart broken by Diablo, besides. I couldn't forgive them, but I no longer had much interest in laying my hands on them.

Depending on how things went, it might be better to let the king of Farmus and the archbishop live so we could more effectively use them. As long as Shion didn't kill them, then, I was prepared to give tacit approval to whatever she did. If someone hits you, you gotta hit back. Hit back, put the fear of God in them, and make sure they never make the same mistake again. Shion was the perfect person to handle this, and once she extracted the info we needed, I was sure she'd give them a hearty meal—using Master Chef to make sure it tasted *just* the way she wanted.

While Shion played the role of interrogator, I had other business to take care of.

First, I had to study how this world handled postwar cleanup. I wanted to at least consider things like what they did with POWs, as well as the other conventional wisdom surrounding warfare around here. If all of mankind considered us to be monsters, then I could just operate by my own rules—but if there was a chance we could build cooperative relationships, like we had now, I wanted to nudge things in that direction as much as I could.

Thus I decided to examine what nations generally did in times like these. Yohm and Elen's gang wouldn't know anything about politics or government. For something like this, Vester was my man. Soon, there was a knock on the door, followed by Diablo bringing the former dwarven minister into my chamber.

"I hear you called for me, sir?" he asked when he set eyes upon me. "And let me say, I am so glad to see you safe after all these calamities that befell us!"

Yeah, that ain't the half of it. Not that they were over yet, either. I decided to cut straight

to the point.

"You said it. But I wanted to ask you: How do human countries around here wage war against each other?"

"...Ah, you are curious about Farmus, then? That *is* a rather thorny issue to deal with."

Vester then began discussing the rules of war with me.

First off, Western Nations countries that were members of the so-called Council of the West generally didn't fight one another. Even if they did, it'd have to involve formal declarations of war and a litany of strict rules. Failure to adhere to those would put the full weight of the Council against you—meaning every other nation in that western region, pretty much.

What about nations not involved with the Council, though? Assorted scenarios could play out in that case, but basically, the Council never got involved no matter who won or lost. If one side engaged in behavior that was cruel and inhumane beyond reason, however, it would certainly torpedo that nation's reputation within the Council. Just because rules didn't apply to the other side, that didn't mean you could do whatever you wanted. Trying to navigate the boundaries of this seemed like a big headache to me.

On the other hand, though, if you were invaded by another nation, that was a different story. You had the right to request rescue support from the Council, and that was one major reason why the Council had so many small kingdoms represented among its ranks.

Larger nations, such as the Dwarven Kingdom and the Eastern Empire (full name: Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire), naturally weren't involved with the Council. Get stormed by one of those outfits, and the Council was ready to handle that with a unified front—but if *you're* the one storming them, the Council was totally hands-off. You might even get kicked out of the Council for needlessly riling a superpower like that.

Having it laid out for me like that, it sounded like the Council—this sort of United Nations-like presence in this world—was based pretty heavily around the idea of weaker nations helping one another out. Considering the ever-present threat of

monsters, I suppose, people there had learned that wars among mankind were pointless.

Now I had some level of understanding to work with. Within that framework, the Kingdom of Farmus had staged a single-handed invasion of Tempest. Was this a holy war, involving the full will of the Western Holy Church? That was a thornier question.

"That's exactly the issue," Vester advised. "If Farmus had won or at least forced a stalemate, the Holy Church could've driven a litany of other nations to join the battle. The way things are now, though..."

...Yeah. It took one slime to wipe out the entirety of Farmus's military force. We're talking *literally* three survivors. It had to be one of the biggest routs in all of history. Plus, they invaded a country with ties to Blumund. Was it really worth picking a fight with a nation like ours? Beating us wouldn't earn them anything; it wouldn't make anyone move from one side to the other. And winning was a pretty big long shot from the start...

"So," I said, "if the Holy Church abandons Farmus, is it safe to say no other human nation will be willing to stage a military operation against us?"

"The Dwarven Kingdom isn't part of the Council, but they do keep up on their internal goings-on. From my perspective, I would not expect any moves from them at all."

Well, huh. Maybe we're in a better situation than I thought.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee! I see, I see. Perhaps a show of force would be advisable against the Western Nations..."

"Hang on, Diablo. I have my own thoughts about that."

"My pardons."

"Nah, nah. I think I'm gonna ask you to make Farmus capitulate to us."

"Ohhh! I would be glad to take that duty."

I nodded at him as I thought this over. Once we had Veldora resurrected, the Western Nations and the Church would be essentially bound and gagged. We could use that opportunity to prove we weren't their enemy. Farmus was probably going to get cut

out of the Council before long, besides.

Report. I believe matters will proceed in the way you predict.

Good. With Raphael, Lord of Wisdom and all that backing me up, it had to be a sure thing.

Now, how were prisoners of war handled in this world? Unfortunately, even Vester didn't have much to offer. Wars just weren't that common, and POWs were generally exchanged for other prisoners, for money, or for other rights and privileges.

The idea of a nation taking a rival's supreme leader prisoner was practically unheard of. Such a talentless king would quickly lose the faith of his people, no doubt, so I'd be surprised if anyone accused us of regicide or some other dirty deed like that. *I suppose we could say that he died in battle, but it'd be much better to give him back alive, I think.*

"All right. Thanks for the advice. I'm glad you're here for us, Vester."

"Oh, no, it's nothing that impressive," he replied, visibly blushing.

His personality had mellowed out considerably here in Tempest, making him kind of a cheerful, intelligent man with a darker side that occasionally rose to the surface, but blushing definitely did *not* fit his look. There's nothing cute about a middle-aged guy acting all bashful. "Ah, I almost forgot: Is it all right if I report on these events to King Gazel?"

"Sure, no problem. Tell him to give me some feedback if he has any."

Even if we tried to hide it, they'd find out in a flash. Better to just give him the whole, unvarnished truth.

"Very well. I will be off, then..."

He was still blushing when he took his leave. Then something clicked in my mind. *Wait a second. What if he wasn't being bashful at all? What if he was just that, you know, charmed by me? I did have my mask off.*

Wait... No way...

Assorted concerning scenarios flashed through my mind. I'd just have to hope none of them came to fruition.

*

The moment Vester left the chamber:

Report. Analysis and Assessment of Unlimited Imprisonment is complete.

Well, perfect. Thanks, Raphael. Let's go outside and get Veldora out of there pronto.

"I've got some business to take care of, so I'll be gone for a bit. I don't need anyone to accompany me. Shuna, show Diablo around town for me."

"Very well. Take care."

"Thank you for your consideration, Sir Rimuru."

"No prob. See you later."

Before long, I was deep inside the Sealed Cave—the very place where Veldora was being held, a region I didn't even let Gabil and his army come near. Unleashing the dragon in the middle of town was likely to cause some, uh, consternation, so I went down here instead. Besides, even when sealed, the area around him was so dense with magicules that people couldn't even come near the place.

For me, though, it was easy. It used to take several minutes to pin down the coordinates for Spatial Motion, but now it required no more than a passing thought to wrap it up. In an instant, the two points in space were connected, and a hole opened up before me. One hop was all it took to reach my destination.

Okay. Let's review where we're at right now.

I've evolved into a demon lord, and my skills have changed quite a bit as a result. Essentially, all those skills (Spatial Motion included) have been brought together under the same umbrella—an umbrella called Raphael, Lord of Wisdom—making them all much easier to use.

The ultimate skills Raphael's powers involved (quoting from him) were: Mind Accelerate, Analyze and Assess, Parallel Computation, Cast Cancel, All of Creation, Combine/Disassemble, and Ability Adjust. The unique skill Deviant, an old memento from Shizu, was gone, now integrated into Raphael's own abilities. Maybe that was why he was a lot more talkative than my old partner?

Incorrect. That is unrelated.

So it *wasn't* "just my imagination" this time. And that must mean... Ahhh, but let's not pursue this right now.

By the way, Mind Accelerate lets me extend my rate of thinking by up to a million times. It's a little hard to picture that with words alone, but crank it up, and it feels like time's stopped for you. Thanks to all these skills, I could now trigger multiple magics at the same time, with no more than a fraction of a second's delay between them. It was virtually incomparable with the Great Sage.

The ultimate skill Belzebuth, meanwhile, encompassed Predation, Stomach, Mimicry, Isolate, Rot, Soul Consume, and Food Chain. Soul Consume was a new power for me. Merciless, a power I thought could come in pretty handy, was subsumed into the others—a pity, but it was still active within Soul Consume. I still needed to break my target's heart before I could take their soul, but it was pretty handy in practice anyway.

Another interesting thing was that Receive and Provide had merged into Food Chain. It set up this entire skill tree of sorts to tap into, with myself at the very peak. Monsters below me could provide their strength to back me up, and I could divert some of my own strength down to them. It was ridiculous—and even now, it was doing its thing, granting me access to the skills the town's monsters picked up in their evolution. I was letting Raphael take care of all that for me.

That rounded out my skill set, and even I was shocked at how superpowered it was. There's no way I could take full advantage of this stuff. Raphael himself was subject to Food Chain, too, placing him in the midst of an Ability Adjust. If these skills were gonna change all the time, why bother remembering them?

But enough about me. Let's turn our attention to Veldora.

This has been a long time coming, hasn't it? Nearly two years, in fact. But I was finally ready to keep my promise. I still needed to find a vessel of some kind for the guy, but I had a feeling one skill or another would take care of that for me.

I'm bustin' you outta there, Veldora!!

Then I placed the order with Raphael.

The moment I did, a virtual tempest of magicules swirled around within my Stomach. If I hadn't evolved Belzebuth, I'm not sure the Stomach would've been able to take the strain. It felt like a near-overwhelming gale had burst out of nowhere.

"I, the great and venerable Veldora, have returned!!"

"Venerable"? Dude, is this some new way of talking you developed while you were in here?

"Hey!" I said, trying to keep things light. "Long time no see! How you doin'?"

"...You seem to be treating this great resurrection of mine rather flippantly. But it came more quickly than I expected. I had anticipated a while longer."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Analyzing the Unlimited Imprisonment took a hell of a lot of time in itself. The way I *was* doing it, I'd probably need another hundred years or so, I'd guess. But then my Great Sage kind of evolved on me, so..."

"Evolved? No wonder, then. Even my unique skill Investigator told me to expect another century or so. All I could do was send the information I gleaned from the inside to your Sage, but the flow of data vastly accelerated itself out of nowhere, so I was wondering what was afoot. A skill evolving, though...? What happened there?"

I answered the question as best I could—I became a demon lord, my unique skill became an ultimate skill, the Sage became Raphael, and I'm one lean, mean, analyzin' machine now.

"Ahhh... I see. And you've become a demon lord in the span of under two years?! An awakened demon lord is not some imposter pushover. Even I would have problems against such a foe!"

By “awakened,” I assumed he meant a true demon lord. When a potential seed goes through the Harvest Festival, that apparently “awakens” them—not that it really matters to me at this point.

“Yeah, well, um... What can I say, huh? I was always kind of like a genius, wasn’t I? Even back then. No regular dude would be reborn as a slime, after all. I kept on naming people, too, and that made me evolve really quickly. I mean, really, it was... easy.”

“...You’ve taken far too many risks, you fool. No wonder I noticed my magical energy being taken from me when I wasn’t paying attention. Whenever you lacked the energy to carry out your ridiculous naming sprees, you took what you needed automatically from me. Of all the foolish things! It was such a blow to my analysis performance that I feared it would extend my imprisonment. But your evolution saved us this time, then? Never did I ever anticipate *anything* of the sort!”

Huh? So... So I survived all those epic naming sessions mainly because of Veldora? I mean, I *did* think it was kind of weird, pulling off all these evolutions at what seemed like a minimum of risk. Definitely gotta knock off the naming jags in the future. Hell, no wonder the demon lords didn’t immediately set out to build a vast army for themselves. Now it made sense.

But what’s done is done. Let’s just call it all part of the plan, huh?

“I bet you didn’t. Well, I planned it that way the whole time. Did you receive any gift from my evolution, by the way? The World Language said something about everyone in my spiritual genealogy getting something...”

We should have been connected that way, too. But instead, I felt an audible *huh?* from my Thought Communication. Veldora fell silent for a bit.

Then:

“Ah! Ahhh! So *this* is an evolved skill! My unique skill Investigator has become the ultimate skill Faust, Lord of Investigation! The power to reach the ultimate truth, the final goal of my boundless research!!”

He sounded pretty excited about it, dancing around a bit in the cave. I dunno, maybe he’s the type who’s slow on the uptake. His teacher probably would’ve written “too inattentive” on his report card. But whatever.

"Oh, um, that's great. A lot easier to evolve than you thought, huh?"

"You fool!" came the exasperated reply. "Not even I was aware of such phenomena. It is *not* a lot easier than I thought!"

No, I suppose not. True demon lords were a rarity, after all, and I suppose it wasn't such a common thing.

We spent the next while catching up on stuff, sharing our knowledge with each other. Really, we could've spent all day down there, but I wanted to get Veldora out into the open sooner or later.

"Hey, so now that the seal's gone and everything, you wanna go see what's going on outside?"

"Ah, yes. But what will we do about a vessel to serve as my physical body?"

"I think we can find a way to make that happen, but there's something I want you to promise me, all right?"

"Oh? What is that?"

"Your aura's too huge. I want you to hold it back for me. We have human beings in town now, as well as a variety of weaker monsters. If you show up in resurrected form over there, it's gonna wreck everything, won't it?"

"...Ah. You really *have* become a king, haven't you? All right. You have my word!"

Obtaining this firm promise was the whole reason I went so deep into this cave in the first place. I needed to be sure he could keep that crazy flow of magicules in check. Once I had his word, I unleashed my brand-new Enhanced Replication, or whatever it was called. This was the vessel I had in mind for Veldora—an exact duplicate of me, handsome face and everything.

...Well, huh. No wonder Vester fell for me. I had matured from before, taller and more grown-up. Bewitching, even. Must be the evolution affecting me.

"Hmm. Is that your intention...?"

"Yep. Use it as your vessel."

"Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I see! Very well, then!"

With his blessing, I transplanted Veldora's spiritual body—his heart, as it were—from my Stomach to the Enhanced Replication. He didn't even have an astral body at the moment, making the operation very unstable, although it'd gradually rebuild itself as part of Veldora's spiritual life process. My Replication should be the final defense he needed for now... or so I thought.

Report. I have an important development to share.

Whatever Raphael had, it sounded important. Something to do with Veldora, perhaps.

Report. I have confirmed the establishment of a "soul corridor" between my master and the individual Veldora. After consuming the remains of the individual Veldora and analyzing them, I have obtained the ultimate skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm.

That was some pretty heady crap that Raphael was reporting on, as if it was the day's weather. So shocking that I lost my words for a moment. Apparently, Belzebuth consumed the dregs of Veldora that remained in my Stomach, obtaining part of its powers for itself. This firmed up the link between our souls, transforming it into this new power.

The ultimate skill Veldora consisted of Summon Storm Dragon, Restore Storm Dragon, and a family of storm-related magic. Summon Storm Dragon called forth Veldora in dragon form, the way I remembered him. He was a spiritual life-form now, but once he was fully recovered, I should be able to summon him in that shape as well. I can summon only one dragon at a time; if I summon another, the first one disappears. Maybe I could take advantage of this for transport purposes? It seemed feasible.

Restore Storm Dragon copied Veldora's memories into my own mind. In other words, if Veldora died for some reason, I could replace him—or, to put it another way, the "real" Veldora would reside within my own soul. That was what allowed me to summon him whenever I wanted, I suppose.

The storm magic granted me access to Death-Calling Wind, Dark Lightning, and Storm of Destruction. These were all incredibly powerful spells, not at all the sort you'd find in a grimoire down at the local library, so it was a nice bonus.

That rounded out the set, and to sum up, it meant Veldora was using me as a kind of backup. Which I didn't mind, especially if it unlocked all of Veldora's skills for me.

"A 'soul corridor'?" Veldora asked. "So all my memories and experiences are gathered in your mind, regardless of where we are in time and space. As long as you do not cease to exist, I am immortal. If I am subjected to Unlimited Imprisonment, you can simply resummon me to spring me out. I was once nearly invincible, but now I see I've been granted eternal life as well."

Wow. Really? Like, that *totally* seems like cheating. Although it assumes I'll manage to keep myself alive going forward. Still, crazy. I could create these situations, like— *Ha-ha! You thought you could take me? Well, check out this storm dragon I just happened to have bumping around in my pocket!* Heh-heh-heh. I almost felt bad for my rivals. Talk about the ultimate ace in the hole.

With that soul-corridor connection, changes began to occur within Veldora. With his heart linked up to my soul, he had lost all his vulnerabilities. In a single moment, both his astral and spiritual bodies were regenerated, giving him new life in his original, complete form.

And then:

"Mnh?!"



He grunted, and then his Enhanced Replication began to mutate. It grew and grew and grew, coming close to seven feet tall. Now he was tall, well-built, supple, and quite muscular. His skin was a dark shade of brown, his hair blond, and his looks rugged and masculine. He was a fine figure of a man, one with just a few suggestions of my own facial features still in place.

It was kind of like if you took my external human form and made it deliberately manlier.

I couldn't get *this* manly even if I tried faking it, so Veldora's will must've been involved with this. Just like the battle-obsessed freak he was, he probably wished for something that looked strong and would hold up in a fight. Ah well. At least he didn't grow into his full, gigantic dragon form.

This resurrection certainly seemed to fill him with joy, too. "Gahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I am fully restored!! I have obtained ultimate power! Anyone who defies me shall be slain!!"

...Um, hang on a sec. That's weird, isn't it? He's starting to sound like a villain here. And where have I heard that line before?

—Wait. That's gotta be a famous line from the boss character in a manga I used to love...

"Uh... Dude. Why do you know that line?"

"Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I was rather bored in there, so to pass the time, I analyzed your memories and read through the works I found inside."

"Um, don't you think your analysis work would've gone a *hell* of a lot faster if you didn't waste your skills on stuff like that?!"

"What?!"

"...Huh?"

We stared at each other. It wasn't exactly an affectionate moment. Veldora's eyes swam as he considered what he had done.

"...Well, regardless, I have finally been released! My thanks to you, Rimuru!"

Way to change the subject, you bastard. I swore in my heart that I would pursue this

issue in *detail* later on.

*

Still, just as I requested, Veldora was trying his best to rein in his aura. He was trying, but after having his full, vast, expansive strength restored to him, it was all gushing out like a tsunami. So I gave him a crash course in aura suppression—otherwise, I'd never be able to introduce him to anyone else.

“Not like that! Try to picture it building up in a little compartment in your body!”

“Mmh? Ah, speaking of which...”

Veldora closed his eyes, meditating over something for a moment. Then I noticed his aura shrink down a considerable amount.

“How is this?”

“Ohhh, much better.”

“Gahhhh-ha-ha-ha! I see my manga knowledge has paid off! It is as if all the knowledge of the world was contained inside those arcane volumes!”

—*No it's not, dumbass.* What a goofball, trying to act out all those crazy stories. But... well, with a little practice, he oughtta be fine.

Report. The Food Chain process on the monsters who share in your soul hierarchy is complete. A large number of skills have been gifted to you, their master. Would you like me to sift through them and execute Ability Adjust?

Yes

No

Now the Harvest Festival had done its work on the townspeople.

There was no way I'd be able to fully harness the dozens, perhaps hundreds of skills streaming my way. Better to have someone rework them to be as simple and easy to

use as possible. I mean, really, a skill's something you may or may not be able to obtain after many years of diligently applying your latent talents. Now I had a zillion. It was just too much—a waste of power on someone like me.

So I thought YES—and the process of elimination wrapped up in an instant.

Report. Using the unique skill Unlimited Imprisonment as a base, the consolidation process has been completed. The unique skill Unlimited Imprisonment has evolved into the ultimate skill Uriel, Lord of Vows.

Wait. *Waaaaaaait* a second. Since when did *I* have Unlimited Imprisonment, too?! Because I *think* that's kind of an important piece of information, but Raphael treated it as a total given, didn't he...? I guess he's just the kind of person to lose all interest in a solved problem, no matter how difficult it was.

So. Lord of Vows. Or loyalty, to put it another way. The collected prayers from those who vow fealty to me. All those prayers crystallized to form this new ultimate skill—and the moment I obtained it, I could feel a new strength. Strength, and an unbelievably reassuring peace of mind. And why wouldn't I? This strength was proof positive of the bonds my friends and I shared.

But... hang on. Does this now mean I'm in possession of *four* ultimate skills? Those are some amazing toys, there. Nobody's gonna mind if I get a little carried away with them, would they?

...Ah, but I shouldn't let my guard down. Villains usually meet their tragic doom when they get all cocky like that. No self-proclaimed demon lord would leave themselves open like that. Whenever I do, things usually go awry, don't they? We need to proceed carefully.

For now, let's go over our new skills.

Understood. The forces of the ultimate skill Uriel, Lord of Vows are as follows:

I had Raphael spell them out for me, as always.

Apparently, this skill had merged some of my extra skills into it as well. The only intrinsic skills I had left at the end were Infinite Regeneration, Universal Detect, Universal Shapeshift, Lord's Ambition, Enhanced Replication, and Universal Thread.

Meanwhile, the skill itself largely offered the following four features: Unlimited Imprisonment, Control Laws, Universal Barrier, and Dominate Space.

Unlimited Imprisonment:	Entombs the target in a complex number of spatial dimensions.
Universal Barrier:	Provides absolute defense with a multilayer barrier and the severing of space between both sides.
Control Laws:	Black fire and thunder. Magical control. Control of heat quantities and inertia. The ability to freely store and remove heat from the Stomach.
Dominate Space:	A movement ability, allowing the user to freely switch between spaces for which they are aware of the coordinates.

So, kind of the culmination of a lot of skills I had gathered so far.

I could trigger Unlimited Imprisonment any time I wanted to. It was equal to the prison Veldora had been trapped in, making anyone caught inside impossible to retrieve, by and large. Universal Barrier automatically protected my body—fully handled by Raphael—without my having to think about it.

Control Laws seemed like it'd let me engineer all kinds of phenomena through the control of magicules. The description was a lot of Greek to me, really, but for now I could have Raphael figure it out if I wanted something.

Dominate Space, meanwhile, was about as close to instant teleportation as you could get. As long as I could perceive something with Universal Detect, I could flick myself right over there, no need to build a hole in space or anything. This included any place I had visited before, although that required a little time delay.

Frankly, the powers of Uriel were mind-boggling. All the offense from before, plus movement, defense, and banishment—all massively powered up. I felt safe in summarizing it that way.

Like, I'm invincible now, aren't I—? No, no, I just told myself I'd refrain from such nonsense. No getting carried away.

As I pored over my new skills, Veldora seemed to have controlling his aura pretty well mastered, figuring out the traits of Faust, Lord of Investigation along the way. He keeps on spouting off such incredible BS that I forgot, but Veldora's actually a lot smarter than I am.

This Faust thing was pretty amazing, too. It encompassed five skills—Mind Accelerate, Analyze and Assess, All of Creation, Control Probability, and Investigate Truth—and if you asked me to explain how it worked, I'd be stumped. A couple of those skills I had never heard of before, but sadly, Food Chain wasn't in the cards for him. No need to be greedy, though. I doubted he'd be able to fully use it anyway.

So our preparations were complete. Now, for the first time in several centuries, Veldora would be unleashed on the outside world.

*

Upon leaving the cave with him, I found everyone waiting for us at the entrance—and really, we were just about to have chaos on our hands. A large number of people were assembled around the cave, and they were (to say the least) unruly.

Some of them had already realized the legendary Storm Dragon was back to life, with one contingent wanting to march inside to save me and the other refusing to budge until I gave them orders. The arguments between them had grown heated in my absence, even as Benimaru stood silently with arms crossed.

“But I tell you, if Sir Rimuru is gone, then we've got no way to rescue Carillon, our lord. We gotta get him outta there, no matter the cost!”

“How many times do I have to repeat myself? Sir Rimuru ventured into the cave of his own volition. Clearly he has some motivation for this, and it is not for us to interfere with that.”

“But it's been three days! If we don't do something—”

“All right, you mewling vermin! Will you be quiet for me, or would you like to be crushed instead?”

“What’d you say?!”

“Enough, Diablo!” Benimaru finally thundered. “You are not mediating over this conflict at all! And it’s all right, Sufia. There is no doubt that Sir Rimuru is just fine. If he is in any danger, we will immediately take action. But if Veldora, guardian deity of the Forest of Jura, has come back to life, we certainly cannot afford to make any ill-advised moves.”

He distractedly scratched his head. I guess things were a lot worse than I pictured. Wow, three whole days? Between freeing Veldora and working out my skills, I must’ve lost all sense of time.

By the looks of things, the lycanthropes wanted to plunge into the cave and Diablo was trying to stop them. My demon was being backed up by Treyni and the other dryad sisters, along with Jura’s other native residents, although Diablo himself was trying to act as a neutral arbitrator.

Now it was time to delve in myself. This whole quarrel was my and Veldora’s fault anyway, so...

“Hey, guys. Sorry if I made you all worry.”

“Sir Rimuru!”

This led to yet more gasps and shouts as Rigurd sprinted up to me.

“Ahhh, Sir Rimuru! You’re safe! We were so worried! We received word from the Sealed Cave that Veldora the Storm Dragon’s presence revived itself without warning. Are you all right? We heard you had ventured into the cave.”

I gave the concerned-looking Rigurd a smile and a nod to show I was fine.

“Alvis, Sufia, Phobio, and all the other lycanthropes—I guess I put a lot of undue concern on you. Sorry. I should’ve explained myself better.”

“N-no, Sir Rimuru. As long as you’re safe, it’s fine.”

“I was so worried, but... indeed, it is fine.”

“So what happened to the Storm Dragon?”

The Three Lycanthropeers seemed greatly relieved. Given how I was the key to rescuing Carillon, I'm sure my absence must've freaked them out mightily. Veldora, meanwhile, must not have liked the "Sir" being omitted from his epithet, because he scowled back at them. I grinned, patted his shoulder, and told him to calm down before I addressed the crowd.

"That is exactly what I came here to show you all. But before that, allow me to introduce—"

I then pushed Veldora, the handsome young man standing next to me, toward the forefront.

"This is li'l old Veldora in the flesh! He's kinda shy, but make nice with him, all right?"

The entire region of town fell into silence. Everyone's eyes landed on Veldora, nobody daring to say a word. In the midst of this:

"Wait a moment! Enough of that nonsense! I am not in the least bit shy—I just had so few people reach my domain while they were still breathing, up to now."

It was delivered in a peeved, dissatisfied voice, but it was more than enough to plunge the scene right back into chaos.

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The dryads were the first to recover. They all kneeled before Veldora, Treyni included, and bowed their heads.

"O Sir Veldora, guardian of the forest, how it fills us with joy from the heart to see you alive and well again!"

"Gahhh-ha-ha-ha! The dryads, eh? Haven't seen you in ages. Well done managing my forest for me!"

"Oh, we hardly deserve your praise. It is still nowhere near enough of a task to repay the favor you showed us, taking us in after we were separated from our Spirit Queen."

"Ah, don't worry about it. So I guess you and Rimuru are working together? I intend to be just as obliged to him going forward, so keep up the good work!"

Whoa. What's he mean, "just as obliged"? We're gonna have a talk about that later on, to be sure. I had a feeling I'd be taking care of a lazy, useless bum unless I stepped up and did something about it.

"Y-yes. Certainly. But—"

"Umm, if I may," piped up Doreth, youngest of the dryads, recovering from her paralysis just in time to take the words from Treyni's mouth. "Sir Veldora, what kind of relationship do you have with Sir Rimuru?"

I could tell everyone was straining their ears to hear the answer. They were intensely curious about it. I could practically hear them holding their breath.

"Ah, that? Eh-heh-heh. You'd like to know?"

Don't give me that "eh-heh-heh" crap, man. What's the point of acting all high and mighty here?

"Yes! By all means!"

Everyone else nodded. It served only to make Veldora smile triumphantly. You see? You guys all spoiled this dragon for so long that he thinks he can get away with well near anything.

"We... are *friends*!!"

Oh please. Stop. Now you're embarrassing me, too. I wanted to die of shame at the way he proudly bellowed it out, but the monsters gathered before us were now more frenzied than ever.

"My goodness! First Lady Milim and now Sir Veldora?!"

"When did he ever do *that*...?"

"Ohhh, yeah, ol' Rimuru's always been that way! Really cool!"

"Yeah, that's sure the slime I know. I've come to expect damn near anything from him,

really..."

The murmuring continued for a few more moments.

"So... Er, why are you taking that form, Sir Veldora?"

"Oh, this? My friend Rimuru prepared it for me. Over the past three days, he has helped me learn how to restrain my aura so I can converse with all of you without any adverse effects. What do you think? Don't you agree this is better as well?"

"I do." Treyni sighed, overcome with emotion. "I really do."

"This will be a great help to all of us, truly."

"You look so amazing, Sir Veldora!!"

"Yes! Yes, I do, don't I? Gahhh-ha-ha-ha!"

The other dryad sisters gave Veldora just the kind of praise he craved. *Well, if he's happy, I'm not gonna rain on his parade.*

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Well done, Sir Rimuru. You trained him to hold back that all-powerful aura of his? How fascinating..."

"You said it, Diablo. But more than that, he's *friends* with Sir Veldora? That's what *I'm* more surprised about."

"Perhaps," Rigurd said, "but looking back, it makes sense. Sir Rimuru first showed himself in our village just when Sir Veldora himself disappeared."

"Indeed, I had always wondered if the timing of the two events was more than a coincidence."

"Yeah, I kinda kept it a secret from you guys. I thought at the time it'd take a century or so to free Veldora, and if word got out, there was no telling who'd take that as a signal to attack us."

"Ah, I see..."

My explanation seemed convincing enough to them—and in the end, Veldora became a member of our town far more easily than I'd guessed.

Just then, Soei appeared before me via Spatial Motion—I guess that was my gift to him.

“Sir Rimuru, I have returned to report on Clayman’s activity...”

Before he could continue, he realized that he was surrounded by the Three Lycanthropeers and nearly every VIP in the land of Tempest.

“...Did something happen, my lord?” he asked, perhaps hesitant to divulge his report in front of this massive audience. Yeah, something sure did happen, didn’t it?

“Oh, nothing too serious. Your report’s the most important thing for now. Here, you three listen in, too—”

“Allow us to, if you could.”

“Yeah, me too!”

“No way we aren’t staying involved now.”

Guess I didn’t need to ask. Great! Now’s the perfect time to nail down a plan.

“Soei, summon all the town leaders who aren’t here right now! And have Yohm and Mjurran join us in the great meeting hall. Kabal and his gang, too, while you’re at it.”

“...At once.”

Then he Spatial Motioned out of there. I was sure he’d have them here in a flash. It was time for an all-hands conference.

I couldn’t overstate the importance of this meeting. The future of Tempest was riding on it—a future where man and monster could live together. If anyone got in the way of that, we’d knock them out of the picture, no matter what. And right now, my friends and I had the power to do that.

First, the demon lord Clayman. Next, the Western Holy Church. *Let’s have ‘em all accept their just deserts for laying hands upon my friends.* The thought brought a soft smile to my lips.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

EPILOGUE

THE STRING- PULLER IN THE SHADOWS

EPILOGUE

THE STRING-PULLER IN THE SHADOWS

The anger was writ clear upon the demon lord Clayman's face. He had come so far, and now one plan after another was falling apart on him.

He schemed to have Carillon be attacked by Milim—and then she just flew over, declared war, and flew on back. Learning of Farmus's ambitions, he ordered Mjurran to wreak even more havoc—only to have Rimuru, leader of the monsters, return to the scene and erase the Farmus military from the face of the Earth.

Clayman planned to use all this chaos to awaken himself and become the “true demon lord” he knew he could be. But none of this made sense to him.

Damn all of them! And after that kind benefactor set everything up for my awakening...

The frustration made him grind his teeth. But his efforts weren't a complete failure. Mjurran, one of his pawns, had been killed by Rimuru—and he could always use that as a pretext to declare war. That was the original plan, and Mjurran was always meant as a sacrifice toward that end.

Now, though, there was another problem:

In the end, can I actually win?

That was a serious issue. Among the weak human states that dotted the continent, the Kingdom of Farmus was among the more decently powerful ones. For this campaign, they had a legion of nothing but knights, numbering twenty thousand strong—a figure not even Clayman could afford to ignore. And it took just one magic-born, one Rimuru, to slay them all.

The unbelievable news left the demon lord in a daze for a few moments. Even worse, Pironé—the little finger of the “five fingers” that formed Clayman's closest, most faithful confidants—had died in the midst of an espionage operation. Unlike Mjurran, the ring finger, Pironé had been eminently useful when it came to infiltrating deep into human society.

How annoying this is. Of all the coincidences, the Nuclear Cannon strike that demon deflected landing a direct hit on my own agent...

The unexpected loss of a vital pawn in his strategy irked him. But the next ebullient dispatch he received made all the dark clouds in his mind evaporate away.

—The demon lord Milim had dispatched Carillon, putting an end to the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania.

Now, finally, Clayman had something to rejoice about. He hadn't managed to bring Carillon under his own control, but in terms of daunting the other demon lords, this would serve well enough. Any demon lord who didn't bend to his will was just trash in his way. Milim alone was powerful enough to overwhelm someone as strong as Carillon, and with her on his side, he doubted he needed to beef up his offenses any further.

The news came by way of the demon lord Frey, elegantly sipping her tea as she delivered her tidings. There was no reason to doubt it. The demon lord Carillon was dead. Milim Nava had had no problem dealing with him. And now she was Clayman's.

Ten demon lords controlled the vast majority of power in this world. Three of them, counting himself, were now on the same side, and one was out of the picture. It pained Clayman that his planned "awakening" had failed, but Milim had more than made up for this shortcoming.

"Heh-heh-heh... I think we can alter my plans to point matters back in a beneficial direction."

"Oh, you think so? Well, glad to be of service, then."

With that less-than-heartfelt endorsement, Frey stood up.

"I have nothing further to report—and with that, I've fulfilled my duty to you. I'm going home, but what are you going to do with Milim? She's so worked up about the battle that she ripped apart the magic-born sent to take care of her."

Clayman responded with an exasperated grunt. "Then you take care of her. She's our friend either way."

"As I told you," Frey coldly replied, "I've fulfilled my duty. I helped you trick Milim, and I have no obligation to aid you any further."

But Clayman simply gave her a thin smile. "Heh-heh-heh... You appear to be mistaken, Frey. Listen to me. I am giving an order to you. Go back, take Milim with you, and take care of her. Or would you like to be Milim's next opponent?"

Frey gave him a stern look in response. She had anticipated this, in a way, and it didn't disturb her.

"...Aha. I see. So that was your goal from the start, was it, Clayman?"

"Haaa-ha-ha-ha! Well spotted. So I imagine I know the answer I should expect...?"

"...All right. I don't want to wind up like Carillon, no."

"There you go. Very good. That's very intelligent of you, Frey. I will leave Milim in your hands, then. Take her along with you. Wouldn't want my *own* castle destroyed in the process, now would we?"

Frey gave this an exaggerated rolling of her eyes. "And you think I want *my* home wrecked? Not that you'll listen to me..."

"I'm glad we have an understanding, then. You may go."

The attitude indicated to the world that he no longer saw the demon lord Frey as an equal. He was calling the shots, and she carried them out. Frey voiced no great displeasure at this as she gave Clayman a final cold glance and left the room.

Once he saw she was gone, Clayman closed his eyes and began to think.

The situation had changed so extensively now that he would have to revise his plans. Losing his chance at an awakening hurt, but it wasn't an issue. With Milim's powers, he decided, he could ram headlong into any human force and expect a likely victory out of it. Her strength would spread death and destruction across the land, reaping souls the entire way. That, Clayman thought, should be enough to elevate him to true demon lord status without lifting a finger.

His original plan—to set up an orc lord as a new demon king, providing him with all

the backing he needed—was nice, but *this* was much more interesting. With Milim, the ultimate trump card, in his hands, there was no longer any need to fear his fellow demon lords.

Heh-heh... Now I can finally get Leon out of the picture.

Simply picturing it made a joyous smile creep across his face.

But before Leon—

He would have preferred to put his own priorities first, but that wasn't going to happen. He needed to evaluate matters and see what required the most urgent attention. After all, it was what motivated his benefactor that mattered the most.

Their enemies could be divided into three camps: the demon lord Leon, his rival these many years; the leader of the Forest of Jura, proving more powerful than he first guessed; and the ever-enigmatic Western Holy Church, along with the Holy Empire of Lubelius that existed above it.

At the moment, direct conflict among demon lords was prohibited. The downfall of Carillon would likely be filed as yet another case of Milim going crazy. Maybe some of them would notice Clayman lurking in the shadows, but he didn't picture any of them making a public issue out of it. Anyone who pursued that question would quickly be making Clayman their enemy. These demon lords were all far too selfish to work together as a group. And if anyone *did* pursue him, he could handle it. The ultimate trump card made none of them seem worth worrying about any longer.

The real issue was the Western Holy Church. Clayman's sworn friend Laplace was still planted in their bureaucracy, and this incident provided both of them with immense backing. The magic-born Rimuru killed twenty thousand Farmus soldiers, something the Church couldn't afford to ignore. So why not pit them against each other on the battlefield and profiteer from the results? They could wait until both sides reached the limits of their fatigue, toss Milim in there, and *bam*—they'd both be gone, practically without a fight. Clayman could awaken himself that way, too, maybe.

That scenario was exactly what his benefactor wanted—the only master Clayman ever truly served in his life. And if Clayman could pull it off, he could then declare war on Leon and stamp out that anxiety for good.

The smile on his face widened. Several mistakes had been made, but fixing them

wouldn't be a problem. Now he just had to report back to his benefactor and await the final decision.

He laughed loudly and boldly, there in his room, already picturing his lifelong dream finally coming true.



PRESENT STATUS

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

Rimuru Tempest



Race → Demon Slime

Protection → Crest of the Storm

Title → Leader of the Monsters
True Demon Lord

Magic →

- Elemental Magic
- Physical Magic
- Spirit Magic
- High-Level Spirit Summoning
- High-Level Demon Summoning

Intrinsic Skills →

- Infinite Regeneration
- Universal Detect
- Universal Shapeshift
- Lord's Ambition
- Enhanced Replication
- Universal Thread

Ultimate Skills →

- Raphael, Lord of Wisdom Mind Accelerate, Analyze and Assess, Parallel Computation, Cast Cancel, All of Creation, Combine/Disassemble, Ability Adjust
- Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony Predation, Stomach, Mimicry, Isolate, Rot, Soul Consume, Food Chain
- Uriel, Lord of Vows Unlimited Imprisonment, Control Laws, Universal Barrier, Dominate Space
- Veldora, Lord of the Storm Summon Storm Dragon, Restore Storm Dragon, Storm Magic

Tolerance →

- Resist Pain
- Resist Melee Attack
- Cancel Natural Elements
- Cancel Ailments
- Resist Spiritual Attack
- Resist Holy Attack

Mimicry →

- Demon
- Spirit
- Black Wolf
- Black Snake
- Centipede
- Spider
- Bat
- Lizard
- Goblin
- Orc
- Other

Rimuru has awakened into "true demon lord" form, although he has not officially declared himself to be a demon lord yet. This provided large boosts to all his abilities as well as let him freely transform from a material body to a spiritual one. Physical damage hardly affects him at all anymore, and he has obtained four all-powerful ultimate skills, making his evolution as unusual as it is formidable.

Benimaru

Race	Oni	Protection	Crest of the Storm
Title	Ogre Lord	Magic	Battlewill Mystic Arts
Unique Skills	Born Leader Mind Accelerate, Dominate Thought, Compute Prediction, Inspire Forces		
Extra Skills	Magic Sense Sense Heat Source Multilayer Barrier Spatial Motion Dominate Flame Dark Flame Magic Burn Ambition Steel Strength		
Tolerance	Cancel Ailments Cancel Pain Resist Melee Attack Cancel Natural Elements Resist Spiritual Attack Resist Holy Attack		



While the wild side of him has shown signs of ebbing, he is unstoppable when riled up. He has obtained offensive skills suited for leading a military force, but his strengths as a solo fighter are also unrivaled. As Rimuru's right-hand man, he serves as a supreme commander to unite Tempest's monsters into a coherent militia.

Shuna

Race	Oni
Protection	Crest of the Storm
Title	Ogre Princess
Magic	Aspectual Magic Illusory Magic Mystic Arts
Unique Skills	Parser Mind Accelerate, Analyze and Assess, Cast Cancel, Control Laws Creator Transform Material, Combine/ Disassemble
Extra Skills	Magic Sense Multilayer Barrier Spatial Motion Majesty
Tolerance	Ailments Resist Spiritual Attack Resist Holy Attack



Benimaru's younger sister and the shamaness of the ogre race, which makes her higher in rank than her brother. This most recent evolution put her in A-rank territory, but her magicle energy stores are lower than average for this ranking. Her strength lies in her skills, and she is no pushover on the battlefield. Still, few notice the full extent of her powers, in part because they often die once they do. A sort of secretary to Rimuru in the true meaning of the term.

Shion

Race	Oni	Protection	Crest of the Storm
Title	Tyrant, the Immortal		
Magic	Battlewill		
Intrinsic Skills	Ultraspeed Regeneration Complete Memory Ogre Berserker		
Unique Skills	Master Chef Guarantee Results, Optimal Action		
Extra Skills	All-Seeing Eye	Magic Sense	Multilayer Barrier Spatial Motion Ambition
Tolerance	Cancel Ailments	Cancel Pain	Cancel Natural Elements Resist Spiritual Attack Resist Physical Attack



Being brought back from the dead has taken a toll on her mind—in assorted ways. Her Master Chef skill, despite the name, is for more than just the cooking Shion wants to excel at. Her magical energy now surpasses Benimaru's, and her force is equivalent to always having Steel Strength active, although she has yet to learn how to temper her strikes. One could only guess how Ogre Berserker could affect this...

Soei

Race	Oni	Protection	Crest of the Storm
Title	Dark Shadow	Magic	Battlewill
Unique Skills	Shadow Striker Mind Accelerate, Ultraspeed, Insta-Kill, Espionage		
Extra Skills	Magic Sense Multilayer Barrier Spatial Motion Replication Sticky Steel Thread Steel Strength		
Common Skills	Coercion Apply Poison/Paralysis/Rot		
Tolerance	Cancel Ailments Cancel Pain Cancel Natural Elements Resist Physical Attack		



As Rimuru's top information officer, he has provided results in a variety of areas. Regrets about his performance in this book's events led him to adopt a more battle-oriented bend as he evolved. Espionage gives him the ability to sabotage entire organizations, while weaving in Insta-Kill (which lets him damage the spiritual bodies of foes) with his combo strikes makes him a brutal opponent.

Hakuro

Race	Oni	Protection	Crest of the Storm
Title	Sword Ogre	Magic	Battlewill
Unique Skills	Battle Lord Heavengaze, Mind Accelerate, Ultraspeed, Predict Future, Mystery		
Extra Skills	Magic Sense Multilayer Barrier Steel Strength		
Common Skills	Coercion		
Tolerance	Cancel Ailments Resist Spiritual Attack		



A top-level warrior. Once old and expecting his body to fall apart on him, falling under Rimuru's rule has extended his life span. Even in human realms, he is known and feared as the Sword Ogre, although his exact identity remains unknown to mankind. His long past is shrouded in mystery, although it includes a stint as teacher for Master of the Sword King Gazel of Dwargon.

Ranga

Race	Tempest Starwolf	Protection	Crest of the Storm
Title	Rimuru's Pet		
Magic	Death-Calling Wind Dark Lightning Storm of Destruction		
Intrinsic Skills	Keen Smell		
Unique Skills	King of Magewolves Ultra-Instinct, Possession Identify, Summon Comrade, Restore Comrade, Control Common Will		
Extra Skills	Magic Sense Multilayer Barrier Spatial Motion Thought Communication		
Tolerance	Resist Physical Attack Cancel Ailments Resist Spiritual Attack Resist Holy Attack Resist Natural Elements		



Originally a direwolf, he swore fealty to Rimuru after tasting defeat by his hands. During his servitude, Ranga has evolved into tempest wolf, starwolf, and finally his long-awaited tempest starwolf form. He constantly lurks in Rimuru's shadow, sharing his magical energy with him. Powerful when fighting solo, he grows even stronger when working in tandem with allies.

Geld

Race	High Orc	Protection	Crest of the Storm
Title	Orc King	Magic	Recovery Magic
Unique Skills	Protector Grant Protection, Stand-in, Iron Wall		
	Satiator Predation, Rot, Stomach, Receive, Provide		
Extra Skills	Sage Magic Sense Multilayer Barrier Spatial Motion Control Thought Ultra-Smell Identify Armor Steel Strength		
Common Skills	Self-Regeneration Apply Poison/Paralysis/Rot Coercion		
Tolerance	Cancel Ailments Cancel Pain Resist Natural Elements Resist Melee Attack		



The last surviving orc general and the one who took on the will and name of Geld, the Orc Disaster. A dutiful warrior who has sworn loyalty to Rimuru, he has evolved to become a defensive specialist, taking damage in place of his allies and granting his defensive strength to his underlings. In peacetime, he is mainly involved with construction work.

Gabil

Race	Dragonewt
Protection	Crest of the Storm
Title	Dragon Warrior
Magic	None
Intrinsic Skills	Dragon Body Flame Breath Thunder Breath
Unique Skills	Braggart Unexpected Effects, Change Destiny
Extra Skills	All-Seeing Eye Magic Sense Multilayer Barrier Sense Heat Source Ultra-Smell
Tolerance	Resist Natural Elements Cancel Ailments Resist Melee Attack



Once an enemy of Rimuru's, he came to join his force largely through his incredible luck. Although quick to get hotheaded and carried away, he is quite talented in battle, watching over the men who adore him as a leader. For better or for worse, once he focuses on something, he pursues it blindly.

Diablo

Race → Demon

Protection → Crest of the Storm

Title → Demon Lord
Noir, the
Original Black

Magic → Unknown

Ultimate Skills →

- Wise Man
Mind Accelerate,
Cast Cancel, All of
Creation, Control
Laws

- Tempter
Control Thought,
Charm, Solicit

Extra Skills →

- Universal Detect
- Multilayer Barrier
- Spatial Motion
- Lord's Ambition

Tolerance →

- Cancel Pain
- Resist Melee Attack
- Cancel Ailments
- Resist Spiritual Attack
- Resist Holy Attack
- Resist Natural Elements



One of the three demons summoned by a desperate Rimuru—although the other two were actually his servants. Unusually powerful and very attached to Rimuru.

Veldora Tempest

Race → Dragon
(high-level spirit)

Protection → Sworn Friend
to Rimuru

Title → Storm Dragon

Magic → Storm Magic Death-Calling Wind,
Dark Lightning, Storm of Destruction

Ultimate Skills → Faust, Lord of Investigation Unknown

Tolerance → Resist Natural Elements Cancel Ailments Cancel Pain
Resist Melee Attack Resist Spiritual Attack Resist Holy Attack



Rimuru's first friend and youngest of the world's four dragons, the strongest beings on the planet. A Calamity-level threat, more powerful than even the demon lords. He once spread havoc and destruction across the world, resurrecting himself whenever he was defeated. His consciousness was wiped clean with every rebirth, making him the only dragon to have experience with being hunted down. His magical energy ballooned with every resurrection, granting him massive force and potential. With Rimuru's evolution, he was finally released from the seal the Hero placed upon him. While lacking in experience, he earned his first ultimate skill with some quick studying under Rimuru's wing.

AFTERWORD

Hello!

Here we are with Volume 5 of *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, a mere month after the previous volume came out in Japan. As always, quite a bit of this volume is original material that wasn't in the web version—hopefully you've found it up to snuff.

I've been given a decent number of pages for this afterword, so I'm having trouble figuring out what to say. Maybe I'll go into some behind-the-scenes stuff about the production? It might include some spoilers, so I'd recommend reading the whole book first before proceeding further!

As a rule, the general plot of the light novel edition of *Slime* is the same as the web version. However, in order to maintain integrity with the original material, there have been a few small changes, not to mention a few bigger ones thanks to the new characters appearing.

Volume 2 was mostly just editing and revision, but from Volume 3 on, I started adding new content and such. The same was true for Volume 4. If I'd been running at the same pace as the web version, I would've had Rimuru saving the kids in Volume 3 and evolving into demon lord form at the end of Volume 4. However, I selfishly wanted to flesh out Volume 3 to talk more about how the town was developing, and my editor was kind enough to agree to the edits.

This called for a change in plans. The original idea was to have Volume 4 end in a cliff-hanger as we see Hinata for the first time, and with Volume 5 coming out right afterward in Japan, that's where Rimuru would wrap up the encounter, become a demon lord, and then there'd be a bit about his meeting up with the other demon lords. However, as I wrote Volume 4, I began to feel like, *This ain't gonna happen, is it?*

Here, from memory, is the phone conversation I had with Mr. I, my editor.

“Hello. Do you have a free moment?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Well, ummmmm... Regarding Volume Four, I think I’m gonna have a ton more new content than I was planning for...”

“Again?! Didn’t you say the same thing for Volume Three?”

“Yeah... I’ve been cutting out a lot, but if this keeps up, I dunno if I’ll be able to fit the Hinata battle in or not.”

“...Well, let’s do it! Just keep on writing! We’ll add in more pages if we have to!”

“Huh? Are you sure? I’m talking a *whole lot* of stuff here, so...”

“Sure, it’s fine. I’ve kind of resigned myself to the fact that this is how it’s gonna be with *Slime*, so don’t worry about it!”

“Um... Well, all right! Talk to you later!”

That kind of thing.

At this point, my thought was that Volume 4 would be a bit expanded, but Volume 5 would remain mostly the same length. *But!* Thanks to being given carte blanche to expand as much as I wanted, Volume 4 wound up having a lot of... um, volume. This was even after I cut out a whole section involving an expedition to the Dwarven Kingdom.

Thus, by the time I was into the second half of the book, the reality was that I was way the hell over my word count. Bad news, probably.

Time for another phone call.

“Hello? This is Fuse calling. I wanted to talk to you about something, but did you have a moment?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Wellllll, I think Volume Four’s gonna be a lot bigger by the time I get done writing it,

but the real issue is with Volume Five.”

“How so?”

“If we’re gonna cover everything we planned to, I think we’re gonna have some serious trouble on our hands.”

“Oh? But if we round out Volume Five with the evolution to a demon lord, that’s gonna be kind of thin content-wise, isn’t it? There won’t be a lot of quantity at all, I don’t think.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m a little worried about. It might get a bit thin on that front, but there’s this bonus arc that I wanted to write at around this point in the plot, so I was wondering if I could add that to the book...”

“Hmm...”

So Mr. I and myself fleshed out what we wanted to do in detail. And the result... is the very book you have in your hands right now. *Bonus arc?* you may ask. *What bonus arc?* No, it’s not your imagination, as anyone who’s read the book—or even the table of contents!—would know.

Why not? Well, it happened again. By the time I finished writing, the number of pages was through the roof. How did this happen? Oh, the usual way—more dialogue, more scenes added, more of this and more of that, and it just sort of turned out that way. You’ll get that bonus arc in the next volume.

—Not that I know exactly what the next volume is gonna cover yet.

And getting back to that content...

Oh dear, we’re starting to gradually diverge from the web version more and more over time, aren’t we?!

People familiar with both versions would certainly have noticed this by Volume 4. The Church is in a rather different position from the one it takes in the web plot, and with that change, it only follows that other changes trickle down, affecting future developments. I think I’ll have to deal with more problems like that in the next volume,

too.

I mean, is it okay if I just, like, ignore the web version from now on?!

I'm starting to imagine the devil whispering something along those lines into my ear.

When Rimuru officially declares himself a demon lord, you know the other lords won't take that sitting down. The Western Holy Church—and Hinata, its most powerful of paladins—will be making moves, too. We have a few people behind the scenes as well, and every nation will have its own reaction that we'll want to know about.

For people who've read the web version, maybe they've taken some solace in the fact that they know how things will turn out. But there are no absolutes in this world. In fact, I can no longer deny that our assumption back at the start—that the web and light novel editions will follow the same general plot—might be falling apart.

Maybe, just maybe...

So I know all of this is irresponsible and capricious of me, but I'm thinking very intently about the story content, trust me. Even if that assumption falls to pieces, you know, the web version's always gonna be there for you! (But come on...)

Anyway, not to end it on a weird note like that, but here's hoping you'll continue to support *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*.

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