

転生したら スライム That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

12







Tatsuya appeared in the garden that only the emperor and a few close associates could enter. And as it happened, the emperor was relaxing there.

"Interesting. This must be a twist of fate." Those were the last words Tatsuya heard before his consciousness faded. When he awoke, he realized that not a scratch remained on his body from before. Tatsuya's luck had saved his life. So, in order to return the favor, he pledged the life he had once wasted to the emperor.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime 12

By 伏瀬

Full Color Edition

Author: Fuse (伏瀬)

Illustration: Mitz Vah

Translation: Wakamesalad, DasRay, Anna

Source Proofreaders: Apollo, Seeker

Editors: Voxel, Derka, Alaric, Sylk, Sushi

English Proofreaders: Naz, Squishy, Murica

Special thanks: Theri, Alexis (Redrawing)

Colored illustrations created by Theri, check him out [@jetsettheri](#)

This translation is fan-made and free to access by the public. **This is not to be used in any commercial means.** The translators or editors are not liable to any action of the readers. Please respect the fair use of our translation as well as Fuse's work.

All rights reserved - 伏瀬 and MICRO MAGAZINE

LN fan translation Feedback Form:

<https://forms.gle/UUmkEyvNDShd5RGNA>

We welcome all constructive feedback and suggestions for our work.

1st Edition Full Color

The Eve of War Arc

Table of Contents

[Prologue - Clowns on the Run](#)

[Chapter 1 - The Staccato of Marching Jackboots](#)

[Chapter 2 - Outcomes and Preparation](#)

[Interlude - The Internal Affairs of the Empire](#)

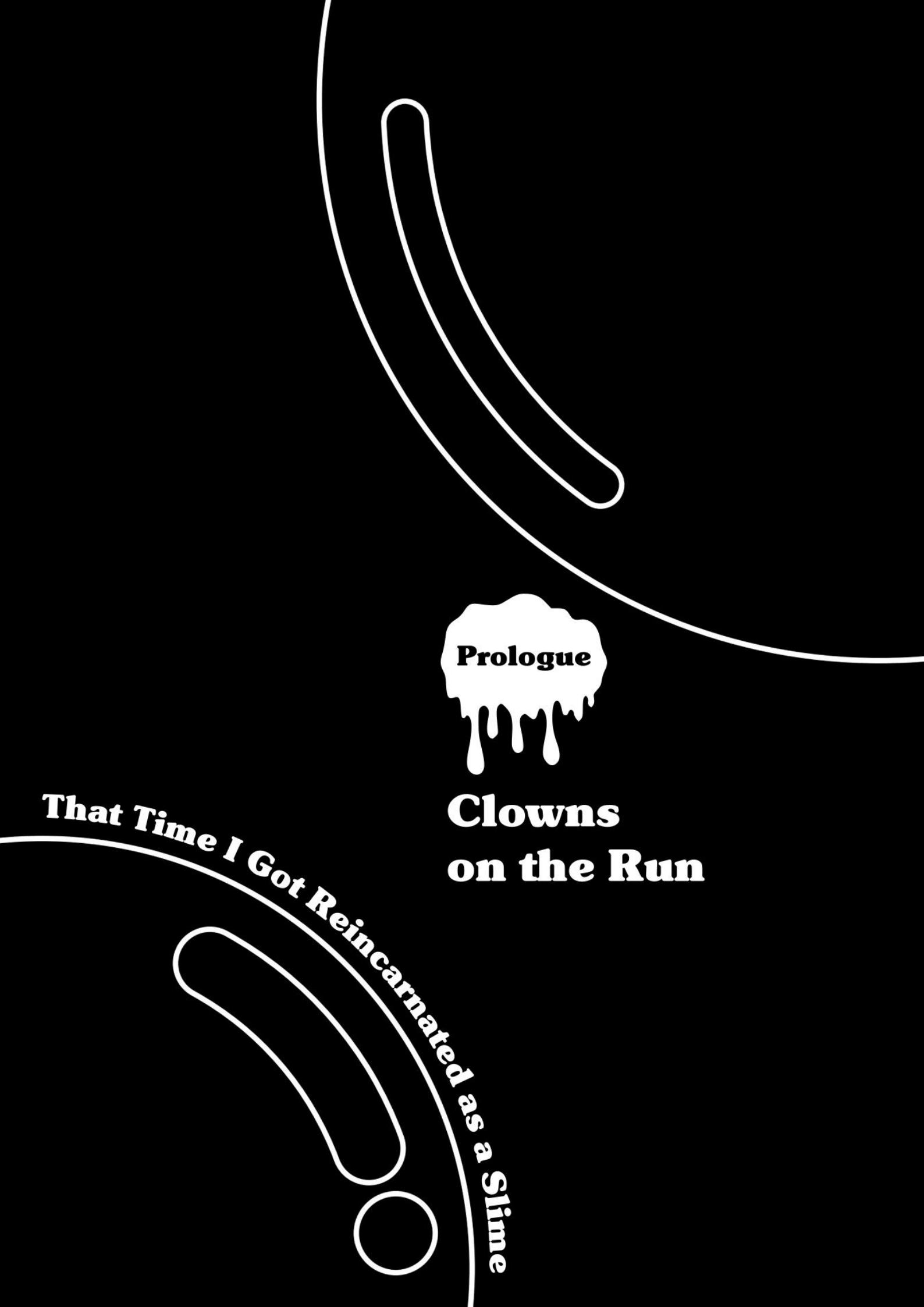
[Chapter 3 - Visitors from the Empire](#)

[Chapter 4 - The Empire Strikes First](#)

[Chapter 5 - War on the Horizon](#)

[Epilogue - The Emperor's Hegemony](#)

[Manga](#)



Prologue

Clowns on the Run

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

Prologue

Clowns on the Run

Yuuki Kagurazaka was a genius.

In his original world, he already possessed a special power. Mental force—so-called psychokinesis—a superpower, one that he was born with. However, he never intended to make use of this power. Because he knew that if others were to discover his power, he would become a spectacle.

Despite the monotony of daily life, he seemed to enjoy himself. He had loving parents and plenty of friends. Making money was easy for him. As long as he wanted it, there was nothing he couldn't get. There was nothing he wasn't satisfied with.

Yet, one fateful day, tragedy struck. Just as he started middle school, both of Yuuki's parents died in a car accident. It was not his parents' fault. The Kagurazaka's car was struck by a truck driver who was dozing off behind the wheel. Only Yuuki, who was sleeping in the backseat, survived.

Yuuki found it incredibly unfair. He hated the guilty driver but could not do anything about it. Japan was a nation of law and order, and taking personal revenge was illegal.

When the verdict of the trial came, he realized various things. He realized the incompetence of the transport company, given that they contracted the work under unreasonable conditions. They put all the pressure on their employed field workers, and these workers had to keep working despite being overworked. The driver was a victim in a sense, too.

Then the fault would fall on the transport company—but that was not true, either. If they were to decline the request from their important clients, they wouldn't order from them in the future. One doesn't simply turn down an old client's requests. In that case, they would need to improve the management of their business, but it wasn't easy hiring experienced drivers, either. Even if the company wanted to hire young talent and train them, their circumstances right now would not allow them to spare the effort.

What is this—Yuuki couldn't help but exclaim. There were so many unfair things in this world, yet his hands were bound.

Who should he hate?

At the end of the day, the fault lay with the flawed societal structure. He yearned to take his revenge against this society. But there was nothing Yuuki could do. He was a genius, but quickly realized his limit.

This world was already highly developed. Even with his superpower, it was not enough to make an impact. He had no chance of winning against an army. And even if he could, there was no future for him if he did.

Yuuki also thought about destroying society and rebuilding it from the ground up... But that would plunge many into misfortune. He couldn't do such a thing.

If he really wanted to change society as a whole, he would have to do it step by step, slowly increasing the number of like-minded companions. Only when he became a politician would he be able to shape this country into his image. This was the only solution within his reach. But walking this path would require patience. It was a feasible goal, were he to work assiduously, but that would still take a matter of decades.

Yuuki was torn.

But before he could come to a conclusion, he found himself in the other world. Was this a blessing or a curse?

Yuuki was summoned by the demon lord Kazalim and his deep-seated resentment. He had lost his physical body and became purely spiritual instead. But he never lost his power as the "Curse Lord."

He spent a long time preparing for his resurrection. In order to see this to fruition, he resorted to summoning a body that was compatible with his spiritual body. Naturally, he needed to make sure that the being he summoned was carefully restrained. No misstep was allowed in this ritual, so as a precaution, he used his domination power to engrave a curse before summoning.

First, he would crush the mind of the one he wanted to summon, before the target even knew what hit it. Next, Kazalim would deprive its soul's power and take its body to resurrect himself. That was the gist of his plan.

There was only one thing Kazalim hadn't accounted for—the person he summoned being Yuuki.

The curse proved ineffective. With his genius, Yuuki already grasped the rules of this world. When he crossed worlds, he acquired the power he so wanted—the power to change the world. It was soul power—a pure form of energy that could freely adapt its nature. Its name was Unique Skill 'Creator.' When he told Rimuru that he didn't have any special ability, he lied as naturally as he breathed.

His first act of creation, using his Skill, was to create the ability that would nullify evil intentions against himself: 'Anti-Skill.' At that moment, Kazalim's scheme was ruined.

He even lost to Yuuki, becoming his servant in the process.

Yuuki, on the other hand, discovered his *raison d'être* in this world. This was a world where the strong trampled the weak. It was built on an imperfect system that still had a long way to go until it was fully developed. And so, Yuuki thought that if he could become the ruler of this world, then he could lead this world in the right direction.

Yuuki was determined to challenge this unjust world head on. His next step was to wage war against this world itself.

Conquering the world—Yuuki began moving towards his goal.



Yuuki, accompanied by Laplace, Footman, and Teare, escaped from the chaos they unleashed at the church. Their first priority was to escape from the Holy Empire of Lubelius. While it was tempting to hang around a little longer to watch the chaos unfold, it wasn't worth the risk.

The berserk Hero Chronoa wasn't a force to be taken lightly, and she certainly was not someone Yuuki could control. She was lashing out indiscriminately. Everyone there was her enemy. She was a truly terrifying force.

Granbell must have known this when he asked to cooperate with Yuuki.

It was a tough pill for him to swallow, but Yuuki had to admit that he'd simply been outsmarted this time.

"Ain't we the biggest losers here," Laplace complained. "All that work distracting Demon Lord Luminas to get an opening, and we were *this* close to gettin' the ultimate weapon, the Hero..."

"Hohoho," Footman chuckled, "that one's on a whole other level. It's a shame we let it go, but everyone who took that thing on has gotta be dead by now."

Footman had a point, but Yuuki was far from convinced about the latter. The Hero couldn't possibly have dispatched *everyone* there that easily, he thought.

"We can't guarantee that, though," Laplace remarked. No matter how you put it, Demon Lord Rimuru is stupidly powerful. Plus, Luminas and Leon were there too. With three demon lords and several powerful majins, both sides had equal chances of winning.

"You have a point. Granbell is an ex-Hero, so he's also pretty strong. I wouldn't bet on who won out in the end there," Teare added.

Those two were not as optimistic as Footman. Like Yuuki, they thought that Rimuru and his entourage had a chance of winning against Chronoa.

To Yuuki, Chronoa winning would be the best possible outcome. If that were the case, not only could he get rid of the nuisance Rimuru and the hindering Granbell, but also the future threats, namely Luminas and Leon, whom the clowns despised. All these threats would disappear, and it would essentially put control over the entire West in Yuuki's hands.

The only remaining wild card would be Chronoa, which would be tough to deal with. But considering that she lacked self-consciousness, there was nothing to fear. By using a couple monsters as bait, they'd be able to lure her off to some far corner of the desert anyway.

Raw strength alone wasn't enough to pose a threat in Yuuki's eyes. That's why he wanted to stay behind and watch the battle play out...

"Actually, running away *is* the right choice. If we got caught in the crossfire, we'd be taking a lot of hits. Besides—"

I had an ominous feeling—Yuuki's instinct kicked in.

In order to make plans for the future, he needed to analyze this chaotic fight. Even though he wanted to stay, Yuuki chose to trust his instinct and fled alongside the troupe.

If Chronoa were defeated, the surviving demon lords would surely consider them a thorn in their side. Rimuru seemed to have already noticed Yuuki's betrayal. He won't be able to make excuses anymore.

The territories and reputation he built in the West would go to waste due to this blunder. He only had himself to blame for having fallen into Granbell's trap. He was merely reaping what he'd sown.

This was why he chose to flee as soon as possible. He could no longer hesitate. One of Yuuki's strengths was that he was decisive. He had made it through countless challenges with his judgement.

This time is the same, Yuuki thought to himself.

But not a moment too soon, his naive plan hit a brick wall.

It happened in an instant. As Yuuki and his entourage were about to escape, a man suddenly stood in front of them. Beside him was an eye-catching, blue-haired beauty, wearing a rather out-of-place crimson maid uniform.

"Huh?!"

"Who're ya?"

Yuuki stopped, sensing danger.

The man didn't respond to Laplace's question. He was staring straight at Yuuki, ignoring everyone else.

"Hohoho, if you insist on getting in our way—"

Footman, who was standing in front, went to attack the man and woman. Instead, a figure suddenly appeared and pinned Footman to the ground with one hand.

It was another woman, wearing the same crimson maid uniform as the blue-haired one. This one, though, had green hair. Needless to say, it was Mizeri, who had been busy sabotaging the Ingracia Kingdom until just a few hours ago. Due to Testarossa's interference, she had to stop her meddling, and quickly came here thereafter.

Since Mizeri had come, it obviously followed that the blue-haired beauty was Raine. Both of them were accompanying the one and only demon lord, Guy Crimson. Known as the Lord of Darkness, he was the strongest of the demon lords.

His crimson hair, a red sheen deeper than blood, fluttered in the wind. His crimson eyes, glimmering gold and silver stars, gazed down at Yuuki arrogantly.

"Yo. I think this is the first time we've met. You've done well to catch my attention."

Guy's gaze was locked on Yuuki. No one else was worthy of his eyes. That fact wasn't lost on Yuuki, but he was conflicted over how that made him feel.

When Footman was easily beaten by Mizeri, he could measure just how strong they were. Or rather, he could tell by the color of their hair and by those special maid suits. Kagali—also known as Kazalim—and Clayman had mentioned these people. These three fit the bill.

In other words, the person in front of him stood at the top of the world. His position was Yuuki's end goal. As long as his ambition was to conquer the world, he would have to clash with this enemy one day.

"Is that so? You must be the so-called strongest demon lord, Guy Crimson. It's an honor to meet you. My name is Yuuki Kagurazaka. I never expected you to

come to me; were you looking to team up?" Yuuki mustered a smile without being intimidated by Guy.

Naturally, that was just wishful thinking. He could tell just by looking at how Mizeri was handling Footman right now. It was plain as day that Guy and his maids did not come to forge any alliances.

Even though he was faced with overwhelming danger, Yuuki still tried to put on a friendly tone. This was his unique way of negotiating. He would often throw out a wild statement to get a reaction, in an attempt to gauge his enemies' intentions.

"Ah-hahaha. You're an interesting fellow. You've got plenty of guts to be saying that straight to my face. Now that's not a bad proposition, but you seem to be Leon's enemy. Besides, weren't you planning to head east? I personally don't want Rudra to accrue any more power."

Negotiations failed.

Yuuki knew from the start that Guy would not have accepted the ludicrous proposal. But he didn't let that discourage him, instead reading deeper into Guy's words. Rudra was the name of the emperor of the Eastern Empire—the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire. He figured those two had some kind of relationship, one evidently tainted by bad blood.

So is he trying to get rid of us before we can run to the East? I don't really want to make the strongest demon lord my enemy, but I suppose there's no other way out, considering how things have developed...

He wouldn't be able to avoid conflict with Guy. They had no chance of escaping unscathed. Under these circumstances, he couldn't resort to trickery, either. With all other options blacked out, his best bet was going all out against Guy.

Yuuki finally came to a conclusion.

"Hmm—never mind, then. Since we're enemies, this timing is impeccable. Before I move my base to the East, I can see just how strong the strongest demon lord is for myself," Yuuki answered, practically taunting Guy.

An overwhelming sense of excitement welled from his heart. He had been hiding his full strength all this time, but he had to let loose against the strongest of the demon lords, if he wanted even an inkling of a chance.

The thought of failure never crossed his mind as he stepped forward¹.



Yuuki was incredibly confident. So much so, that he wagered he could beat absolutely anyone in a one-on-one fight.

He saw Chronoa go berserk, which only reminded him of how dangerous she was. But that was all there was to it. It would be a tough battle, but he was sure that he would come out on top if he gave it his all.

¹ "Oh? You're approaching me?"

She wasn't alone though; there were still several hostile demon lords with her. That being Leon and Luminas. And that good-natured Rimuru, too, had surely guessed Yuuki's true intentions.

In reality, Rimuru had known Yuuki was an enemy for quite a while now. But it was better for Yuuki that he did. Otherwise, had he continued his innocent charade in an attempt to manipulate Rimuru, it could've easily backfired. Yuuki had been oblivious to this, but he definitely made the right call. Rimuru was his enemy.

Despite his confidence, he wasn't so reckless as to take on three demon lords and Chronoa at the same time. Even without his premonition, he would've opted to get out of the fray as fast as he could.

However, this time was different. This ominous feeling was because of the man standing in front of him.

Yuuki understood this, but still decided to face the challenge head-on.

"Oh, do you think you can defeat me?" Guy smirked.

"I suppose. I plan to defeat you sometime in the future anyway. I'm just doing this a bit ahead of schedule."

Raine and Mizeri seethed with anger. They really wanted to kill him, but without Guy's permission, they wouldn't even dare speak. Guy was the absolute authority, and it would be disrespectful to worry for his safety.

Guy was normally pretty fickle. Unless he recognized his opponent as worthy, he would crush the enemy mercilessly.

Raine and Mizeri worked hard to gain his approval, and if they were to cause any trouble, he wouldn't hesitate to kill them. Guy was overwhelmingly powerful and could easily beat the two of them.

Laplace couldn't move a muscle. Like a rabbit petrified by the gaze of a snake—that analogy seemed fitting.

If Laplace tried to save Footman, Raine would fight back. Even though Guy and the other primordials were outnumbered, the difference in class was insurmountable. If they were only fighting Raine and Mizeri, then they could probably figure out a way to pull through. But with Guy here too, they had no chance of winning.

To Laplace, Yuuki challenging Guy was suicide.

There's no chance he'd win. We ain't on this guy's level. That Chronoa may be pretty strong, but this Guy Crimson is the real monster. We ain't able to take him. We can't run away, either. The plan that Boss has...it better work or we ain't gonna survive...

Laplace deserved credit for having seen a fraction of Guy's true power. Amazingly, considering the circumstances, Laplace was still thinking about ways to escape—that tenacity was one of Laplace's greatest strengths.

He knew Yuuki was strong too, albeit constantly hiding his true strength from even his companions. Laplace didn't know whether it would be enough to fight Guy or not...

If Yuuki couldn't win, Laplace planned to save Footman and run away with Teare. Yuuki would surely catch on to Laplace's plan and act accordingly. This would only work out because of their mutual trust.

The problem lay with Raine and Mizeri though. They were no ordinary enemies, either. They wouldn't sit back and let him get a chance to help Footman. Laplace was rooted in place. He had to carefully weight his every move.

Gotta figure out a way to save Footman—while his mind was working on a solution, something unexpected happened.

"Hey, let him go," Guy ordered Mizeri.

There was no way she'd go against his order. She quickly released Footman.

How complacent. But now we have a chance to escape.

Laplace began to think more positively, but it seemed things weren't going to be that easy.

"Don't worry, if you manage to beat me, I'll let you guys go. I won't touch even a hair on you guys."

Guy's challenge contradicted itself. If they could beat Guy, wouldn't they be able to just walk away anyway? His declaration was troubling. The situation was becoming increasingly hopeless. He prayed that Yuuki would win as he watched the battle.



Yuuki was the first to move. With absolute confidence in his immunity to magic and Skills, he fearlessly launched a kick at Guy.

His kick was sharp, heavy, and combined with a feint. At first, his foot was closing in to sweep Guy's legs, before jerking upward to land a clean uppercut. Despite Yuuki being the one to land a devastating kick, he ended up scrunching his face.

"Tsk, just how built are you?" he grumbled with a click of the tongue.

His 'Anti-Skill' was invincible and could penetrate all of his enemies' defense. Yet, Guy stood still, unaffected by Yuuki's hit. It was as if he didn't feel any pain at all. He had done no trickery whatsoever. Guy's body was simply harder than diamond. Being both tough and flexible, little could stand in his way. That neatly described just how powerful Guy was.

"Hahaha, that tickled. I'd hardly call this a fight. Entertain me more, or I'll kill everyone here," Guy laughed as he ignited a small flame in his palm.

It was the elemental magic 'Napalm Burst'²—a jet of flames that took the shape of a dragon, diving at his target with its long and narrow body. Its goal was to relentlessly attack the target until they were toasted. Burning at several thousand degrees, any normal man would become charcoal in an instant.

This flame dragon closed in on Yuuki.

² Kanji: Domination of flame dragon

"It's a waste of effort!" Yuuki shouted. "Magic doesn't work on me—" he was about to take another careless swing at Guy when suddenly a shiver ran down his spine and he jumped away.

"Ho, your instincts are quite sharp," Guy said with a smile.

Yuuki had no time to retort, as he had thrown himself on the ground and was rolling around, trying to quell the flames.³ Without a doubt, the effect of 'Anti-Skill' prevented Yuuki from getting harmed by Guy's magic. However, at the same time, the supposedly nullified magical flame was still burning. It didn't behave like a typical magical flame—this one burnt oxygen, depriving it from the air. A tad too slow, and Yuuki would likely have suffocated.

Although it felt like a long time, it all happened in the span of just a few seconds, meaning Yuuki got off without getting hurt. Had he not noticed the depleting oxygen, he would have continued attacking Guy and definitely tasted defeat. Having realized this in time, he opted to extinguish the fire, despite it making him look like a buffoon.

And from Guy's reaction, a daunting thought settled in Yuuki's mind. While he didn't want to admit it, he had to be sure. Without necessarily expecting Guy to give him an answer, he took a chance and asked while standing up, "—Why didn't you attack me again? Are you actually trying to fight me fair and square?"

"Ahahaha, don't play dumb! Surely you have realized by now that I have already discovered the secret behind your power!"

"..."

As I suspected—Yuuki thought bitterly.

His 'Anti-Skill' was versatile and could cancel any form of power it encountered, but when it was used against Arts, which were made by fusing magic and a Skill, he could not nullify both of them at the same time. That was its only flaw—his only weakness.

All physical enhancements aside, Yuuki was still human. Even if he could fight toxins with antibodies, he could not live without oxygen. The weaknesses of his humanity, Yuuki now realized, put him at a disadvantage.

Guy stood there casually.

"I know someone who can cancel out magic perfectly, but I would still win in a fight. That's because they couldn't cancel anything other than magic. As far as I know, there is no way to completely defend against the laws of physics in this world. When you specialize in one thing, you'll be vulnerable to another. But you don't only seem to be able to counter magic, but Skills as well—"

Guy, looking down on Yuuki, revealed his thoughts without attacking any further. His lax attitude was all calculated.

It would've been easy for Guy to kill Yuuki outright, but that wouldn't have been fun. Instead, Guy wanted to destroy Yuuki's confidence first, and then watch him admit defeat in despair.

³ Just like they taught us in kindergarten: stop, drop, and roll!

He had figured out Yuuki's physical constitution when Yuuki first attacked. Guy had already seen through his quirk. He even planned a counter for it.

So what if Yuuki was able to cancel magic and Skills? As long as he was human, it would be a piece of cake to beat him. Humans are fragile. Their frail bodies had plenty of weaknesses to exploit. Guy didn't need to think too hard to come up with various ways to kill a human.

Besides, Yuuki's physical abilities were far inferior to Guy. When Yuuki launched his kick, Guy only left a tiny 'Barrier' as defense, but even that was too much for Yuuki's kick to penetrate, leaving not even a nick.

In terms of magicle capacity, comparing the two of them was almost comical. Guy's magicules could rival a 'True Dragon,' so even if Yuuki canceled his magic, he could immediately recast it without a hitch.

"If I just wanted to kill you, then I wouldn't have come here myself. Now since I'm here, you'd better amuse me," Guy provoked Yuuki, arrogant as he stood over him.

He wanted to make Yuuki desperate enough to go all out. And then he would promptly beat him to a pulp.

Yuuki had painfully figured out what Guy was planning, but he couldn't muster a retort. His remaining confidence disappeared from his face. He started analyzing the situation, desperately trying to figure out a way to get through this.

His genius brain had come to the conclusion that the gap in power was lightyears across, but Yuuki was not going to give up. He was searching for all possibilities. The only ray of hope he could grasp onto was that Guy was underestimating them.

I can't fault him for looking down on me when he really is leagues ahead. But as it stands, he's a bit too cocky.

Yuuki had other trump cards. They were the superpower he was born with, as well as the 'Greedy One' he had taken from Mariabell. In addition, he had his 'Creator,' which could create whatever Skill he required for the situation. Using 'Creator' could help him overcome this disaster.

You'll regret that you didn't kill me when you had the chance!

Steadying his breath, Yuuki faced Guy again.

"Don't get cocky just because I've shown a fraction of my power."

He wasn't being a sore loser—he meant it. If he could make his opponent angry, he would lose composure and make mistakes. That was his plan.

As he spoke, Yuuki allowed his power to surge through his body. He now used the power he usually suppressed, concentrating his mind on a singular task, to remodel his body to fit his will. He evolved from a human to a 'Sage,' and then once more to become a 'Saint.' He evolved to a form surpassing Hinata herself, and ceased to breathe. A fully evolved 'Saint' was equal to a spiritual life form. While Hinata was still being limited by her body, Yuuki had reached a higher plane of existence. Now, he had overcome the need to breathe at all. He cast out the weaknesses of humanity and greatly elevated his existence. If he were to convert all his energy into magicules, he could rival Leon and Luminas.

Yet, Guy was not fazed by this either.

"How disappointing. Is that all you're capable of? You won't be able to win against me, even if we fought a million times over," he said dismissively, nonchalant as always.

"Perhaps. In that case, I'll do my best to entertain you!"

Yuuki's proclamation kicked off the battle anew.

...A second later, Yuuki learned why Guy was regarded as the strongest demon lord.



The scene was desperate. Yuuki was lying on the ground, physically outmatched. Against Guy's overwhelming strength, none of Yuuki's attacks worked. It was no use trying any more tricks. Not even his strongest, most polished attack could leave a scratch on Guy.

"Dammit, damn it all!"

Yuuki didn't have the strength to even get up again. The most he could do was curse at Guy. At this point his prevailing resilience was praiseworthy.

Laplace's eyes were glued to the battle. He could never forget what he saw unfold.

This is just too wild. It ain't Boss being too weak, it's Guy being outta this world...

Yuuki's strength exceeded Laplace's imagination.

Making use of his strange power, psychokinesis, Yuuki was pulling out all the stops to see what would work on Guy. He was lobbing stones, igniting fires, applying force, and releasing mental interference waves. Yet, all of this was easily countered. Even though he was using ridiculous strength, thirty times stronger than an average human, to launch attacks at speeds over a hundred meters per second, his attacks were child's play to Guy.

Yuuki's primary way of defense, 'Anti-Skill,' was no exception. It was unable to stop Guy's magic after a few hits.

"That won't work on me anymore," Guy taunted.

It appeared that he had figured out how to counter 'Anti-Skill' somehow. That was a horrifying fact.

Kazalim and Clayman had mentioned the Ten Great Demon Lords in the past. They had emphasized that Guy and Milim were particularly strong, but this vast difference was unfathomable. Had they been aware of it sooner, they would never have agreed to the naive ambition of conquering the world.

So this the power of a Catastrophe-class...

Laplace had finally learned his place in the food chain, and that he should avoid those at the top. He had always chosen to hide his true strength from even his closest companions, yet against a demon lord like Guy, he wouldn't have even made a scratch. Guy was on a whole other plane of existence compared to them.

Laplace couldn't even spot an opening for an attack. Even Yuuki, who was certainly stronger than him, was lying helplessly on the ground like a baby. With how things had developed, it'd be easier to travel to space than to come out of this alive.

Someone has to make a sacrifice—Laplace made up his mind. He put on his usual half-hearted attitude and stepped in front of Guy.

"Magnificent, Demon Lord Guy-sama. We, the 'Moderate Clown Troupe,' are open to any business requests. Currently, we are already employed by Yuuki over there. Since our boss has lost now, we may logically consider our contract terminated—"

"Huh!"

"Laplace, what are you sa—"

Laplace put on a front of betrayal, pretending to betray his companions, though rather flippantly. He didn't know what Guy's personality was exactly, but heard he was remarkably selfish and arrogant. He seemed completely uninterested in the weak. Unless he recognized you, you were not permitted to speak with him.

Laplace approaching Guy with this attitude was flirting with death. But at the same time, it also meant that he had Guy's attention. This could give Yuuki just enough time to make his escape. Laplace made his gamble.

Never betray your companions and never betray your client—that was the golden rule of the Moderate Clown Troupe. That's why Laplace thought Yuuki would for sure be able to pick up on his unspoken plan.

Footman was too much of a loose cannon and not the sharpest tool in the shed. But he was also very thoughtful of his companions. Teare was actually stronger than Clayman, yet she was too timid to show her true ability. And even though both of them had the bad habit of getting over their heads sometimes, they worked fine under Yuuki. It was because of this that Laplace decided to sacrifice himself.

"I'm sure I'd be of help to Guy-sama. So what do ya say, at least spare me my life?" Laplace shamelessly declared in open treachery.

Footman and Teare were in utter confusion, while Guy looked on with curiosity, as the edges of his mouth slowly widened into a grin.

Great, I just have to keep this up and Guy will surely be pissed off!

Laplace didn't plan to dig his own grave, either. There was little hope with Guy as your opponent, but he still had a slim chance of saving his life. That's why he wasn't going to hesitate anymore and decided to finish his sentence.

But just before he could say it out loud—

"A-ha-ha, don't push yourself like that, Laplace. Seriously, am I really that unreliable?"

Someone spoke before Laplace. It was Yuuki, shakily standing up.

.....

.....

...

Yuuki braced himself for his own death.

At this moment, his heart filled with unquenchable resentment. He was angry at his own powerlessness. He was even angrier when he heard what Laplace said.

Yuuki had managed to interpret Laplace's words correctly. Laplace would never betray him. In other words, what he had said was all an act. Even when Yuuki was in such a sorry state, Laplace still chose to have faith in him.

His mind was swirling with joy, but also guilt.

If only I had more power...

Realistically, nobody would be there to respond to his desperate thought. Yet at that moment, something spoke inside Yuuki's mind.

«...You want power? You need my help.»

Yuuki was baffled. He thought he might've been hallucinating from the exhaustion, but the voice definitely sounded real.

«Just trade places with me. You will obtain the strongest power. Your wish is to conquer the world. Taking my help will make it a cakewalk. Come on, make your decision.»

The strange voice's proposition irritated Yuuki.

Shut up. I am me. It may be different from borrowing the strength of my companions, but I won't stoop so low as to borrow a stranger's power to fulfill my ambition.

Yuuki was confident in his choice to reject the offer. After all, going after a personal ambition would only be meaningful if it were achieved without outside help. Yuuki had his principles, too.

«.....»

The voice fell silent, seemingly confused about his unexpected response.

Changing gears, Yuuki quickly brought his mind back to the situation at hand, disregarding the voice he could no longer hear.

Even though the situation had become desperate, something caught Yuuki's attention. He realized that Guy must've had some goal. Indeed, while Guy likely wanted to engage in battle, there must be some other reason.

Guy said something along the lines of: "I don't want Rudra to gain more strength." In other words, if he would not go into the Eastern Empire and assist Rudra, Guy wouldn't need to kill Yuuki and his companions. At least, that's how Yuuki interpreted it.

So, then why didn't Guy kill Yuuki immediately...?

Seriously, toe to toe, I have no chance against him. My next play is a battle of wits. But instead of Laplace offering to take the fall, this will have a better chance of succeeding!

Yuuki regained his confidence and stood up once more.

.....

.....

...

Yuuki brushed back his bangs and put on a defiant smile, in spite of his circumstances.

"I didn't expect you to be so strong, clearly surpassing my calculations," Yuuki conceded. "But I've seen through your plan. You weren't going to kill us after all, were you?"

"Heh, what makes you think that?" Guy sneered.

"If you had planned to do that, you would have obliterated us by now. With each attack, you only ever left me on the brink of death, never finishing me off. Why?" The confidence in his voice was palpable. He was being incredibly reckless.

How could Yuuki talk to Guy like that after seeing his immense strength?

Nobody could understand Yuuki. Nobody except for Guy, who was rather intrigued.

"So you noticed, but you don't need to know the answer."

Guy's response made it clear that he wouldn't reveal anything else.

Yuuki shrugged. He had expected this answer, so he began to calmly execute his next plan.

"Then I want to make a deal with you."

"You want to make a deal?"

"Yeah. If you let us go, we can be of help to you."

"Be of help to me?"

"Indeed. It sounds like you don't want us to join the Eastern Empire, but I hope I could sway your mind otherwise."

"Keep going..."

"Since our goal is to conquer the world, we will eventually become an enemy of the Empire. I have experienced the extent of your great power just now. Knowing it, I don't want to be your enemy. Because of that, destroying the Empire first would be much easier."

Yuuki's explanation was just confusing nonsense to everyone else. Footman and Teare were lost. Laplace was confused about the current situation, too. He was prepared to die for his plan, yet his only hope, Yuuki himself, threw a wrench into the whole thing. All that was left for him was to hope that Yuuki's negotiations went well. Even so, Yuuki's rash words made Laplace sweat profusely.

This is way too reckless. The reasoning is absurd, but why does it seem like Guy is enjoying this?

Indeed. As Yuuki said this, strangely, Guy cracked a smile.

"You still intend on challenging me?"

"That's only natural. My ambition is to conquer the world, after all. Right now, I don't seem to stand a chance against you. But one day, I'll eventually surpass you."

Yuuki could barely stand because of his wounds, yet he still talked big to Guy.

Thoughts like "*pissing off Guy would get me killed*" didn't even cross Yuuki's mind while he was talking.

But this was Guy he was talking to, so his attitude turned out to be the right call. Had he begun to pathetically plea for his life, Guy would've immediately lost interest—a surefire way to get them all killed.

Unbeknownst to him, he had played all his cards right.

"So you're saying that it'll be good for me if you manage to take down the Empire?"

The conversation had reached its turning point. Yuuki had to execute his plan cautiously. He shifted his gaze back to Guy and nodded affirmatively.

"Of course. I don't know the exact reason, but you don't seem to want the Empire to invade the West. Is that right?"

"..."

Guy must have some connection with the emperor, Rudra.

That was the key. Yuuki turned up the act.

"I have many enemies ahead of me to bring down, and I intend to join the Empire. However, I don't intend to be under its control. Instead, I will destroy it from within and turn it into a puppet of ours."

"Hrm, I see. You will get help from the Empire while your goals still align, but they might not be the same afterward. You want to borrow the strength of the Empire to defeat Leon, and probably that Rimuru as well, right?"

Guy's sharp eyes seemed to have seen through it all as he stared at Yuuki.

There was no turning back for him now. He didn't know what kind of relationship Guy had with Leon, nor what he thought of Rimuru. He couldn't even predict how Guy would react as he replied. Despite it all, Yuuki still decided to express his ambition deliberately.

"That's right. I want to dominate the world, and I will beat you in the end—Demon Lord Guy Crimson-san," Yuuki proclaimed with impudence.

It was up to Guy to interpret this.

Even if we followed Laplace's plan, I doubt a single one of us would've seen another day. Sorry guys, but please play along with my plan.

Yuuki apologized to his companions in his heart.

It was all or nothing for them, and Yuuki was very greedy. If he lived, he would get everyone else out alive as well. The bet was incredibly risky.

However, Yuuki hit the jackpot.

"Are you guys seriously called the Moderate Clown Troupe? Because you sure act like clowns. You've thrown the entire playing field into disarray, like some kind of joker card. Your proposal is very interesting. Considering how bold you've been, I've decided to let you all go peacefully. However, don't expect me to be merciful the next time we meet."

In the end, there was no telling what Guy's goal was. Whatever it was, what mattered now was that Yuuki and his companions were saved.

Raine and Mizeri couldn't object to Guy's decision. As soon as Guy said they could go, Yuuki and his companions fled on the spot.



After Guy and his servants left, Yuuki and the other clowns hurried to the agreed upon rendezvous point, where Kagali and the others were. Since there were no more threats, everyone thought that it was best to leave as quickly as possible.

Once he saw Kagali at the rendezvous point, Laplace spoke up to Yuuki.

"Ya gotta be kidding me... Unbelievable, to do something so bold in front of that monstrous Demon Lord Guy..."

"And we somehow managed to escape safely," Teare added. "I honestly thought that we were screwed."

"Hohoho, I had confidence in Boss from the start."

That's because you don't use your brain—Laplace teased Footman. Yuuki saw the exchange from the corner of his eyes, and sat on the ground, exhausted.

"I was forced to come up with that plan on the spot, but that probably was the only way we could have gotten out of the situation alive. Thankfully, it worked in the end. I'm not taking any complaints from you guys."

As opposed to the wounds he sustained in battle, his mind was far wearier. Yuuki didn't want to argue any longer at this point. He lay down spread-eagle on the ground and closed his eyes.

Kagali had no clue what had happened, so Laplace and Teare began to explain the whole story.

"Y-you guys fought Guy! And you managed to come back unscathed..." Kagali couldn't contain her shock, becoming utterly baffled.

Ah, it's so good to be alive.

As the wind caressed Yuuki's face, he let his thoughts wander.

Suddenly, he remembered something.

What was that mysterious voice he heard halfway through his battle?

Was it my alter-ego? No way, that sounds like some made up nonsense. Actually, hold on. Even though I don't feel there's any power hidden inside me, there's one possibility that I could think of.

Yuuki recalled his recently acquired power. The Unique Skill 'Greedy One'—with this Skill, the stronger his desire was, the more power it would grant him.

During his battle with Guy, not a single one of Yuuki's attacks landed. This naturally included the powerful Skill 'Greedy One,' of the Deadly Sins series.

This 'Greedy One' sure is a mystery too, but there are always Skills and magic beyond my imagination. Guy managed to bypass my 'Anti-Skill' with his magic. I have to figure out how he did that...

Yuuki had an incredible amount of self-confidence, yet his ego took a huge hit after being taken down by Guy so easily. He wouldn't give up that easily, though. Now that he managed to survive safe and sound, he must think of plans for the future. Yuuki's greatest strength was that he could quickly refocus himself. He was once an extremely arrogant person, thinking that he had power even surpassing the demon lords.

No, even if I'm not the strongest, with the right amount of research and strategizing, I can beat any opponent I face.

Relying on the power he had and the assistance of Kagali, Laplace, and the others, he managed to build a powerful faction.

Everything was going smoothly. But lately, he was experiencing failure after failure. Moreover, Yuuki's fight with Guy had completely destroyed his confidence. That being said, he was lucky to even be alive after that fight.

Things are getting very interesting. Some extra difficulty really spices up a game.

And so, Yuuki was not frustrated at his defeats. Instead, he pondered further on it.

Speaking of Guy's ability, he was struggling to analyze it, even using his 'Creator.' Unique Skill 'Creator' was very special. Not only could it create Skills, but it could also analyze other people's Unique Skills, provided they were using them, but Yuuki believed no one could hide their abilities against him.

And yet, it hadn't worked on Guy. That meant that he had some power greater than Unique Skills.

Yuuki craved for power. He wanted stronger powers that would surpass Guy's. Deep inside his heart, the flame of his desire burnt violently.

In that case, perhaps my 'Greedy One' has the chance to evolve, too. I am greedier than anyone; if I pour my desire into it—

Yuuki felt a shiver of excitement.

He started thinking hard. Losing to Guy had made him realize how unfair this world was. He wanted to fight it and emerge victorious—that was Yuuki's wish. He closed his eyes and spoke to the voice inside his heart. He ventured to a place deep in his heart and continued to delve deeper until he reached the bottom of that abyss.

Yuuki observed the abyss carefully.

«So, are you ready to take my help now?»

No, that's not my plan.

«Then what do you want?»

I have some business with you.

«Some business with me?»

Yes. I am going to take your power.

«Quit joking around.»

I'm not joking around. I am very serious, you know?

«Stop this nonsense—»

Sorry, but you're in my way.

«Ah!»

The next second, his wish swelled to fill his entire mind. He desired his true ambition and its fulfillment. He didn't want to be anyone's servant. His strong will turned into a weapon. Yuuki was challenging himself.

Then, the Voice of the World rang out.

«Confirmed. Conditions satisfied. Unique Skill 'Greedy One' has evolved into Ultimate Skill 'Greedy King Mammon.'»

Yuuki opened his eyes once more, now with a smug smirk.

“I'll make good use of your power,” he muttered quietly enough that no one else could hear.

On that day, at that moment, at that place, the foulest majin was born.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

**Chapter
1**

**The Staccato
of Marching
Jackboots**

Chapter 1

The Staccato of Marching Jackboots

We returned home on the same day that our music exchange with Luminas ended. Venom and his subordinates, as well as the band members whom they were in charge of escorting, were now all perfectly safe.

The children that Diablo protected were given a week off to rest. Thankfully, they did not sustain any injuries, but I still wanted to make sure they were safe and sound, just in case. They had witnessed firsthand the difference between training and the real deal, and as a result, lacked their usual liveliness. I was afraid they were traumatized, so I told them to have a good rest.

My conference with both Luminas and Leon was moved to a different date. After arguing over where it would be held, we finally settled on the capital of Tempest, Rimuru.

We came to this decision because Luminas's place, Lubelius, would be busy with restoration. As for why Leon's territory—El Dorado—was a no-go, there was apparently something serious going on over there and so they couldn't afford to invite foreign dignitaries at the moment. In that regard, there would be no problems if we convened in Tempest, and I had no reason to decline.

After all, we already had two demon lords staying in our nation.

A certain annoying fairy and a lazy, young nobleman popped into my head.

I didn't have time to rest yesterday, since the two of them came over as soon as they could. After Leon had returned home, he allegedly began to make immediate preparations for his visit. While I thought it was rather impatient of them, I understood that both Luminas and Leon wanted to prioritize the exchanging of important information. Besides, I wanted to hear their sides of the story about what happened. That was why I didn't voice any complaints and instead agreed with them.

We gathered in the most luxurious reception room available. The leaders of this conference were Luminas, Leon, and I. Given that it was a conference between demon lords, I put on airs to suit the occasion.

Only those involved would take part in the meeting.

Once we collated the various details, we would determine how much information we could share regarding Chloe. Given the circumstances, there was a tacit agreement that it would be better to keep Chloe's situation a secret from even our own subordinates.

Shion, Diablo, and Veldora were also coming with me.

Honestly, I didn't want Veldora to attend. Since he would get bored halfway through the conference anyway, I wanted him to play quietly in his room. But for some reason, he became all adamant and asked, "And why should I not be joining?"

If you insist—I had unwillingly agreed to let him participate.

Shion was supposed to be in critical condition following her battle with Razul, but she recovered in the blink of an eye. 'Ultraspeed Regeneration' was indeed a very terrifying Skill.

She stood dutifully behind me, alongside Diablo. Hinata was seated next to Luminas, with Louis and Gunther shadowing them both. Positioned behind Leon, the two knights—Alrose and Claude—were also at the ready. Last but not least was Chloe, the girl of the hour. Even though she returned to her child-like form, it would be prudent to treat her as an adult.

The inside of the room was furnished with a rectangular table, along with six individual armchairs that we had provided. Veldora and I sat side by side, directly facing Hinata and Luminas. Leon and Chloe, on the contrary, were seated at the ends of the table, opposite each other.

With that, the interim demon lord meeting had begun.



First, we asked Chloe to personally explain to us what had happened. As she delved into her story, Hinata interjected here and there, adding her own clarifications for what had occurred. Naturally, what they shared was impossible to believe. However, having experienced that imaginary landscape firsthand, I could more readily accept their testimony.

"—So, with the help of Hinata and Rimuru-san, I was able to safely free myself from the 'Infinite Loop,'" Chloe declared, marking the end to her almost inconceivable explanation.

Everyone looked like they had something to say, but kept quiet, glancing around as they tried to gauge each other's reactions. In such an uneasy situation, Veldora was the one who broke the ice, mainly because he couldn't read the mood at all.

"Which means the Hero who sealed me away was—"

That doesn't matter at all, does it? I thought quietly to myself, but Hinata already had a response waiting.

"Me. Now we're tied with one win and one loss. Don't you think it's good to have tasted defeat?"

"Wha-WHAAAT?!"

"Ara, do you have a problem with that? If you want, we can settle this once and for all."

"Grrr, very well! Since you insist, allow me to show you my true strength and—"

Our meeting would go nowhere if this continued. Hinata was usually levelheaded, but strangely enough, she was being immature towards Veldora.

I decided to be the mediator for this one.

"All right, that's enough."

Please discuss your differences when you two are alone.

"Hinata, it is very important to teach that moronic dragon some manners. If you are going to fight him, then I'll join you, so don't be afraid to call me at any time."

Please don't make things worse, Luminas-san.

And so, I hurriedly changed the subject. "Come now, everything turned out fine. By the way, I've been thinking about this for a bit, but I was apparently killed, right? I wonder if the culprit came from the Empire."

This was an important issue to me.

Even now, the Empire's movements remained suspicious. We needed to stay vigilant due to their potential hostility.

Chloe voiced her support. "Yeah, probably. I also think that it was the same person who killed Hinata. It seems like there are powerful individuals in the Empire, and although there's also the possibility that you were challenged by several people at once, the flash of light that pierced through Hinata was something *I* couldn't even follow."

I see. If this person could kill Hinata, then including me on their hit list wouldn't sound too far-fetched because I never became a demon lord in that timeline.

"Despite the fact that I've evolved into a demon lord now, it's still better not to let my guard down."

Even though it was a completely different timeline, I felt serious aversion to the person that had killed me. We definitely needed to exercise caution when it came to antagonizing the Empire.

"I agree. The Empire is a lot more dangerous than what you think, Rimurusan. After you died, Veldora went on a rampage, but the Empire was still able to fend him off."

While fighting Veldora, Hinata was murdered, and Chloe leaped into the past. Afterwards, Chronoa could only remember certain things from her fragmented memory.

Still, there was no doubt that the Empire used the clash between the rampaging Veldora and Chronoa to their advantage. Given that we had witnessed firsthand the power of Chronoa, just being able to intervene in such a battle was a feat in itself. And if that was the case, then the Empire's strength was definitely greater than what we expected.

Luminas and Leon looked like they had the same idea. Everyone had a growing sense of urgency regarding the Empire.

Of course, in this somber atmosphere, Veldora just had to blurt out his off-topic opinion. "Me going on a rampage? I find that hard to believe," he asserted, a smug look on his face.

Everybody's reaction to that outburst could be summed up with "What is this guy even saying?"



Veldora's impressive ability to joke around like that in such a heavy atmosphere was quite—

"Wait! Why are you all looking at me like that?! There's no way a gentleman such as I would go out of control like that!"

Well, you see... Given that he used to run amok in the olden days, it was easy for anyone to imagine that he had let his emotions get the better of him and gone on a rampage. Then again, watching my death moments before his revival might've set off his wrath, or something like that. When I thought about it that way, I couldn't help but feel a little happy.

"Come on, let bygones be bygones."

So, I decided to appease Veldora with a bit of warmth in my voice.

The Empire is dangerous—we ended the discussion with that conclusion.

Next, we analyzed Chronoa's memories by having Chloe recall as far back as possible.

After Veldora was defeated by the Empire, the world entered a tumultuous period of conflict. In the war involving the West and the East, it was the Empire who possessed the upper hand.

Milim made her move in the midst of all this. My death set off her wrath against the Empire. However, before she could cause any meaningful damage against them, Guy intervened. As a result, history wound up repeating itself—a devastating battle between Milim and Guy.

Dagruel and Luminas also clashed with each other, adding fuel to the fire, their armed conflict bringing even more destruction to the world.

And Chronoa fought someone and ultimately died in the process. She had rushed to wherever there was battle and fought for as long as her life still lasted. All she had left was a lust for destruction, indiscriminately taking down powerful people, friend or foe.

So that's why she couldn't remember who killed her...

"The number of individuals capable of defeating someone as strong as Chronoa is certainly limited, right?"

"It's Guy."

"I can only think of Guy."

Luminas and Leon immediately responded to my mumbling.

I thought so, too. Despite the outcome of the duel between Guy and Milim being unclear, the only person who could kill Chronoa was him. Be that as it may, we didn't know the exact reason as to why Guy would kill Chronoa, so it might not have been him.

"So, why is Chronoa so fond of me?"

Judging by Chloe's story thus far, I didn't think I had any connection with Chronoa. She was revived after my death, so we never encountered one another. And yet, no matter how you looked at it, Chronoa obviously adored me. I wasn't *that* dense to have missed the obvious signs.

She was already like that the first time we met, now that I think about it. When I had unwittingly summoned her to stabilize Chloe, the moment she laid her eyes

on me, she hugged and kissed me. I was a little bit shocked because I thought that it was our first time meeting each other, but I surmised there was a pretext to her behavior.

"That's because—"

<Because Rimuru helped me. You were definitely the one who saved me in that future, where all I did was rampage.> Chronoa took over Chloe's story.

"Hey, I was about to explain it to them!"

<It's fine, let me continue. After all, I'm also you, so aren't we in this together?>

From a bystander's point of view, Chloe acted like she had multiple personalities. Chronoa could apparently interject herself into the conversation as long as Chloe wasn't actively suppressing her.

It was something we just had to get used to.

And so, Chloe and Chronoa swapped back and forth as they told their story. Based on Chloe's—I mean Chronoa's—memory, I wasn't dead in the future. It was indisputably the Empire that had defeated me, but by all accounts, I had somehow revived afterwards.

Fair enough... If I survived, then that meant 'Great Sage,' the predecessor of Raphael-san, was alive too. It appeared to have taken some time, but in the end, it also managed to pull through.

Unfortunately, the world had seen dramatic changes. A great war erupted between the East and the West, and a fierce power struggle arose among the demon lords.

Hmm, it's not hard to imagine what I would be feeling then. After all, it was still *me*. There was no doubt in my mind that I would have desperately tried to find friends who had managed to stay alive. Saving everyone was an impossible task but helping those I had a connection with was definitely feasible. And through that, I found Chloe (Chronoa).

The crucial parts of Chronoa's fragmented memory were, regrettably, what she could not remember clearly. Despite the setback, we could still perceive the flow of events, albeit vaguely. I evidently met Chronoa and ended up fighting her countless times. And with my earnest efforts, she would've eventually returned to her normal self.

Nevertheless, what the world endured was simply irreparable.

<As we all expected, I indeed fought Guy. I don't know how or why it happened, but the one thing I'm certain of is that Rimuru was already gone at that point. Yet, Rimuru had hugged me while I was dying. After I finally passed on, I recovered my consciousness and saw myself (Chloe) and the previous Rimuru together.>

I wasn't surprised about Guy fighting her.

More importantly, the strange thing that occurred just before Chronoa was about to die...was probably her 'Time Travel' activating. But that in itself was not enough to explain how she arrived at Chloe's timeline. Perhaps I did something to make that transpire.

"When you saw me, had I evolved into a demon lord yet?"

<You had. The Rimuru I met then was stronger compared to the current Rimuru.>

Oh, you can tell that just by looking?

I was under the belief that I was pretty strong at the moment, but I doubt Chronoa would misjudge someone's strength. If that was true, then I could only infer that losing the people I knew spurred me on to do something crazy. Honestly, all of this was irrelevant to me now anyway; then again, there was also the issue of the Empire. Rather than stressing over it, we should view the situation in a positive light: an opportunity to motivate everyone and get them stronger.

Well, let's just keep it at that. Besides, if that alternate Rimuru was stronger than me, then surely 'Great Sage' had also evolved into 'Wisdom King Raphael.' If so, then it wouldn't have been too far-fetched if it did something unthinkable like sending Chronoa's spirit and memories to the young Chloe.

«.....»

Fufufu, even you can't deny the possibility.

With that, we tentatively cleared up the presumed future chain of events.

"I guess everything turned out fine," I said, nonchalant.

Hinata gave me a sidelong glare. "Aren't you taking this a bit lightly?"

"Don't say that. Chloe is safe now, and Veldora's already been revived. As long as we keep an eye on the two, we don't have to worry about them going out of control. Therefore, isn't the only problem we have to deal with the Empire?" I answered with a bright smile.

"That's right. If Dagruel ever attacks, I will take care of it. This is my repayment to you for helping Chloe."

Luminas and Chloe seemed really close, and because I had saved Chloe, my stocks with her reached an all-time high⁴. Thanks to that, it appeared Luminas and I would be able to maintain a better relationship than ever before.

One of our main concerns involved Dagruel's treachery. Thankfully, Luminas vowed to take care of it for us. She even promised to protect the West without me needing to ask. The Western Nations had always, by nature, been Luminas's domain. Even though some of the regions had disputes with Guy, he only saw their interaction as nothing more than a game. Luminas apparently came to the conclusion that there was no use fretting over it. The bigger problem was Dagruel. Obviously, we were wary of the fact that he would become hostile one day.

"He is going to join the upcoming war," Luminas declared, "so there is a high possibility that he will take advantage of it when the Empire ultimately moves."

I was still skeptical. "But Dagruel's sons are currently living in this country, you know? I don't think he would use military force against us *that* easily."

In my opinion, there had to be a reason for Dagruel's actions.

"Huh? Did you say Dagruel's sons? Are you sure?"

"Yup. They're Shion's subordinates now and have been working hard on their training."

In response to my words, Shion crisply remarked: "Yes, that is true. Although they still have a long way to go, they've recently shown good results in their

⁴ Fuse phrased this weirdly, but essentially, Rimuru's "value" went up in Luminas' eyes.

training. And when I treat them to my home-cooked meals as a reward, they cry tears of joy. They are such a cute lot."

"*Cry tears of joy*" sounds rather dubious to me. While eating food cooked by the woman you loved would certainly leave you happy...that entire premise depended on the food being edible. Actually, as long as you tolerated the look and texture, you could technically eat Shion's cooking. Well, I reckon it was fine to leave them to their own devices. If the people themselves didn't complain, then I had no reason to interfere.

Luminas looked astounded upon hearing that Dagruel's sons were in my nation. That said, she regained her composure within a matter of seconds.

"Sounds like it's true. Then, someone has manipulated Dagruel—no, it sounds weird if I say it that way since it's something that has taken place in the future. I suppose we can say someone *might* manipulate him," Luminas stated after careful consideration.

A war had broken out in the future, but we were at peace right now.

There must be a reason behind Dagruel harboring such territorial ambition. When I had met him during Walpurgis, I never got the impression that he was a bad person. I figured I should ask Dagura and the other two sons for a possible explanation. If he were experiencing any problems, we could lend a helping hand by offering advice. And if it could be solved through diplomacy, then it was a much better solution compared to armed conflict.

"We will also look into the matter on my side."

"All right, I shall entrust that to you. I do not wish to engage in some unreasonable battle, after all."

We still had time to spare for the results of our investigation regarding Dagruel. Luminas would also be on the lookout, just in case, as it would be troublesome if Dagruel truly did conspire with the Empire.

Louis and Gunther nodded together, implying that we could trust them to stay vigilant.

"Next up is the situation with Guy..." I began.

"I'll tell him," Leon volunteered.

It was useless if we complained to Guy since this whole ordeal took place in the future. On the other hand, our worries weren't exactly assuaged, either; a better plan would be to explain the circumstances to Guy instead. However, I wasn't sure how much information we could actually disclose...

"Guy is a 'Mediator.' Although it has nothing to do with me now, I feel like he may or may not have destroyed me a long time ago. I can't really remember it clearly, so it doesn't count," Veldora suddenly confessed.

I didn't know where to start, what to do, or how to go about it. What did Guy being a Mediator even mean? This was also the first time I'd heard about a fight between Guy and Veldora long ago, where Veldora was annihilated.

By the way, I thought that saying something along the lines of "I can't remember it, so I still did not lose" was a petty excuse that children used. But that was a bit mean, so I decided not to comment.

"Ho, Guy sure does some nice things," remarked Luminas.

"Mediator, huh? Guy is not an ally of humanity, but he is undeniably not an enemy either. It's safe to assume the reason why he killed Chronoa in that future was because he feared the idea that if she, the 'lust for destruction' incarnate, were to be left unchecked, it would lead to the collapse of the world," Leon concluded.

"What the heck is a 'Mediator' anyway?"

Everyone else had already grasped the situation. I asked the question outright, and Luminas was the one who explained it to me.

"A Mediator is a system that exists separately from Heroes and demon lords. It is said that a Mediator's goal is to prevent the destruction of the world and to be the spokesperson of its creator, Star King Dragon Veldanava."

"That's right. My older brother, the Star King Dragon Veldanava, established that system to prevent the world he worked hard to create from collapsing."

I see. That would explain why Veldora was punished; in order to prevent him from destroying the world.

It made a lot of sense to me. Also, as a result of Veldora's story, I was able to confirm that True Dragons could resurrect. I still doubted whether he really lost his memory about that incident, but let's not point that out.

"Got it. So, Guy's unlikely to go after Chloe now."

"Yeah. I also recall Chronoa rampaging, and I think what Demon Lord Guy did was reasonable, so I don't plan to hold any grudges against him."

Hinata and Chloe seemed rather convinced and had spoken with smiles on their faces. We could avoid a fight with Guy as long as we nipped potential causes for violence in the bud.

"If that's the case, can we permit Leon to explain this matter to Guy?" I proposed.

"Of course. After all, the future of me and Chloe is at stake here," Leon stated with firm conviction.

"Leon-oniichan," Chloe quickly pointed out, "has nothing to do with this."

Such innocence was quite scary. I felt a bit of sympathy for Leon.

While Leon was very handsome and cool, the world apparently universally recognized him as a villain. As was the case with Shizu-san, Leon seemed to be a poor talker and was haunted by a guise of evil. Maybe that was why he was so easily misunderstood. In layman's terms, he was the polar opposite of Masayuki.

Chloe treated him like the friendly neighborhood onii-chan. Not even a shred of romantic interest existed in her mind. Leon appeared to have been a popular man for a long time, but that might be the reason why Chloe was completely unaware of the affection he showed her.

When I thought about it, he was also a pitiful man. And so, I came to the conclusion that I should be a little kinder towards him.



The two demon lords promising their cooperation was proof in itself that this conference was a resounding success.

Thus, the only thing left to be wary of was the Empire. We still needed to come up with our own plans after the meeting, so when I was about to formally declare the end of our discussion—

“P-please wait! We have guests right now, and they are in the middle of an important meeting!”

“Oh, I’m amazed you noticed me coming. But, you see, I made the effort to come all the way here, so let me just say hi.”

—A commotion could be heard from the corridor.

I mean, this voice and the arrogant attitude from that conversation just now could only mean one thing...

The person right outside the room was unmistakably the strongest demon lord, Guy. I could count the number of people who were able to slip under my radar—an impressive feat, might I add—on one hand.

«Report. No hostility detected.»

...Don’t tell me you noticed him?

But now was not the time to argue. I hurriedly got up from my seat. But before I could move any further, Diablo, who was standing behind me, headed to the door with a sour look on his face.

“Yo!”

“Go home.”

Following that brief exchange, Diablo slammed the door shut with a bang.

“ “ “.....” ” ”

We were all frozen in shock at the incredible spectacle before us.

The door reopened and Guy stormed in, yelling, “Hey, hey, come on now, Diablo!”

“Tsk, you’re interrupting this important meeting. It hasn’t even been a day yet, which is why I’m still unprepared. I want to take my time speaking with you, so please don’t come here until I invite you.”

Despite Diablo’s polite words, his attitude towards the one he was addressing, Guy, sure was self-assertive.

Or perhaps they know each other? I wasn’t the only one who had the same thought. Even Luminas and Leon were surprised.

“Unbelievable. He didn’t budge an inch against Guy. As expected of Noir.”

“Noir, you say?! Why is somebody like him working under Rimuru?”

Hmm?

Listening in, there was something rather disconcerting about the words being spoken around me.

Is Diablo that significant of a figure? Well, I guess he’s got a cocky attitude... Seriously, what does ‘Noir’ even mean?

While I was standing there, utterly bewildered, more disturbances arrived. The first to come running here was Benimaru, followed by Souei, hot on his heels. Next was Carrera, and almost at the same exact time, Ultima burst into the room, too.

"Rimuru-sama, are you all right?!" Benimaru pressed. "Just now, my sister told me—"

"Milord," Carrera said urgently, "I felt the presence of Red!"

"Has the war started? If so, I will do my best!" Ultima promised.

It was pandemonium.

Given the circumstances, it would be a better idea to receive Guy as a guest than to drive him away. I had no intentions of inviting Guy here to begin with. I'd have to wring out Diablo later to find out what the deal is.

But for now, the first priority was to get this place in order.

"Guys, calm down. Diablo, control yourself."

My words quieted the people who had just barged in.

Once everyone in the room collected themselves, I continued. "Although this wasn't planned, we do have something to talk about with you, Guy. Since you've come all the way here, I'm going to ask you to join our meeting. Is that all right?" I checked with Guy.

"Yeah. I also need to discuss something with you, so this is good timing."

Leon was supposed to explain everything to Guy, but it looks like there was a change of plans. And so, with Guy's attendance confirmed, I decided to dismiss the people that had assembled.

"Don't worry. I'll call if something happens, so for now, you guys can get back to work."

When I said that, everyone had a look of relief.

I had to do a double take when I heard certain people spout lines like: "Phew, as expected of 'Red.' I'm still no match for him now, huh?" or "Tsk, I thought this was my opportunity to go all out," but in the end, the situation was somehow brought under control.



Everyone that had gathered returned to their respective jobs. Then, Shuna left the room to prepare tea for those who remained in the room.

Immediately after her departure, Leon spoke up.

"Hey, what's the meaning of this? Why is Jaune here?!"

Hm?

"I have a question, too. Isn't that other person Violet, or is it just my imagination? I'm not sure because, from what I have heard, she allegedly has a more gloomy and malicious personality..."

Hmmm? What are these guys blathering about with this Jaune and Violet thing?

Ah, maybe...!

"Did you mean Carrera and Ultima? They were recruited by Diablo over there, and they've been better than I expected—" I tried to explain, but was unable to finish my sentence.

"Carrera? And Ultima?! You...you've given them names!!"

"I can't believe it. So what you are saying is you not only have Diablo, but other primordials attending you as well..."

Leon had suddenly stood up and yelled at me, whereas Luminas looked genuinely astonished. Their sharp gazes pierced right through me.

"See, you're flabbergasted too. This is also the reason why I came here—to ask this guy about his real motive."

Even Guy blurted something out of left field.

I'd like to answer you, but I don't really know what to say, okay?

While I was puzzling over how to respond, Shuna entered, pushing a tea cart. We became quiet so we wouldn't hinder her work. A pleasant smell wafted through the air and brought a sense of calm to everyone's mind.

It also helped keep my wits about me as I tried to piece together what these guys were saying. The keyword was "primordial," which Luminas had just mentioned. And by primordial—

«Answer. One of the criteria for classifying a demon.»

*Right, I remember, you explained it to me before. If I'm not mistaken, the original demons are called "primordials." Wait, the **original** demons—?!*

"Diablo, are you, by some chance, one of the original demons?"

Upon asking Diablo, he casually replied, "Well, yes. Indeed, I am the progenitor of one of the seven original lineages to the demon race born in this world."

Oi oi, are you serious?

I couldn't believe the demon I had summoned when I was about to evolve into a demon lord was such a prominent figure... I knew he was very strong, yet evidently, he was even more dangerous than I'd anticipated.

"...No way, don't tell me you didn't know?"

"Unbelievable. I thought you were careless, but I never expected you to be *clueless*..."

Leon and Luminas's stares hurt.

After all, it couldn't be helped, right? How was I supposed to know he was that big of a deal if he answered a random summoning of mine?

«.....»

Even Raphael-san was speechless. Although, that reaction wasn't directed towards Diablo's true identity, but rather at my ignorance. It was under the impression that I already knew about the primordial demons.

—*No, wait a sec.*

Come to think of it, I felt that Elmesia, the empress of Sarion, *had* mentioned the primordials before. That would explain why she was so wary of Diablo—she already knew his true identity!

Had I been more attentive, I would've noticed Diablo's real character much earlier.

Well, this was what you called...making assumptions.

I never dug any deeper nor did I try to bring it up. For Raphael-san, it merely decided that there was no need to inform me. This was a major pitfall. For example, if you had a dictionary on hand, it would be worthless if you didn't use it. Raphael-

san had recently been giving me advice, but even it wasn't omnipotent. There was no way it could figure out what I did and didn't know.

No matter how brilliant your partner was, if you didn't fully utilize it, then it was useless. Never had this been more true.

Putting aside my surprise, Diablo began to share how he met me.

Apparently, it went back to my encounter with Shizu-san. There seemed to be a connection between Diablo and Shizu-san⁵, and when he sensed that she was about to die, he happened to visit this place.

It was a surprise that Diablo already had his eyes on us back then, but I had no clue regarding his intention for doing so.

"A low-ranking demon from my lineage stole my position in line and ended up getting summoned by Rimuru-sama instead; that was the height of my sorrow. However! I stayed calm and waited for another opportunity, and splendidly enough, I was able to successfully respond to Rimuru-sama's summoning!" Diablo finished, grinning from ear to ear.

Then, Diablo responding to the summoning wasn't pure luck, but rather inevitable since he was already aiming for it in the first place?

I was so taken aback that my head started to hurt.

Also, this was news to me, but Diablo was evidently jealous of Beretta and tried to purge him behind my back. Despite that, he mentioned how he couldn't hurt Beretta because it would've been sacrilegious to damage the body I had created for him.

"This body is handmade by Rimuru-sama," warned Beretta, *"so if you lay a finger on it, you will incur his displeasure."*

I was dumbfounded, to say the least.

But honestly, Diablo's story was excessively long. The thought that someone should go and stop him occurred to me, yet Diablo's fervor was too great for anyone to interfere.

There was no other option. I had to bite the bullet.

"Diablo, Diablo-kun! That's enough. The meeting is about to start again."

Following my lead, Guy spoke next.

"You're already satisfied, aren't you? More importantly, that guy Dino is also here, right? Can you call him over for me?"

Prompted by Guy's words, Diablo's endless chatter had finally come to an end.

"Well then, I shall summon Dino-sama." Shuna, who had sadly missed her window to escape from this torment, left with a polite bow.

She ran away—the fact that I thought of Shuna this way was proof that I was at my wit's end.

"But I'm just about to reach the good part!"

While Diablo obviously still had a lot more to say, everyone shared the same sentiment and simply ignored him.

⁵ See episode 24 of the anime's season 1.

I didn't know what he might even begin to reveal if we heard any more of his story. Also, it was better for Diablo to keep his mouth shut for the sake of my own peace of mind.

Guy's seat had apparently been set up in the midst of the uproar. It was a guest armchair brought in by Leon's subordinates from an adjacent waiting room.

"Oh, how thoughtful of you."

Guy's words were answered by Leon's subordinate knights, Alrose and Claude, with a light bow. The two were apparently already acquainted with Guy. Otherwise, neither of them would've dared to engage in such reckless behavior, given that this was Guy we were talking about here.

I should've prepared his seat, considering he was my guest, but with what just took place, I didn't have enough time to pay attention to these kinds of matters. I might've offended Guy if I hadn't offered him something, so I was grateful those two guys were here.

The secretary who was supposed to assist me was, well, too engrossed in his storytelling. And my other so-called secretary, Shion, never left my side, like it wasn't part of her job responsibility.

"Sorry about that," I apologized.

"No, don't worry about it!"

"We are also aware of Your Majesty Rimuru's circumstances. Aren't you keeping people away from this room so we could be at ease? If so, then this was the least we could do."

These two, Alrose and Claude, were really nice people. Diablo and Shion should take notes from them.

"Listen, you guys have to be attentive like that."

"Kufufufufu, I spoke a little too passionately."

While Diablo appeared to have wanted to pin the blame on Guy for dropping by unexpectedly, he normally wouldn't have made such a blunder. But I guess this was just bad timing.

"Yes, this was a good learning experience!"

Shion was rather upfront.

This girl's only good at talking the talk.

I silently prayed that this incident would contribute to their development.

Guy plonked down on the armchair, exuding his cavalier attitude. At the same time, Shuna returned with Dino in tow. For some reason, Ramiris also came along, and, putting all the things that had just happened aside, the meeting resumed once again.

*

The first topic of discussion was about the primordial demons.

"Then, Dino. Let me hear your excuse."

"Er, what excuse?" Dino naturally responded to Guy's inquiry. However, his attitude struck a nerve with Guy.

"Don't fuck with me! Why didn't you stop this guy from naming those three?!"
He's got a point. That is important, you know?

It seemed that "this guy" referred to me, but if I'm being honest, I wouldn't have entertained the thought of naming them, had I known how dangerous they truly were.

Although it was too late now, he should've at least warned me.

"Listen, what the hell do you think I sent you here for?"

"Uhm, sightseeing?"

"Wrooong! For reconnaissance, *reconnaissance*!"

Looking at their exchange, I thought Guy was rather hot under the collar. While I had already suspected as much, Dino was now definitely confirmed to have been a spy. But really, I wished Guy hadn't openly outed him as a spy to the face of the very person being spied on.

"And you, too! Don't make that innocent expression as if you had nothing to do with this!"

Uh oh, I got dragged into this as well. The fact that I was being scolded by the same people who decided to commit espionage against me was outrageous. On the other hand, I was certainly the cause for such behavior. I wanted to complain, but it'd be unwise to gripe without thinking things through.

This was Guy we were talking about here; provoking him was definitely *not* a good idea.

"Gah-hahaha! Don't fret over little things, Guy. This isn't the first time he's granted names willy nilly," Veldora-san unexpectedly backed me up.

Keep at it! I cheered in my mind.

"Shut up!" Luminas shouted. "Don't interrupt when the adults are in the middle of a conversation!"

"O-kay."

Veldora fell silent after that harsh rebuke. His inability to talk back demonstrated how wimpy he really was.

Well, thanks to Veldora's sacrifice, their finger-pointing had shifted away from my direction. I didn't want to blow this opportunity, so I started to needle Guy with my grievances.

"Okay, okay. The reason Dino came here was to keep an eye on me, right? I'll put aside my complaint about that for the time being, and while Dino is at fault for not stopping me, shouldn't the person who entrusted Dino with this job and sent him to my place *also* be held liable for poor supervision? Don't you think so, Guy-san?"

This was, in other words, sharing responsibility. It'd be no fair if I were the only one being criticized here, so my plan was to ensure Dino and Guy got their fair share.

Dino's involvement was already clear, so all I needed was Guy's confession.

"That's right, Guy. Basically, I can't do surveillance stuff for the life of me. It's frankly surprising that you thought of making me work."

Dino appeared a lot more perceptive in this kind of situation given how he caught on to my plot.

Guy looked frustrated. "You bastards..."

We had to find a way to settle this quickly, all the while being careful not to provoke him any further.

"First and foremost, I didn't have time to stop him," Dino said. "When I saw Rimuru with the primordials, I was totally baffled, speechless. After all, there's three of 'em, y'know? I accepted the matter with Diablo because he's always been an oddball, but the idea that someone like Testarossa, along with those other two, would willingly serve another person was something I couldn't even begin to imagine!"

"I guess so."

Oh, Dino is trying to shirk responsibility with his remark, and Guy is agreeing with him. This was a bad development.

"Me too!" I added "I wholeheartedly believed Diablo when he brought them here and promised that they would be helpful, and so I welcomed them. I never thought that they would turn out to be such big shots, since everyone was very polite about agreeing to work for me. They're under Diablo's direct control, and he's the one responsible for them. If anything happens, I'll also be held accountable, but it's only natural to trust your subordinates, right?"

Trying to come up with a good excuse, I redirected the blame towards Diablo. When you got down to the crux of the matter, Diablo was the root cause of all this trouble. That much was certain.

I glanced at Diablo, giving him a hint that he should do his best to take on Guy's anger. When I did, for some reason, Diablo nodded happily after hearing my remark.

"Kufufufufu, Rimuru-sama's faith and his words fill me with joy. I will have to work harder to live up to his expectations!"

"..."

Guy wearily fell silent after witnessing Diablo's radiant smile. Then, he let himself lean back in his seat.

"In other words, it's Diablo's fault?" Guy asked with disdain.

"He's at fault, and..."

"We are the victims, yeah?"

When I faltered with my explanation, Dino awkwardly finished the sentence.

Diablo was the only person that had confidence in his response.

"This guy's been weird since the olden days, so there's no use complaining now," Guy commented, pointing to Diablo.

"Dino, you weren't able to stop Rimuru. This, too, is understandable given the situation."

Oi oi? I don't like where this is going.

"Well. Rimuru, it's you!"

I knew it! Why are you pointing the finger at me now?!

"What do you mean?"

I shouldn't panic here. I had to face Guy with a sense of self-assurance, coupled with an attitude that showed I hadn't done anything wrong. With that in mind, I relinquished control of my body to Raphael-san so that he wouldn't notice my agitation.

I felt relieved. Regardless of how turbulent my thoughts were right now, I appeared calm on the outside.

"Don't fucking make excuses!"

Following that outburst, Guy then scolded me aplenty.

He mentioned quite some serious stuff, like how the delicate balance of power in the world had completely collapsed as a result of my actions. Consequently, the changes to the current state of world affairs were unclear, among other things. Transferring control over to Raphael-san had been a useless attempt.

Guy seemed a lot more calculating than I'd thought.

"Also, because of you, Mizeri's plan failed. You gonna be taking responsibility for that too, y'know?"

Guy finished his sermon on that note.

While it was ridiculous to accept responsibility for something I didn't even know about, if Guy was willing to overlook my behavior, then it was a small price to pay. I nodded and agreed to his demand, for the time being, and got through this precarious situation.



Even though the sermon was over, Guy continued with his story.

He claimed to be causing disasters regularly to remind humans who the common enemy of mankind was. The purpose, ostensibly, was to make people fear the existence of a powerful entity, so that they wouldn't spend all of their time engaging in pointless power struggles among themselves.

When Granbell had been in charge, his approach was to wait and see how things would go and refrained from taking any bold actions. But this time, Granbell's war against Luminas had upset the balance.

Thus, Guy had ordered Mizeri to unite humanity with fear.

With the deaths of the elected councilors, the leaders of the member nations within the council would reaffirm the threat of the demon lords. And by making that happen, the leaders of the Western Nations would join forces—that was the scheme Mizeri had devised.

"Then, for some reason, White—Testarossa—was present in the assembly hall where Mizeri attacked. *Tsk, I'm so used to calling you by your old name, I said it by accident,*" Guy grumbled under his breath, then resumed recounting his experience.

"Mizeri abandoned her plan to avoid clashing with Testarossa. That was fine. The problem is, what comes next? As soon as we are unable to control those devious humans, they will start skirmishing. Moreover, now that the Rosso family has collapsed, the power struggles will undeniably intensify—it's just a fact of life. And with that tomfoolery of the Western Nations in the midst of the Eastern

Empire's suspicious movements, their defeat is all but certain. This is your fault, Rimuru. Tell me, what are you going to do?"

This was unexpected. I didn't know Guy's goal was ultimately to prevent the dissolution of the Western Nations.

He didn't seem particularly interested in humans, but he still might be concerned about them perishing. I mean, it did sound like the duty of the Mediator.

I didn't think he was on the side of humanity, and that his methods were rather extreme; nonetheless, I felt that we could understand each other, depending on the way we did things. Therefore, the current point of contention was how to deal with the Western Nations, which I intended to sort out.

I didn't even know that Testarossa and Mizeri had encountered each other, but I couldn't use that as an excuse. I just wanted humanity to recognize our existence as monsters and build friendly relations with them.

As I was wondering how to answer Guy, Diablo stepped forward. Ignoring Guy's slightly uncomfortable expression, he began to speak.

"Heh, we don't have to do anything unnecessary; we only need to help realize Rimuru-sama's ideals."

Although I was anxious of what he might say, it wasn't like I had a better alternative. Arguments about ideals wouldn't work on Guy, so I wagered on Diablo's confident attitude, but it appeared to be a failure.

Diablo, to my surprise, started preaching about idealism, which I had dismissed as an ineffective strategy.

"What do you mean?"

"It's simple, Guy. What is the point in tediously shackling people in fear? Indeed, fear makes people obedient. However, that's not the best way to utilize their full potential. What's more, remember that fear gradually fades away. Regardless of how much tragedy you inflict on mankind, they will eventually forget. Conversely, resentment will be the only thing that remains."

"Hmm. Continue."

"Their resentment will eventually turn into hatred, and they will begin to seek revenge against the one that oppresses them. That's exactly what human beings, clever but lacking wisdom, will do as they are not aware of the stark difference in absolute power between us. If they are instigated by monsterkind and the like, they will soon resort to committing foolish acts."

"Well. I would slaughter them before they could carry out those stupid decisions."

"Kufufufu, it'd be futile. Considering how stupid humans are, their memories about the massacre would eventually vanish. It is unavoidable because their species cycles through generations so quickly. But—"

Diablo paused briefly, then faced Guy with a serious expression.

"Compared to the unipolar concentration doctrine of the Rossos, the redistribution of wealth rebuilds relationships between countries while maintaining some degree of equity. Thus, a new economic principle emerges."

"Which is?"

"The new economic principle—by providing the foolish human race with different options, they will be under the illusion that they are the ones who have chosen their own future, and innately believe that they created it. This system, unlike human memory, won't disappear over time. It will come to rule the world of man semi-permanently. Managing that will be Rimuru-sama's job—in other words, our job."

Ooh, Diablo's talking sense. If people believed they created it, then they'll take care of it themselves? I mean, was that even my original intention? I felt like I had said something along those lines, but I didn't think it was *that* big of a takeaway... Starting with the premise that it would succeed was also a little daunting.

"I see. If you control the economy and guarantee security for free, the weak will undoubtedly depend on you. A society in which everything is decided by a bloodless war. Maybe it is even better than what the Rossos had in mind."

Guy nodded to himself, as if he now saw Diablo in a more positive light.

"Of course. It will be a world where many are happy, rather than an elite wealthy few. The supply and demand created there will produce new possibilities. That's Rimuru-sama's wish, Guy."

Welp, he isn't wrong.

What I was looking forward to, was the improvement of cultural life. Movies, music, comics, and novels—I wanted to see more entertainment available for the masses to enjoy. In order to create such art, possessing a stable livelihood was essential. I wished to help people lead fulfilling lives so that new hidden talents could be discovered.

With that being said, I haven't given it much thought beyond that.

"Meaning, once you experience and appreciate a blessed period of peace, you will be afraid to lose it?"

"That's right. If I had to sum it all up in one word, it'd be the concept of 'gratitude.' People would thank Rimuru-sama for protecting their peace, and therefore become cooperative for the sake of maintaining world stability. I believe it is more effective than your idea of control through fear."

The next thing I knew, Diablo and Guy were nodding together as if they had understood one another.

After listening to Diablo's conjecture about the future, Luminas and Leon—and even their subordinates—looked at me, seemingly impressed. I couldn't exactly reveal that this whole thing wasn't actually my original intention in this serious atmosphere.

"However, it'll require a long-term outlook and careful calculation to put that into practice, won't it? If you don't manage it well, I can picture the number of people growing out of control. Could you look after and handle that many?"

Oi oi, they aren't exactly pets you need to take care of. Don't phrase it as if they're some Japanese rice fish pets that are getting overpopulated inside a fish tank.

"Hm, are you implying that Rimuru-sama cannot see that far into the future? That may be an arduous task for you, but it's nothing Rimuru-sama can't handle in his spare time. So, allow me to inform you that there is no need to worry."

Oi. Why are you already assuming that I will manage it?

To be honest, I believe I once told Diablo that it would just be like the demon lords who controlled the world from behind the scenes. If I said that in front of Guy and the others, they'd probably be annoyed.

Though I was concerned, it turned out that my worries were unfounded. Rather, it was—

"I see. Well, I'll leave it up to you. I'm not too optimistic, but I have nothing at stake if you fail. The only thing left for me to do then is to weed out those stupid idiots with my own hands. Let's see how you handle your responsibilities," Guy commented with a surprising grin.

Having been forewarned, all I could do was prepare myself for the worst. Since I had nodded in agreement with him earlier, I couldn't really say no now.

"Diablo exaggerated a tad, but he is, for the most part, not wrong. It's a bit idealistic, but I do hope that will happen one day. Even if you hadn't said anything, I aim to achieve world peace my own way," I promised Guy.

Thus, before I could fully process what was going on, the Octagram had officially entrusted me with the management of the Western Nations.

Well then, it would have been nice to end the meeting on that pleasant note, but there were still other problems.

"Rimuru, I'll give you a small piece of advice. Jaune, or Carrera, has a violent temper and a penchant for unleashing nuclear magic whenever she feels like it. If you don't keep a tight rein on her, this precious capital will be reduced to ashes," warned Leon.

Following that little bit of news, Luminas also shared her insight. "That's right. Let me add another thing. As I mentioned earlier, the Violet that I know of is gloomy and malicious. She is a being synonymous with inhumanity. Unlike monsterkind, she does not seem to have any intention of eradicating the human race. On the other hand, she has a very fickle and volatile personality. Although she appears to be acting as a cheerful little girl in front of you, I suggest you keep your guard up."

Yep, they both revealed something rather unsettling. What's more, even though it was never directly mentioned, it seemed that Testarossa was more troublesome than those two.

This became a problem. No, it wasn't appropriate to say it became one. To be precise, I finally came to the realization that this whole situation was a massive headache.

Now that I knew the three demonesses were actually primordial demons, I had to take charge of them. If something went wrong, then I would be held accountable for their actions... Despite the fact that they were supposed to be Diablo's subordinates, that excuse wouldn't fly.

I had already promised Elmesia-san that I would take responsibility, so it was too late for me to refuse.

I wanted to punch my naive self for not knowing what I was really getting into, but I guess I had to suffer the consequences for being such a carefree person at that time.

Compared to managing human society, this one seemed to be a bigger pain in the ass. The thought made me depressed, and I let out a mental sigh.



Once Guy finished talking, Ramiris, Dino, and Veldora stood up, as if on cue.

"Well, it seems like we're just bothering you guys, so I'll leave the rest to you!"

"Right. I also have something important to do. Vesta-san is waiting for me, so I'll see you later, Guy!"

"Then, I should return to guard the labyrinth. Ahh, busy, busy, Ga-ha-ha-ha!"

Noting their well-rehearsed choreography, it wasn't hard to figure out that they were planning to escape.

Dino, in particular, was evidently tired of having the proverbial finger pointed at him, and thus made his announcement without even a shred of sincerity.

"Huh?" Guy retorted, and unable to let it go that easily, took another jab, "You *working*? What a sorry excuse for a joke."

"No, no, it's the truth!" came the reply, but instead of Dino, it was actually from Ramiris. "You see, Dino is also helping out as my assistant!"

That bit of news came as a genuine shock to Guy. Dismissing whatever came from Dino's mouth was one thing, but when even Ramiris backed up his claim, Guy was left with no choice but to believe him.

"Dino is *working*? *Really*? Rimuru, just what kind of magic did you use?!"

Guy's astonishment was directed at me this time, but I also struggled to come up with an answer myself.

"I don't know either! In our country, we have a simple rule: 'If you do not work, then you do not eat.' He was no exception, that's all, no magic involved!"

I would've had a much easier time if that kind of convenient magic was at my disposal. Thankfully, I somehow managed to get my point across to Guy since he didn't push the subject any further.

Ramiris and the other two had hastily retreated from the room. Their impeccable timing was hardly a surprise, given how they had already polished off all the tea and snacks Shuna had prepared. Geez, *what upstanding guys*.

"Well, fine. I thoroughly chewed Dino out this time, so maybe he'll finally put some effort into his reports now," Guy muttered quietly.

As I'd mentioned, that kind of talk would be more appropriate if I weren't sitting *right here*. How was I supposed to deal with such a brazen admission of espionage? Well, I doubt Guy would've even listened if I'd told him. Plus, it was probably better to spin this in a positive light—we could be honest with our intentions.

I decided to leave it at that and changed the topic.

"So, did you come all this way just to ask about Testarossa and the other two?"

If that was all he wanted to do, then he would've left by now. And seeing how he was still here, there must've been something else on his mind. I wasn't particularly keen on inviting more problems, but if I hadn't asked, I wouldn't have found out.

"That was troubling me too, but the reason for my visit is different," Guy clarified, slumping back into his chair.

His gaze wandered over everyone in the room and came to rest on Leon.

"I swung by after meeting these guys who call themselves the 'Moderate Clown Troupe.'"

"Oh?"

"Aren't they the ones you've been making deals with?" Guy asked.

"Yes," Leon replied.

No, wait, wait. This is an important revelation, not something you can just gloss over!

"Hey," I interjected, "so did you meet with Yuuki, too?"

"Yeah," Guy frankly responded to my question.

I had recently ordered Souei to search the Freedom Association's headquarters and branches. I hesitated to think that Yuuki had intended for yesterday's encounter, and so I figured he would show up in the association headquarters, where he was based. Although he likely would've made efforts to reappear unnoticed, I cautioned Souei and his subordinates to keep an eye out for disguises and substitutes while they reconnoitered the location.

I hadn't received any reports of movement as of yet. I also would've never guessed that Guy had encountered Yuuki and his troupe.

"Then, does that mean you were conspiring with Yuuki?" I ventured.

"What? Don't be stupid. Those bastards were trying to escape to the East, so I punished them a little."

I was under the impression that Guy and Yuuki were on the same side, but evidently, they weren't. That tidbit came as a relief to me, but it still didn't explain Guy's motive.

"So you didn't kill them?" inquired Leon.

While that concerned me too, there was more beneath the surface. Did Yuuki intend to abandon everything he had built up in the West and flee to the East? Like, I knew he was gutsy, but that was a terrifyingly bold decision to make.

However, catching Guy's ire was definitely a stroke of bad luck for them. Since he said it was just a punishment, he probably didn't kill them. Still, they were undeniably given a serious beatdown. Well, I wasn't about to feel sorry for them; on the contrary, they had certainly deserved every bit of it.

"They didn't die. At first, I considered capturing them to sell you a favor. However, the situation changed," Guy explained, and went on to recount what happened when he encountered Yuuki.

As a result, a rough outline of Yuuki's surreptitious behavior became clear: Yuuki was the employer and the boss of the Moderate Clown Troupe. Well, this only proved that my—Raphael-san's—prediction was accurate.

As for the numerous feats and misdeeds Yuuki had carried out:

First, he developed the Adventurer Mutual Aid Association into the Freedom Association.

Second, he conspired with the Rosso family, who controlled the council, and handled clandestine work for them, which included brokering deals with Demon Lord Leon.

Third, he backed Clayman as demon lord and was manipulating him from behind the scenes.

Fourth, he crushed Echidna, the Mother of Darkness, which commanded the underworld of the East, and engineered the surreptitious organization named Cerberus.

By day, he was the head of the Freedom Association, and by night, he led a secret society.

This was the first time I'd heard of Echidna, and apparently, it was a considerably large, underground group. The information was authentic, since Leon was the one who provided it.

By the way, the Orthrus Slave Trade that Masayuki allegedly destroyed was supposedly a subsidiary of Cerberus, so Yuuki must've been involved with that. He was immensely gifted at destroying a preexisting organization and seizing control.

Although the strategy sounded pretty easy in theory, it was actually a Herculean task in practice. He had achieved all this within ten years, which clearly placed him a cut above merely "competent." It wouldn't even be an exaggeration to call him a genius.

Despite Yuuki's many talents, he still suffered setbacks that stemmed from his overconfident personality. A major flaw of his was that he would misjudge an opponent's strength.

One look from Guy should have been enough for him to understand just how much trouble he was in. Fortunately for him, Guy decided to let him off the hook, so I suppose I could only commend his exceptional luck.

Yet the fact that Yuuki survived that encounter left me with mixed feelings. I wouldn't go so far as to wish death upon my fellow countryman; at the same time, I couldn't forgive his actions, either.

Yuuki had the facade of a kind person, all the while secretly leading Leon and the Rosso family, which was headed by Granbell, around by their noses. Not only that, but he also employed the Moderate Clown Troupe to set Hinata up for a fight against me...

His utmost goal was this childish dream—one of world domination—and I couldn't even laugh because of the implications.

By the way, why *did* Guy forgive Yuuki so easily?

"So," I began, addressing Guy directly, "what are you planning, since you let Yuuki go like that?"

It would pay off big time if I got an answer—that was why I had inquired.

"Well, it was all for a game," Guy replied nonchalantly.

The word "game" didn't make much sense to me, yet Guy seemed to ignore my confusion and continued on with his story.

According to him, the Eastern Empire would soon make a move. Guy had let Yuuki go because he was offered a deal: Yuuki would sow chaos among the ranks of the Eastern Empire in exchange for sparing his life.

Incredulous, I asked Guy, "Um, hey, you don't seem to want the Western Nations to collapse—what's up with that?"

The answer I got was even more surprising than the one before.

"It's my job to manage them so that they don't collapse. Well, I don't want too many of them, though. The entire human race will be ruled by demon lords. That's my ultimate objective."

That must have been the game Guy was talking about. When he has complete control over humanity, victory is his.

"No no, then why did you order Mizeri-san to go destroy the council?"

The members of the council would've been wiped out right before the impending invasion from the East. Had that happened, the Western Nations would've been royally screwed. Any efforts to coordinate a defense amongst countries would've been impossible, their fates most likely sealed before they even had a chance to fight.

"You can just call her Mizeri," Guy smirked at my question, then continued. "I approved of Mizeri's operation in order to unite the West."

What does that even mean—

«Answer. It is likely that the plan was to bolster Master's control in the West by instilling fear in council member states.»

Uh, so in other words, what he implied was something like this: the council members are wiped out by a demon lord, and the humans fall into panic. Then, if I were to reach out to them, the humans wouldn't hesitate to seek my protection. To that end, a little sacrifice was trivial.

«Answer. That is likely correct.»

I see. They had purposefully concocted an extreme plot, which could easily paint me in a good light. Though I felt that Guy's aim and Mizeri's intentions didn't quite align, they were trying to work things in my favor.

No, that's not it.

I guess they thought they could use me to manage the Western Nations. But I was one step ahead of Guy, and already had my hands on the West. While I didn't really think that far ahead, the council was completely within Testarossa's unrelenting grasp.

Guy's goal wasn't to destroy humanity, but rather the exact opposite: he wanted to properly manage the human race so they wouldn't perish due to their own stupidity.

Thus, if I were to take on that role, it would be a boon to him. Nevertheless, this failure marked a positive development for him.

I figured one thing out though—Guy is a slacker at heart.

I was now convinced that things would be better if I handled them myself.

"Then," I pondered aloud, "you won't have any problem with me dominating the West, I assume?"

"Nope. Unless those idiots forget who's boss, I have no intention of butting in."
That's a relief.

It felt like we skipped over a couple steps I had otherwise expected, but if he was fine with it, then I had no qualms about managing the Western Nations from now on.

"In that case, I'll accept the offer. By the way, do you mind ending your assaults on the northern regions of Ingracia?"

I'd heard from several sources that Guy's subordinates regularly ravaged those lands. That area had been under the protection of Razul until he met his demise at Shion's determined hands.

Since it was an emergency at the time, Sarion's emperor, Elmesia, dispatched the Magus to subdue them. It would be out of character to thank her for it, but it was also a little too convenient for me to ask her a favor like that again.

As long as I was in charge of the Western Nations, I'd have to shoulder the burden of defending them, which entailed hefty defense expenditures. I'd really like to avoid that, and fighters of Razul's caliber were few and far between to begin with.

"Please be at ease. Those chores can all be left to Testarossa," Diablo reassured me with a smirk, as if he had solved all my worries.

"Yeah, that's right," Guy interjected before I could even ask if that was okay. "Those guys would need a place to unwind from time to time, so just leave them to their own devices."

Even Guy agreed with what Diablo suggested.

In that moment, I knew that a normie like me would never understand what went through a demon's head.

As Diablo had recommended, I decided to hand the demons off to Testarossa. And because I took Guy at his word, I judged there wouldn't be any disagreements about it.

This was how I cemented my hegemony over the West, but it wasn't over just yet.

"All right, Rimuru, can I leave the matter regarding the Eastern Empire to you then?"

Prompted by Luminas's question, I suddenly remembered *that* little problem again.

"When you say the Empire is making a move, do you mean they're taking military action?" I ventured to confirm it for myself, and Guy nodded as if it were obvious.

"I've heard the Empire has been conducting a number of military exercises recently," Hinata added. "There's been a lot of talk about it at the council as well." The fact that she was aware of the situation suggested that she probably had a plan in mind.

As for me, I was rather skeptical about whether an invasion from the Empire was truly feasible. I had deliberated over the three possible routes of invasion and deemed them far too arduous and unrealistic to assault.

Apart from the vast losses they would incur, the Empire stood to gain little if they ultimately decided to conquer the West, ending in a Pyrrhic victory. A war of aggression was, after all, waged for profit. Prosperous countries became promising targets for those who had no food to eat, no resources to use, nor any space to live. If those problems could be solved, then there was no real reason for bloodshed.

However, it came as no surprise that this was not an easy problem to solve. There was no reason for a rich country to make sacrifices for a poor country, and if they were demanded to do so as a matter of course, it would definitely cause disputes among other nations.

That was why affluent countries also held armies for self-defense. It was important for them to dissuade aggressors with the guarantee of a heavy cost for victory. Should the blood they spill outweigh the potential gains they would make, then only a fool would resort to war.

Even so, *they* still wanted to wage war. The reason for that was—

«Answer. They are likely confident in their odds of victory.»

Is there no other possible explanation?

Since I'd taken control of the council, it was inconceivable for there to be an insider. But if there were one, they might have developed some new technology or devised some outlandish tactics... Or perhaps they possessed some kind of trump card.

“Hinata.”

“I know. You’re wondering about the structure of the Dwarven Kingdom that you requested me to evaluate before, right? From what I’ve gathered, it’s not impossible to get a large army through.”

Hinata instantly read my intentions and gave me the information I wanted.

The Dwarven Kingdom was neutral, and I doubted that Gazel would permit it, but it was the safest route to use to invade the West.

No, perhaps—

“I wasn’t sure it would happen, so I had dismissed the thought, but there really is a chance that they’ll attack the Dwarven Kingdom first, huh?”

“Hmph, don’t try to hide it. I know your request for me to investigate that route was based on that very suspicion.”

Huh, Hinata’s complimenting me? It was just something that popped into my mind, but whatever.

“Was I exposed? Well, since that’s a possibility, we need to deal with it first.”

I should contact Gazel and conjure up a plan together.

The fact that we had delegated military authority of the council to Tempest was already becoming more trouble than it was worth. Nonetheless, it was now our inescapable responsibility to bear the brunt of the Empire.

“If you weren’t here, Granbell and Luminas would’ve had to fight the Empire,” Guy informed me, his voice indifferent like it wasn’t his problem.

The Empire's military power was unknown.

The Rosso family's combined strength, the Holy Knight Order, and Lubelius's forces—led by Hinata—would have been the ones entrusted to counter the Empire's advance.

Guy didn't seem too concerned with which side would win, but even then, he had accepted Yuuki's offer; he must've had his own reasons for that. The key thing to find out was what he meant by the word "game," but I didn't think he would give me a satisfactory answer even if I asked.

"I'll help as well, but I won't be under your command, okay?"

There was no reason for Hinata to be on the front line, so she had a pretty good point.

"I still don't understand why they want to initiate war, but we won't be sitting on our hands, that's for sure. Hinata, I want you to be ready in case the Empire invades in a very unconventional way."

"Understood. We'll take care of the agent who disguised himself as a merchant, too."

Hinata reassured me with a somewhat strained smile. That was a relief; there was nothing more for me to add.

"Rimuru. If you are defeated, then I will have to fight. Work hard and make sure that does not happen," Luminas commanded, as if my failure would be a major annoyance.

Luminas couldn't afford to worry about a war right now. She had to assess the human casualties surrounding the collapsed Grand Cathedral, as well as its reconstruction efforts, back in her own nation. Honestly, I was grateful to have gotten Hinata's cooperation, given everything that was going on.

"What worries me is if we can even cooperate with Yuuki..."

The potential prospect of working together made me feel quite emotionally conflicted.

The Farmus Kingdom had been led around by the nose, and my companions—including Shion—were harmed, all because of Yuuki. He was the one who controlled Clayman, and if we went further back, was also involved with the Orc Lord, the incident caused by the previous Geld. Even if you were told to let bygones be bygones, it was difficult to readily accept that sentiment.

"Rimuru-sama, are you worried because of us by any chance?"

Shion could sometimes be unusually sharp. I hadn't even breathed a word about that, yet she spoke as if she had already seen my inner turmoil.

"I guess you could say that. With everything that we've endured, it's hard to just suddenly trust him."

Or rather, having faith in him was out of the question. And when it came to war, there was nothing more dangerous than an untrustworthy ally.

"Even I don't know what that runaway Yuuki has planned next. I'm not really interested either; I just hope he'll do his best in sabotaging the Empire," Guy revealed rather nonchalantly.

I thought for a moment after I heard that.

As I'd expected, the idea of including Yuuki as a part of our military forces was a bit far-fetched.

"Kufufufufu. Let us ask Souei-dono to investigate his recent activity," suggested Diablo.

"Please do so."

We would hold off on the matter of Yuuki for now. But the question of whether or not we would find common ground was entirely up in the air. At the very least, there was no way we could work together without at least receiving a proper apology.

Since we were also running a country, we might have had to consider reconciling with him depending on how he played his cards. Although, my heart definitely wasn't kind enough to disregard his actions without some form of compensation.

"Shion, will that be enough for you?"

"Of course! If he remains hostile, I will crush him, and if he is willing to reconcile, then I will forgive him after just one punch!"

Please don't end him in that punch—I silently begged her in my mind.

If that really wound up happening, then we just had to say it was an accident. Since neither Shion nor I had the intent to kill, we could insist that it wasn't on purpose.

On that note, we decided to postpone the matter of Yuuki.



That was not the end of Guy's business with us as he had one more thing to discuss. His real reason for coming was related to the Hero—in other words, Chloe.

"I knew that Granbell's goal was to free what Luminas had desperately tried to hide in that place. So, I've been watching over it to make sure it doesn't go off rampaging. But then Diablo told me to let Rimuru handle it."

Guy said he then dropped by to check up on what happened after that.

Just when did this exchange happen—was what I'd initially thought, but then I remembered there was a short interval where Diablo momentarily stepped out while the battle was still raging on. That's probably when he made that unwanted negotiation.

I sighed internally, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I didn't know how things would've turned out if Guy ultimately decided to join the battle at that point.

"We were just talking about that earlier, but this is good timing. We can go over it once more, and I'll explain it myself."

Taking the lead here, I decided to elucidate everything. I didn't think Leon or Luminas would say anything uncalled for, but better safe than sorry. It was probably a good idea to hide critical information, like Chloe casually leaping through time, or that she had gone through several loops already. I thought that if I never mentioned it in the first place, then there was no way for him to find out.

“—And for that reason, we defeated the rampaging Chronoa and resolved the case.”

Although this wound up dumping all of the blame on Chronoa, it was done to protect Chloe. It would have only led to trouble if we explained that Chloe was Chronoa. I wanted to keep it a secret from Guy.

“I see, you went through a lot. Then, can I ask just one thing?”

“Ahh, ask me anything.”

“That girl over there, no matter how you look at it, is a ‘Hero.’ How are you going to explain that?”

Grr. I tried to cover up the story, but it was impossible with Guy.

Next, I attempted to give a probable yet absurd explanation. “This child’s hidden power was awakened in that fight—”

“Don’t lie.”

I knew it.

Awakening to new powers in the middle of a fight was a classic development, but as expected, such an excuse didn’t work.

“The truth is...” I hesitated, wondering what to say.

Leon spoke up and covered for me. “The person I’ve been constantly searching for with ‘specific summoning’ is this Chloe. By whatever whim of fate, she was there, but thanks to that, we were saved.”

I had absolutely no idea how Leon planned to continue the tale, but playing along appeared to be the only way to deceive Guy.

“That is correct. I was surprised too, but this girl, Chloe, was the perfect vessel to seal Chronoa.”

Before I could interject, Luminas cut in and followed Leon’s lead. The scale of this whole turn of events ended up getting even more complicated, but more importantly, was I supposed to be the person to continue after her?

“A sealing vessel, you say?” Guy muttered, then glanced at me with weary eyes.

That’s what I want to ask, too—I thought to myself, but it was unthinkable to tell the truth now that the story had gone this far. I had no choice but to join in.

“Right. According to Leon, she possesses a special ability that allows her to steal the power of any opponent and seal it away. I was skeptical at first, but once I witnessed its effect with my own eyes, I had no choice but to believe it.”

How’s this?

I handed it off to Leon, signaling that the rest was up to him.

“Honestly. I ended up having my trump card taken from me, but it’s better than allowing it to uncontrollably rampage around.”

Luminas quickly joined in with a bitter expression, delivering it in an extremely convincing fashion. *She’s incredible as always*—I quietly admired her.

All that was left was for Leon to wrap it up.

“...That’s what happened. There are a lot of strong people in this world, including you, Guy. I sought to protect Chloe in case of a threat, but I didn’t think that she would expend her power as soon as I met her. I really am unlucky.”

Leon let out a depressed sigh—paired with a look that made me seriously question if he was pretending or not. If Luminas won the award for best actress, then Leon would've won best actor as well. Thankfully, the story now came perfectly together: by sealing away Chronoa, Chloe gained the power of a 'Hero.' That was the setting we had concocted.

"Hmm. You guys aren't trying to trick me, are you?"

"No, not at all."

"Being overly doubtful is a bad habit of yours."

"That's right. You shouldn't worry about such trivial things."

We denied Guy's suspicion in perfect harmony. The reason why we were able to instantly cooperate was because the three of us all cared for Chloe.

"But you see," Guy mused, "that girl definitely gained the power of a Hero, right? Would it truly be okay to leave things as they are?"

Leon stood up in response to Guy's words, but Guy merely smirked and placated him by saying: "Relax, I won't touch her."

"Then that's fine. Just remember, if you ever think of pointing a blade at Chloe, then you'll have to go through me first," Leon warned, then sat back down.

While that didn't exactly help the tense atmosphere, Guy never had any murderous intent. I was on guard because I'd thought that he might cause a problem, but he subverted my expectations with his cordial behavior. I felt relieved as a result, but in an instant, something happened that made my blood run cold.

The bright glint of a moving blade.

I had no clue where he brought it out from, but Guy had a longsword in his hand and was currently swinging down at Chloe's neck with it.

Guy's swift swordsmanship was worthy of being called godlike. My perceptual speed, which stretched things out a million times more than normal, told me that I was already too late even if I moved immediately.

Not only that, Leon and Luminas faced the same dilemma. Everyone had an air of despair and tried to turn away from the horror that would transpire.

But, in the next moment, a sharp and clear clang echoed.

«—?!»

The small Chloe suddenly grew up and blocked Guy's attack; I didn't know when she had pulled a sword out, either. Her clothes had also changed to that of a Hero. Chloe's usage of her Holy Spirit Armor was fairly natural, and she seemed to have already mastered it.



"Nice to meet you, Demon Lord Guy-san. Even though it's my first time seeing you in person, I always knew you were strong."

"Ahahaha, you're not bad as well. Chloe, was it? People capable of using that power properly are, including me, quite scarce in number."

Guy and Chloe exchanged greetings. Despite the friendly behavior between the two, I was on edge.

This was because I didn't understand what had just happened. I couldn't track their movements even with my perception cranked up by a factor of one million.

It became abundantly clear that this phenomenon wasn't due to some kind of super speed. There was no turbulence in the surrounding air, nor were there any abnormalities in the laws of physics.

Magic, or something else, perhaps. It's times like these that my trustworthy partner comes into play. Now, I request an explanation, Raphael-san!

«Report. Unknown. Failed to 'Analyze and Assess' the phenomenon performed by individual 'Chloe Aubert.'»

Uh, seriously? For Wisdom King Raphael-san to say "I don't know" was certainly a rare sight to behold. Whether it was prediction or partial calculation, it would normally give me at least *some* information. The fact that it couldn't even provide that this time meant it really was a supernatural event outside of its comprehension. In other words, this was impossible to deal with.

I was definitely taken aback, but I glanced around to gauge everyone else's reactions. Leon and Luminas appeared just as pale as I did. However, instead of being angered by Guy's actions, it felt as if they were desperate to understand what had taken place right in front of their eyes.

The others were out of the question. They evidently didn't even notice the movement of the swords, so they couldn't have possibly recognized the dire situation.

If anything, Diablo was the only one who looked remotely surprised. Maybe he had some idea of what had just occurred. I'd ask him about that later, but first, I had to stop Guy and Chloe.

With an expression that read, *it's my turn*, Chloe began attacking Guy.

They were amicable enough when they exchanged greetings, so why is this happening...

They crossed swords several times. It felt like I was watching a stop motion animation; the continuity to the flow of their sword exchanges was nonexistent—or so it seemed. This was bad. I couldn't fully follow everything, so this was all based on conjecture.

"Stop, stooop!!"

I forced my body in between Chloe and Guy. It was a risky gamble trying to predict where they'd pop up next, but it thankfully worked.

"Hey, don't do anything rash. You could've been cut down by mistake."

"That's right, Rimuru. Guy wasn't seriously fighting; he was just testing me. Although, I'm really happy that you were so worried about me," Chloe reassured me, adding a hug and planting a kiss on my cheek. This, too, was another stop motion movement. I'll declare that this was unavoidable force majeure.

Speaking of Chloe, right as she kissed me, she became small again. No, it was more like she became the original Chloe again. She then yelled, while turning red and shaking with anger, "Enough! How dare you hug Rimuru-san on your own, and even ki-kiss!"

"Was that Chronoa just now?" I asked.

"Yes. We switched in the middle."

Apparently, while Chloe was the one who blocked the first attack, Chronoa took over for the rest of the battle. They looked completely identical, so telling the difference was a *little* challenging.

As soon as Chloe calmed down, Leon picked her up and carried her in his arms. He cautioned, "Rimuru, I greatly appreciate the fact that you helped Chloe, but I cannot allow you to get any closer to her."

"Enough already, you worry too much, Leon onii-chan."

After placing Chloe down on her chair, Leon stared coldly at Guy.

"Guy, didn't you just say you wouldn't lay a hand on Chloe?"

"Sorry. I was just testing her for a bit. Obviously, I had no intention of killing her."

"Even if that's the case, you shouldn't joke around with that level of strength, regardless of whether or not you had murderous intent."

Leon was fairly angry and refused to back down against Guy, given his long-winded complaint.

It was Chloe herself that intervened between the two, desperately explaining that Guy had no intention of hurting her, and that she wanted to test Guy's strength as well. Consequently, Chronoa seemed to have gone on a slight rampage, so it wasn't entirely Guy's fault. Perhaps Chloe—no, Chronoa—wanted a glimpse of how strong Guy, the cause of her death in the future, was.

The current situation was entirely different from the future that Chronoa experienced. She possessed a new power that she never had before—if my memory serves me correctly, I believe it was the Ultimate Skill 'Spacetime King Yog-Sothoth.'

Chronoa was rather interested to see if that power would work on Guy.

«—!! One possibility has emerged. Assuming that the individual 'Chloe Aubert' can use the power of the Unique Skill 'Time Travel,' which has been integrated into Ultimate Skill 'Yog-Sothoth,' to control time, 'Analyze and Assess' will always fail, since it is impossible to observe phenomena that are not on the same time axis.»

Ah, is that so...

The true nature of the power that Chloe acquired was the ability to stop time, or something to that effect.

Raphael, too, was using 'Analyze and Assess' on the inner workings of the Unique Skill 'Time Travel,' but it'd still take some time before it got any conclusive results. It looked as though 'Time Travel' had firmly been incorporated into Chloe's 'Yog-Sothoth.'

Well yeah, it's hard to understand something you can't even observe.

In short, Chloe was the one who made that power her own. While the thought of that was already absurd, I also wanted to scream aloud that being able to *stop time* was basically cheating.

Needless to say, I wouldn't be able to see anything even with my perceptual speed stretched by a million. There was no way for us, whose bodies yielded to the flow of time, to perceive events that happened in a frozen world.

No, hold on a second.

If we assume that is correct, then doesn't that mean those who can't reach that time-frozen world will never win against those that have, no matter how strong they are...?

«Answer. That presumption is likely correct.»

Hey, you're kidding me, right?

As much as I didn't want to believe it, I had no choice but to at least acknowledge that potential. I mean, even Chronoa was once killed by Guy. It was only natural that if someone could willfully stop time, then you never stood a chance. On the other hand, if we applied the same reasoning, didn't that mean Chloe could stand up to Guy right now?

Even though she bore the appearance of a cute little girl, Chloe's strength had already surpassed mine. And with that realization, I broke out in a cold sweat without anyone knowing.

In the end, Leon gave in and a settlement was reached.

“Just like you care deeply for Ramiris, I care deeply for Chloe. Keep that in mind,” Leon warned, strongly insinuating that he wouldn't stand idly by next time, and sat down.

“I feel the same as well, Guy. I certainly admit that you are the strongest, but it would hurt to lose our cooperation, wouldn't it? Unless you are serious about antagonizing her, know that laying a hand on Chloe will make us enemies.”

Luminas seemed like she was also secretly upset and joined Leon in berating Guy.

Normally, it would've been foolish to declare outright who you thought of as a loved one, but with Guy, the opposite was true. There was no stopping him if he truly became hostile towards Chloe—those two thought of it this way, and so they demanded he not lay a finger on her.

“Okay, okay. I don't want any trouble either. As long as she doesn't get in my way, I won't mess around with your precious thing.”

Surprisingly, Guy was rather understanding, and so the safety of Chloe was secured.

Meanwhile, our beloved Chloe was far stronger than any of us, but it was probably better to keep that to myself.



The sun was already setting when the meeting ended.

Shuna had thankfully prepared dinner, so we moved to a different location and started the banquet. Or rather, there was no sign of anyone wanting to leave until we ate.

On today's menu was kakuni⁶ pork—well, a monster substitute—with fried eggplant and tofu. That was paired with miso soup and freshly made rice—more specifically, a pure-black rice called “Magic Black Rice”—as the sides. This wasn't one of our multi-course meals, given that today's meeting was unplanned, so I refused to hear any complaints.

“What is this, there's no tempura,” Luminas grumbled aloud.

Who knew she was such a big fan of it?

“It's all right, Luminas. This should be very tasty as well. You must not underestimate Rimuru's obsession with food.”

Hinata took my side out of nowhere. Not sure how I should take that kind of compliment if *that's* the only thing I'm getting praised for. Oh well, moving on.

Thus, the banquet continued, and it appeared that everyone was satisfied.

“I see. Your country's dishes are somewhat okay too,” Guy noted, sounding impressed.

“It has a strange taste, but at this level, I suppose it passes.”

Given how Leon completely finished his food without any complaints, I decided to take it as his way of praising me.

“Hmm, what Hinata said is right. This is another abnormal dish, but it is remarkably delicious.”

“It's amazing as usual. It's a taste that I've really missed. Getting another chance to eat this meal makes me glad to be alive.”

Luminas appeared content, and Hinata was extremely overjoyed.

No, come to think of it, isn't this the first kakuni pork and rice she's had in two thousand years?

“Maybe white rice would've been better?”

“Thank you for your concern. I've already gotten used to these kinds of odd-looking foods.”

I see, that's a relief. If Hinata lived inside Chloe for two thousand years, she would've seen a *lot* of varied dishes, and that explained her indifference towards the color. Even before that, she must've been unable to taste food, unlike Chloe. Perhaps it was because she could only get visual information, but the simple fact that she could finally taste what she ate was enough to make her emotional. When I imagined Hinata's situation this way, it made sense for her to be so thoroughly impressed.

In the end, the banquet concluded with favorable feedback. The demon lords quickly prepared to leave as soon as they were done eating. While it would've been nice for them to stay a bit, since they already finished their business here, they had no plans to prolong their visit.

⁶ Japanese braised pork dish which literally means “square simmered.”

"Chloe, if you don't like it here, don't hesitate to call me. I will come get you right away," Leon said sourly, seemingly refusing to give up.

There was a major dispute on the topic of who would take care of Chloe.

"My friends are here, and I like the place where Rimuru-san is."

Although we all respected Chloe's decision, I had my doubts that Leon would so readily accept it. After all, Leon hadn't even tried to hide his clinginess with Chloe.

Despite my reservations about the methods he chose, ultimately, his desire to protect Chloe was genuine. And Leon's feelings were clearly conveyed to her as well.

"Onii-chan. I was very happy to know that you were concerned for me. But you don't have to worry like that. Because I am not a little kid anymore!" Chloe said as she hugged him.

Leon gave a gentle smile and patted Chloe's head. They were childhood friends who grew up together like siblings, but Leon sincerely cared about Chloe.

She finally let go of him and changed to her adult form.

"See? If I borrow Chronoa's power, I can change back to my grown-up form, so onii-chan doesn't have to worry about me anymore," Chloe beamed happily, as if she were trying to reassure Leon.

That smile had devastating power. It was...how should I put it...enchanting? It was an ephemeral smile, yet at the same time, made me feel her strength of heart—a smile filled with charm.

"I see. You have become an amazing woman. But that won't change the fact that I care about you. You may rely on me anytime," Leon declared to Chloe with a tender smile on his face.

As one would expect from Mr. Handsome Leon, it was an exceptionally mature-looking move, befitting of an adult.

I can only hope to imitate something like that—I thought to myself from the sidelines, but then, Leon suddenly turned around and stared at me coldly.

The difference was quite drastic. Really drastic.

"Chloe said that she became an adult, don't tell me you..."

"No! I'm asexual so there's no way that can happen!!"

He was even making terrible assumptions. When he faced me, that previous sense of handsome maturity had all but disappeared. I desperately tried to plead my case, and I thought he understood after Chloe noticed the topic of our conversation and got angry...but apparently, it was superficial.

"I believe you are already well aware of this," Leon whispered to me as he left, "but never do anything that would expose Chloe to danger."

Although I *did* think that he was being overprotective, Leon had used every tool at his disposal to look for Chloe, who got swept up in the world transfer along with him, so it wasn't as though I couldn't understand his worry, either.

On the bright side, he also returned home quietly. I promised to bring Chloe for a visit next time, and thanks to her, we might be able to establish diplomatic relations with El Dorado, which Demon Lord Leon ruled over. It was a bit annoying since he felt like a brother-in-law, but I had to live with it.

"Well, I suppose you have settled down where you are comfortable. Chloe, you are an important friend to me. I'm here for you if you ever need anything, so don't hesitate to ask me for help. Please take care of yourself."

Just like Leon, Luminas also fretted over Chloe. As for her, she felt like a sister-in-law, but obviously, I didn't dare say that out loud.

It was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Luminas said her goodbyes and departed with her entourage.

Since Hinata was also gone, the only person that remained was Guy. When I turned my head to see if he would leave, I saw Diablo still glued to his side. He began to speak. "Now then, shall we continue what I wasn't able to finish a while ago—"

"No, I've heard enough of that already, so it's quite all right," Guy reassured.

"Kufufufu, there is no need to be shy."

"Stop giving me weird invitations!"

What the heck are you doing, Diablo!

"Tsk, then I have no other choice. Let's change the subject to the topic you wanted to hear about, the task Testarossa and the other girls took, and anecdotes about Rimuru-sama—"

Just how much does this guy want to talk?—I looked at him in dismay, and Guy appeared to feel the same way.

"No, no, you guys seem extremely busy right now, so I'll come by again when things settle down," Guy urgently declined and quickly ran away.

I was strangely impressed by the fact that even Guy had times where he was taken aback. After witnessing such an unexpected side of him, it made me think he wasn't the unreasonable type. I still couldn't afford to be careless around him, but maybe I didn't have to worry as much as I thought. Since he accepted that Chloe was a Hero, I guess we could tentatively declare that all the big problems had been dealt with.

Now, the only things left unsettled were Yuuki's movements and the intentions of the Eastern Empire, where he ran off to. I would put aside whether or not we would trust Yuuki for now.

A war, huh?—I sighed quietly to myself.

Solve one problem and another pops up. I felt depressed and thought about how nice it would be if things became peaceful again soon.



In spite of the fact that it was a verbal agreement, it was still a notable achievement that we were able to establish cooperation with two different demon lords. If a war truly broke out, just having allied countries that you could trust was something that made you feel more confident. I could expect support and, worst case scenario, they could consider taking in refugees.

Although, the best possible outcome was having no war in the first place. This all depended on how the other side acted, so all we could do was simply wait...

Since there was nothing I could accomplish by complaining, I decided to devise countermeasures. First, we had to begin defensive preparations and ensure that if we wound up waging war with the Empire, we could handle them.

Let's be prepared for anything—I silently strengthened my resolve.

**Chapter
2**

**Outcomes and
Preparation**

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

Chapter 2

Outcomes and Preparation

Several months passed since the meeting with Guy and the other demon lords. Time quickly flew by; it'd already been one year since I became a demon lord, attended the Walpurgis, had the fight with Hinata, celebrated the Founding Festival, and dealt with the confrontation concerning Mariabell and the Rosso family. Maybe it was because so much had happened, but the past year really went by in a flash.

We had concluded the Tempest Resurrection Festival in private and the Empire had yet to make a move. However, according to the information gathered by Souei and Moss, supplies were being delivered one after another to major cities along the border. Now that their actions went this far, it didn't take a genius to figure out what was happening—a war was brewing on the horizon.

Since armed conflict was all but certain, the screening of humans and monsters alike entering Tempest began to be strictly enforced. We wouldn't be able to welcome anyone willy nilly; only authorized adventurers, merchants, and those with referrals or other credentials would have the right to enter. It was a precaution to safeguard against spies, but there was another reason as well: To sort out the entrants.

Not all visitors to our country were human, and the abilities of individuals ranged widely. Many of the strangers were uncivilized, and if we accepted them in large numbers, we wouldn't be able to keep up with them. After all, there was no way to stop idiots from running amok, despite strictly forbidding fighting in the city. We had barriers in place for that exact reason, but it was still difficult to completely prevent the usage of magic. These were the drastic differences between a human-populated city and a city with monsters.

Thus, we consulted with Gazel and decided to follow the example of the Dwarven Kingdom. We had decided to educate the entrants a little about the rules of our country at the time of their entry. That was what the entry inspection was all about, as for those who wished to migrate to our country, a more formal preparation was a priority. We set up a separate, dedicated place that they could attend. It was only after they finished learning how things worked in our country that they were ultimately admitted.

Shion's men were best suited for this job, since they could deal with even the most violent of people and put them in their place.

This system would be continued in the future since it also helped to detect spies from the Empire. At the time of inspection, visitors were screened and asked why they were visiting. Preventing the influx of people who didn't have money was one way to prevent unnecessary trouble.

There were a lot of normal inns near the Colosseum, but the people that used those weren't very wealthy. The accommodations for the upper class had become

very luxurious in the capital city Rimuru. Hence, rich merchants and nobles, as well as people arriving for a vacation, were guided to high-class hotels.

While one might argue that memories were priceless, I don't tolerate such sophistry. My goal was for tourists to enjoy their vacation in the spirit of "you get what you pay for."

Prices ranged from as low as thirty silver coins per night for ordinary guests to a gold coin or more for wealthy merchants and lower-class noblemen. But there was essentially no upper limit, as we even had rooms prepared that cost ten gold coins and more—*wait, why am I advertising...?* Well, this was how we segmented things.

I wanted to make Tempest a tourist hotspot, so we'd been trying our best to advertise our city by gifting vouchers for high-class inns to merchants who made large deals with us, and to those who beat Floor 10 of the labyrinth.

Our strategy was well-received by the challengers of the labyrinth. The widely known exquisite quality of our food was a tremendous motivator. The meals alone cost more than ten silver coins. Considering that you could stay at a cheap inn for just three silver coins, you might feel that this was absurdly expensive. However, one might wish to indulge in luxury once in a blue moon, and some people certainly had that kind of cash from challenging the labyrinth. As hosts, it was our job to offer places for those types of people to spend money on, too.

Speaking of which, clearing Floor 10 of the labyrinth was equivalent to a group defeating a black spider, a B-ranked monster—in other words, a team of rank C-plus adventurers or higher. If a person could beat a black spider alone, they would have to be rank B or higher. Therefore, I had no qualms about granting these adventurers corresponding privileges.

Furthermore, if you viewed it through the lens of a small country, they would be strong enough to be hired as knights. If you were rank B in the Freedom Association, then you could be recruited in any country. By acknowledging their position this way, they would naturally pay more attention to their own conduct.

Additionally, if they were B-ranked adventurers, then they most likely possessed a decent amount of money. The same logic applied to labyrinth challengers. Elen's group in particular seemed poor, but exceptions prove the rule.

In any case, there were no second chances for troublemakers. The high-class area was surrounded by a moat and heavily guarded. It was explained to everybody that they would be prohibited from re-entering once they were chased out.

Since no one became upset upon hearing that, it appeared our public image-building strategy was a success.

Merchants, being merchants, came in droves to barter for weapons and artifacts manufactured in Tempest. There were also those who performed high-value transactions, so there were quite a lot of rich individuals.

The number of customers gradually increased over time, even without us giving away accommodation vouchers.

The weapons and armor Kurobee's disciples forged and the craftsmanship of Dold's disciples were of great renown among the merchants who purchased them due to their unparalleled quality.

However, something I didn't expect was merchants secretly buying equipment discovered from the treasure chests inside the labyrinth. I had mixed feelings about this, but we were being careful not to let anything dangerous slip through our fingers, so we decided to monitor the situation for now.

Every time any of our items were sold in other places, it spread our reputation ever further. Perhaps as a result of that, the number of regular customers had recently been on the rise. Word of mouth was truly impressive.

You might wonder why we were doing all this with the threat of war looming, but the war was a whole separate issue to itself, and this was another.

I'm aware that I'm doing whatever I want. I am on guard against an imminent danger, but I won't let that fear rule me. I refuse to surrender my daily life and will keep moving forward.



Just as the capital city was steadily progressing, so too was the transportation network to other countries. With Benimaru's persuasion, we were able to secure Momiji and the tengu's cooperation. The tunnel was now open as well, and almost all of it was paved, save for certain parts.

The handover to the civil engineers brought by Duke Elalude had been completed, and a direct road would soon be opened between Tempest and the Sorcerer's Dynasty of Sarion.

Moreover, construction of the railroad linking the Kingdom of Farmenas had also begun and was rapidly heading towards completion. The tracks to the Kingdom of Ingracia were operating as planned. The same applied to the Dwarven Kingdom, where an inn town developed around the train station on their side.

The point where the road passed through the Great Jura Forest and met with the Great Ameld River was an ideal resting place and thus it served as the location for a base during construction. In addition, since the railroad tracks were laid along the river, using this site as an intermediate outpost killed two birds with one stone.

Even monsters that lived in the surrounding area gathered there and formed a small settlement. It would've been a waste to leave it as is, so we expanded that town further into an inn town. In the future, this modest inn town would likely grow to become a major city with a terminal, so its importance couldn't be underestimated.

The road widening project was finished on Eurazania's side, too. There was still some paving to be done in some sections, but traffic could pass through without any issues.

Merchants had been constantly pleading, "It would be nice if you could finish it soon," because riding a high-speed carriage on a bumpy road was enough to make anyone sick. Regardless, compared to what they had before, safety and convenience had improved significantly.

We had installed streetlamps for travelers who moved at night and automatic magic generators at fixed distances, so the barriers that stopped monsters from approaching the road operated without any gaps in coverage.

Thus, in less than a year, the development of the transportation network was more or less completed.

We had begun preliminary operation of the commercialized magitrain by running it all the way to Dwargon, as well as the Kingdom of Ingracia. Here, we would be able to gather raw data and iron out problems that arose. The various experimental trials had already been performed, so in other words, this was a real-world test.

The magitrain made it possible to move an overwhelming amount of goods while maintaining an average speed of 50 kilometers per hour. And so, the history of logistics would forever be rewritten. It had opened the door to transporting fresh produce from faraway lands without it ever going bad. This allowed access to a richer diet, and I believed it would also contribute a lot in the fight against famine.

Indeed, logistics was indispensable in increasing a nation's power—I reaffirmed this belief once again.

In parallel with the data collection, a detailed operational cycle was also being considered. A trial-and-error method was underway to create a timetable.

The distance between the Dwarven Kingdom and the Tempest Federation was around 1,000 kilometers. If we travelled at a speed of 50 kilometers per hour, we could arrive in 20 hours—less than a day.

Ingracia, on the other hand, was approximately 300 kilometers away, so it could be reached within six hours by train.

We worked these figures out after accounting for a considerable amount of safety margin. Theoretically, the magitrain could quadruple its current speed, and the cargo capacity was calculated to exceed 1,000 tons. However, I thought that it would be difficult to handle unexpected problems if we started running it at full capacity, out of the blue, without any previous experience.

First, we needed to observe the situation. It was bound to experience issues during its service, and we had to take breaks into account as well. Since there were limitations to the continuous operation of the magitrain, nighttime service was currently suspended. Besides, it was unfeasible to keep our engineers and drivers working around the clock unless maintenance, such as replacing broken or worn parts, was performed at night, for uninterrupted service all day.

So far, we had twenty locomotives that were ready to go. Each train formation would consist of six-cars: one locomotive, two freight cars, and three passenger cars. The passenger cars contained 80 seats but could accommodate a maximum of 150 people. However, the downside was that they would have to spend hours standing up, so it was better to prohibit this.

If we set at least 200 passengers per operation as our goal, we could achieve an occupancy rate of over 80 percent. Then, how high would we need to set the fare price per person—*no, wait, why do I have to think about these kinds of problems!* I just have to leave it all up to Myourmiles-kun, he'll handle it just fine.

It was only a matter of time before the train became fully operational, and as we gradually got more experience, I felt that we could cram in just a few more people, to make the most out of each train.

Our goal was to run the train at a speed of at least 100 kilometers per hour and to increase its length to about ten cars. This wasn't a dream, but a fact that would soon be made a reality.

Well, the results of the past year had been truly tremendous.

I believe that the announcement of these results would be met with surprise and excitement around the world. A bright future would come into light, and our efforts, our country's resourcefulness, would surely be known in every land.

Improved standards of living, delicious food, and a variety of entertainment gathered from countries around the world—it all promised a fun and interesting life, something that was unthinkable when I had just reincarnated as a slime. I could freely devote myself to my hobbies if only we didn't have a problem with the Eastern Empire...

It suddenly occurred to me that Veldora and I, along with volunteers, could declare war and immediately invade the Empire.

I've heard that if we developed civilization too quickly, an army of angels would rain down and attack, but we didn't even know where they came from. Therefore, it'd be hard for us to launch a preemptive strike, but the Empire was a different story.

Since they're openly preparing to attack us, they can't complain if we barge in first—that was what I'd thought. Waiting wasn't in my nature, and no matter how you looked at it, attacking would be easier for us than defending.

If what the Empire sought after was the annexation of the Western Nations, then there was no reason for them to invade the Great Jura Forest. They could always choose to ignore us. Veldora's resurrection was already well known, and a little research would reveal that antagonizing me meant making an enemy out of Veldora as well. The ball was in the Empire's court.

Yet, this situation was giving us a considerable amount of stress.

How about we consider the possible routes for invading the Western Nations:

First off, a sea invasion was implausible. Considering the attacks of the great sea creatures, even if they prepared a large number of dreadnought-class battleships, safety wasn't guaranteed. Fighting in the domain of gigantic aquatic monsters was too risky to be an option. It wasn't even clear if they could safely navigate the ocean. The conditions would be miserable for knights if they were forced to battle on the sea, as they'd have to deal with the rocking of the waves.

Furthermore, another question arose: Just how many ships would they need to amass if they wished to transport a large number of soldiers? If they planned to send soldiers in the tens of thousands to the Kingdom of Famenas, Youm's side wouldn't be standing idly by. They were prepared to defend themselves and meet the enemy in battle.

As long as they couldn't establish a beachhead in the first wave, it'd be impossible for the Empire to send reinforcements. Imposing sea beasts behind them and the Kingdom of Farmenas in front—if that happened, the morale of the Empire's troops would plummet, and it'd be as good as a tactical victory for our side.

Thus, another question arose: Ignoring Farmenas, could they use a different approach by invading northern Ingracia? The conclusion was that it would also be challenging. Ingracia's northern border was the playground of demons. Guy didn't seem too keen on keeping his subordinates in check, and Testarossa's men were now in charge of its defense. It was a constant battleground for belligerents, and if the Empire were to invade, then they could expect to become a target of opportunity.

Therefore, an attack via the sea was unfeasible.

Next, you had to consider a land invasion. They needed to take a route through the Dwarven Kingdom or cross the Dragon Roost in the Canaat Mountains. The latter possessed too great a risk, so it'd be discarded as an option. After all, marching at an altitude higher than Mount Everest would be suicidal, regardless of how well prepared you were.

It would be impractical for them to train ordinary soldiers into mountain climbing experts, and even if they did, a group of dragons, who were A-ranked monsters, would be waiting for them.

Common sense dictated that no one would be stupid enough to choose this route.

Then, what about going through the Dwarven Kingdom? When this possibility was pointed out by Wisdom King Raphael-san, Hinata investigated it in my stead, and she confirmed that it was theoretically possible for a large army to pass through. However, Gazel wasn't someone who would ever permit this, and if the Empire forced their way through, then they would need to battle the Dwarven Kingdom before they could face the Western Nations.

The invasion of the Dwarven Kingdom was as reckless as it sounded. The Armed Nation of Dwargon, who declared neutrality, had a highly-trained standing army to guarantee their security. Their armaments, which made full use of their technological prowess, were simply exceptional, and it was said that the dwarves had no weak soldiers among them.

To begin with, based on its topography, the Dwarven Kingdom was built like a fortress. If they just protected their entrances, they could stave off any attack, even one by an enormous army. Eastern, Western, and Central—among these three entrances, if the Empire were to invade, they would choose either Eastern or Central. Western was connected to the Kingdom of Farmenas, so they wouldn't have to worry about that. Eastern was the most dangerous and at risk, since it shared a border with the Empire, but as expected, Gazel was nothing but prepared. He'd been concentrating the bulk of his forces in this area in order to keep an eye on the Empire's movements.

If something were to happen, I planned on quickly responding to their call for aid, and the Dwarven Kingdom was also safe in Gazel's hands.

This was the current situation surrounding our country.



In the end, I felt that the Empire's only option was to go through the Great Jura Forest. Before my meeting with Benimaru, which had become a daily routine, I went through these same plans once more.

In case they chose the Great Jura Forest route, which we defended, it was obvious that the greatest obstacle, from the Empire's perspective, was Veldora's existence. They wouldn't attempt a frontal assault, so they'd probably try to trick Veldora by preparing a decoy unit. With that in mind, I had to consider our country's defensive setup.

There were three possible routes for initiating military operations within the Great Jura Forest. However, one of them was adjacent to Dwargon's territory. If the Empire ignored our warning and came to invade, the Dwarven Kingdom and our army could catch them in a pincer attack. The Empire would definitely be aware of how dangerous this option was, so I think it's fine to set a lower alert level. It was more likely that the Empire would strike by using one of the two remaining routes.

But is it really that straightforward? It was a bad idea to split your forces when facing a large enemy, so we could deploy Veldora on one side and our full army on the other. If we employed this tactic, then we should be able to handle the Empire, even if they prepared a diversionary force.

Even I, who was by no means an expert in military affairs, could formulate something like this. Thus, I had my doubts that professional soldiers would set out to war with such a simple strategy.

There was also the possibility that the Empire was looking down on us—thinking that with an overwhelmingly massive army, they could trample over us, regardless of Veldora or our monster army. On the other hand, perhaps they would utilize an underhanded strategy instead of facing us head on.

For instance, they could use the regular army as bait and initiate guerrilla warfare with elite troops in small groups. What if they split into platoon-sized units in order to infiltrate the forest and then regrouped somewhere else?

In these cases, it'd be impossible to monitor all of the minor trails throughout the woods. If we carelessly deployed a reconnaissance force, depending on the scale of the enemy, it might come back to haunt us. Just like what Hinata had done before if a platoon of Holy Knight-level troops were dispatched...

If we took that prospect into account, there wouldn't be enough troops to cover all possible incursions. It was risky if we moved to intercept the Empire after determining their objective, so I wanted to avoid that as much as possible. And if we lost the initiative, there was the chance that we'd fall into an unrecoverable position.

Although we were trying to be vigilant for that exact reason, the crux of the matter was that we couldn't read the Empire's movements. In war, the more unpredictable you were, the bigger the advantage you held over your opponent. Oftentimes, making an unexpected move would be enough to clinch a victory. As a result, we had to consider every single possible scenario...

It's no use; my mind's going in circles. I became irritated when those thoughts bubbled up. Wouldn't it really be better for me to attack first? Or rather, wouldn't attempting a Blitzkrieg, the moment the Empire declared war be the correct answer?

Since we couldn't guarantee that the Empire would move according to our predictions, it was pointless to dwell further on this subject. No matter how many times I thought it over, I felt that launching a preemptive strike was the rational thing to do, rather than waiting for an opponent to make their move. We wouldn't be overwhelmed with worries and could seize the initiative.

...Well, I won't do it.

No matter how long I mulled it over, the *perfect* answer wouldn't drop from the sky. It was smart to be flexible about these things. In other words, playing it by ear. Somehow, it sounded cool and gave the impression of a capable man.

Right, let's do that.

Having reached my usual conclusion, I grabbed the cream puffs that Shuna had prepared. All this hard thinking gave me a craving for sweets. Although some claim you would get sick of having too much of the same thing, that'd never happen to me. Well, if that ever *did* happen to me, I might reconsider.

"Hey, eating them alone is so unfair."

While I was in the middle of enjoying my cream puffs with Shion's black tea, Benimaru finally arrived. We were in my office. He was a little late to our meeting, which somehow had become a routine. He must've been extremely busy, given that he was in charge of war preparations against the Empire. Complaining about tardiness would've been quite petty of me.

What? Help him? I have no idea what you're saying. If you aren't an expert, you're better off leaving it alone—I know, awfully convenient of me to say.

"Shion, pour Benimaru some black tea, too."

"Understood!"

Benimaru seemed to have been traumatized by Shion's cooking, and as a result, always wore a wary expression. It was okay if it was just black tea, but still, his cautious attitude never faded—very typical of him.

"Thank you. Nothing like a couple sweets to get you going again."

"Well, good thing we've got sugar to spare. It'd be nice if this peace continues."

"Right. I guess if a decisive battle were to come, we could just beat them and call it a day."

Benimaru's confidence was as strong as ever. Although reliable, I hope he didn't forget to make an effort to avoid war as the first option.

"Enjoy!"

Shion placed the cup of black tea in front of Benimaru. She poured some more for me too. It had a wonderfully relaxing scent.

"What about Diablo?" Benimaru asked.

"Ahh, he has another day of arbitration."

"Again?"

"Yeah, again."

Yep, Diablo was out mediating. Ultima and Carrera got into a spat every single day. It wasn't that they didn't get along, but rather they tried to compete with each other in any way, shape, or form.



Yesterday, it was about the extradition of criminals, and before that was the treatment of suspects in custody. Sometimes they'd fight over the food menu, and other times they'd argue about who should buy the latest fashion clothes first. Everything would be fine if it were just a verbal debate, but when those two fought, their ferocity could surprise even the yakuza.

Only Diablo could stop those ruthless perpetrators. Venom, who was Diablo's subordinate, was already a victim, having been abused both verbally *and* physically by Ultima and Carrera.

No damage had thankfully been inflicted upon the town's residents, and in fact, it had actually become famous enough to lead people to make bets, but it was still a problem that we couldn't turn a blind eye to. That was the reason why I had Diablo sort things out, but it might be time to think of a permanent solution. Otherwise, the situation might change for the worst—I could already feel that Diablo was going to snap sooner or later.

Speaking of which, Diablo took Ultima and Carrera to the labyrinth a few days ago. He was brimming with enthusiasm not because of something fun and sweet such as a date, but about the thought that he was going to give them a thorough scolding.

He took advantage of the fact that you couldn't die in the labyrinth and beat them up without mercy, yet it appeared that they hadn't learned their lesson at all. On the contrary, they were rather eager to fight Diablo.

Ahh, why are the demons so bellicose...

Personally, I couldn't keep up with them.

While I was having a brief chat with Benimaru, Diablo suddenly came in, looking utterly exhausted. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"Oh, thanks for the hard work," I replied.

"No, no, it's barely enough to warrant calling it 'hard work,' it's just that my time with Rimuru-sama has—"

"You don't seem tired, so let's get down to business."

"All right."

Well, if you can spare the energy to talk nonsense, then I suppose you're okay.

Diablo wanted to say something, but it'd just wind up being his usual soliloquy anyway. Putting that aside, Benimaru and I decided to start today's meeting.



As I had mentioned before, the number of immigrants to our country had grown. And when that happened, the problem of work allocation to those newly immigrated naturally arose. The employment rate was very important, just like with any other country. This was because if we wished to increase the nation's productivity, then each and every citizen needed to work diligently.

If the employment rate was good, then consumer spending would naturally rise, and the economy would improve as well. On the other hand, if it was bad, then the economy would deteriorate, and crime would naturally increase.

It was the role of the national leadership to properly manage the task, but obviously, this was exceedingly difficult.

There were individual differences in the abilities of the immigrants we accepted, and there was a limit to the amount of unskilled labor that could be assigned to anyone. Our country was still in development, and the onrush of construction work in various locations had kept us afloat. But even that was drawing to a close, and now the question of "What do we do from here?" was in the air.

Skilled laborers had no problems. If you were an experienced craftsman or someone with enough personal talent to earn a living, then it was an easy question to answer. The problem was those who lacked the knowledge and means to make money.

If you were a farmer, then we could grant you farmland. If you were a craftsman, then we could introduce you to a workshop. If you were an adventurer, then the labyrinth was the perfect place, and if you were an actor, then you could be hired by theaters.

Still, what about people who did not possess any such talents? The solution I came up with was to establish an education center. At the time of immigration, they'd be asked what they could do and based on their answer, they would be taught accordingly. The education center would serve that purpose, and it was going to be operated by the military under Benimaru.

"The number of immigrants continues to grow, and there are a lot of people applying for the military. Whether or not they'd be useful is another issue, but at the very least, I believe they could manage being assigned to domestic security."

We'd been trying to solve the immigration problem, yet it seemed that there were even more people coming in.

If you join the army, you can earn a living. You can also learn skills for free and even get a job—this was the rumor being spread around.

As a result, the number of people joining the military gradually increased, which not only included ordinary immigrants but adventurers and mercenaries alike. Well, as long as our country was responsible for the defense of the Western Nations, building up our armed forces was a crucial task. For that reason, there were no difficulties for now. While minor complications did arise, those had been at a level that could be resolved within the military.

The bigger problem was that war with the Empire was becoming a reality. Obviously, there was no way we could send people who had just been enlisted the day before into combat, so we were forced to reorganize our forces. And so, I had ordered Benimaru to submit a proposal for consolidating our military.

He brought forth a single sheet of paper and placed it on the table.

"This is the new organizational structure that I've come up with. Some of the personnel changes are a little bold, but I think this will work."

Benimaru held military command authority, whereas supreme command authority, which included the right to appoint individuals into positions, rested with me. It was a little complicated; originally, military command authority was included

in supreme command authority. Now, military command was separated and given to Benimaru. This was due to my belief that an amateur like myself shouldn't interfere with the command of the military. Therefore, Benimaru was entrusted with all matters related to the military. With this setup, Benimaru's orders took precedence over mine within the army.

However, strategic command was a different story. I had the power to designate the upper echelon of the military, or to make the decision to end any war we were currently engaged in. Benimaru was free to nominate anyone below the rank of general, but the establishment of corps or the appointment of generals was left to my discretion. He still needed a confirmation from me on whether or not the organization chart that he drew up was acceptable.

"Hmm. If you're okay with it, then I don't have any objections—"

Even if I didn't plan on complaining, there might be some things I wanted to say. After all, I would be the one responsible if something went wrong as long as I had the authority to make appointments. Nonetheless, we had already debated numerous times regarding the new organizational structure. I wasn't going to complain or anything; it was already too late for that. And the personnel I kept pushing for until the very end was "First Corps Commander Gobta."

"I wasn't too convinced when I first heard about the idea of designating Gobta as a general, but now I think he'll be a good fit."

As you can see from Benimaru's reply, there were pros and cons to having Gobta become a general. Indeed, the thought of giving that idiot, Gobta, responsibilities of a leader was worrisome. It was only natural that Benimaru and his staff were anxious, since the lives of Gobta's subordinates would be entrusted to his judgment. Given that he was someone who often slept during meetings, it wasn't like I didn't have any reservations, either. That said, I also knew very well of the fact that Gobta had been secretly undergoing special training, and that he was trying his best because he wanted to protect this country.

"Right?! He's a man that pulls through when it counts," I said.

Although, when it doesn't, he does absolutely nothing. But, well, Gobta's men trusted him a lot, and he was also quite good at looking out for them. I had faith in Gobta.

"He's one of the Four Heavenly Kings, so he will never betray your expectations!" Shion declared.

"That's right. And we will send Testarossa as an inspector so she can make up for any shortcomings, just in case," Diablo added.

The two of them both supported Gobta as their co-member in the Four Heavenly Kings.

"When you put it that way, even I can't say no as the head of the Four Heavenly Kings," Benimaru added with a bitter smile.

He must have acknowledged Gobta.

"Diablo is certainly correct," he then added. "If anything happens, we can support him. Let's give him the job."

"It'll be okay. He may not look it, but his heart is in the right place."

Thus, Benimaru and I decided to make Gobta a general.



I took a closer look at the organizational structure in order to review the other corps leaders beside Gobta. There was a total of three new corps to be established under Benimaru's direct command.

The aforementioned First Corps, with Gobta assigned as commander and Hakurou as the military advisor, would have the following soldiers:

- **100 Goblin Riders:** Each member had grown to the level of rank A-minus and possessed the competence to be a centurion.
- **12,000 Green Numbers:** The 4,000 initial men became senior soldiers and would take command of the 8,000 newly hired junior soldiers. They would work in teams of three.

The number of troops had increased significantly over the past year, but most of them were monsters from the Great Jura Forest. As a result, they were able to operate without any major problems.

Although the junior soldiers were only rank C to D, the senior soldiers had grown to the equivalent of rank B. It seemed like we could expect them to be a considerable force.

Following that was the Second Corps. Geld became the commander for this one. This Second Corps, however, was currently active in various places as a construction unit. In wartime, it would be recalled and become Tempest's main force. The soldiers under Geld's command were:

- **2,000 Yellow Numbers:** They were High Orc warriors who followed Geld from the start. Their individual strength was considerably high at rank B-plus, allowing them to create an iron wall defense by uniting with Geld. Furthermore, they also took the role of platoon leaders that commanded the new troops.
- **35,000 Orange Numbers:** The newer high orcs that had joined as enlisted soldiers. They were a unit around C-rank in strength, but only 15,000 veterans would be involved in combat. The remaining 20,000 would serve as logistical support or military engineers.

And lastly, we had the Third Corps. The aerial cavalry unit was finally being put into action as a secret weapon. The commander of this particular corps was Gabil, its original founder. The soldiers under his command were:

- **100 Hiryuu:** They were the most powerful unit within Tempest. Each individual bore the strength of rank A-minus, was capable of flying, and had a high command ability. Some were able to reach rank A and had the Skill 'Dragon Body' that could be used as their trump card.
- **3,000 Blue Numbers:** These were Lizardmen warriors who volunteered to participate because they wanted to be Gabil's subordinates. The unit was established with them as its members, and their combat prowess was

equivalent to rank C-plus. But they weren't just ordinary foot soldiers; their distinguishing feature was that they fought while riding wyverns. Their unit had the best striking power, coupled with air superiority.

Be that as it may, the current number of wyverns we had at our disposal was only 300, so we couldn't assign one to everybody. Most were relegated to raising and supporting wyverns, and it looked like it would be a while before they could participate in combat. Even then, you shouldn't underestimate them. Wyverns were a subspecies of lesser dragons, a B-plus-ranked monster. While Gabil had succeeded in capturing and nurturing them, their goal for now was to increase the population. If they could assign a wyvern to everyone, then the Blue Numbers could display their true value.

These were the three corps under Benimaru's direct control.

"So, the Second Corps is under Geld and the Third Corps is under Gabil. Looks like there aren't any problems," I said.

"Well, I've considered a lot of various options, but I think this is the safest bet," Benimaru assured me.

Geld was, needless to say, a reliable general. I also didn't see any issues with Gabil either. He definitely tended to get easily carried away, but even then, he was good in a fight. His performance in mock battles was excellent, and he was at the point where Benimaru recognized him as a rival. His strategic thinking was a bit on the weaker side, but his tactical decisions more than made up for that shortcoming. He treated his subordinates well and knew when to retreat. He was, without a doubt, a talented person that could be trusted as a general.

"As for these, they're the same as before."

Benimaru brought out a different piece of paper. Three units were listed there:

Benimaru's personal bodyguards, Kurenai, was composed of 300 men. Led by rank A Gobua, it was an elite unit full of fierce fighters, all ranked A-minus and above. They also currently served as the general staff.

It was only after I saw them in combat training, but I thought that Gobua and the others were evenly matched with someone like Gel mud, who had once been a high-level majin, if not stronger. If we took proficiency into consideration, there were some members of the squad that were equal to rank A. Some of them could even defeat a Holy Knight one-on-one, so calculating the overall strength of this unit was complicated.

The criteria for a monster's strength were almost always decided by the amount of magicules. Since monsters were born strong, they had no concept of proficiency. However, in addition to their innate physical power, our country's monsters had undergone military training. It seemed that this training helped them acquire even more combat strength.

I didn't think I was overestimating them, even if you considered them out of place or above the normal criteria. In the first place, if we just looked at the anomaly Hakurou, it was enough to prove that I was right.

The people of this unit were fierce soldiers who had all endured Hakurou's hellish training. They were extraordinarily well trained.

Second on that list was the intelligence unit, Dark Shadow, that Souei ran—it consisted of at least 100 men. There were many mysteries surrounding this group, and as they were under Souei's complete control, few knew of its existence. But as far as I know, they were considerably strong.

Souka and her four subordinates, who were the commanding officers, were ranked A. Several of them were even more dangerous. Glenda was part of this corps, but there were a couple of Special A rank fighters as well. In fact, Testarossa managed to recruit a few talented individuals via plea bargains, and they were taken in by Souei. They were Girard, the leader of the mercenary group Apostles of Verte, and Ayn, a spirit wielder who had apparently served under him. Both of them were over A rank and were now active as excellent intelligence agents.

I had once joked that it was like a special agency for troublemakers but now it was looking exactly like that.

Souei claimed that we couldn't expect much combat ability from this team, but I didn't believe it. I felt that they would be perfect at assassinations. I mean, the group possessed numerous people that were over rank A, so I wanted to ask him what nonsense he was talking about. I wondered what Souei wished to achieve.

—Rumors that they were a frightening unit was, in a way, unavoidable.

Finally, there was the Yomigaeri, who were under Shion—they totaled 100 men. The quirk of this group was that they weren't easy to kill, stubbornly so. They reportedly received incredibly severe training that utilized their terrifying regeneration abilities and became as strong as rank B-plus. Considering the fact that they were originally ranked C, their growth was the highest. They performed well in the battle against the Holy Knight Order, and some of them might even break through their ceiling and reach rank A.

While I thought the strongest unit right now was Hiryyu, if there was a team that could turn it around and claim that title, it was definitely Shion's Yomigaeri. And this unit, according to Benimaru's organization chart, was supposed to be my bodyguards.

I didn't like it, but the idea of abusing their near immortality—stalling for time by acting as bait—was the main reason why they were delegated this role. Essentially, if anything ever happened, I could use the Yomigaeri as a decoy and escape. Shion explained it rather proudly.

In case you were wondering, even though they were technically my bodyguards, they didn't need to follow any of my commands. They were a group that solely existed to protect me, so they were strictly forbidden from doing other things, regardless of my orders. Therefore, even if I shouted at them not to, they'd gladly sacrifice themselves for me. It was extremely troubling.

Although, if I asked them to do some trivial tasks, they would readily accept...

It was probably a good idea to not tell Shion any of this. At times like these, it was best to put up a facade in order to hide how I truly felt.

By the way, Shion had one more undisclosed unit that wasn't written on the list. Although officially it was a secret, it was more so an open secret nowadays. It

was a self-proclaimed unit that followed Shion. They were supposed to be her bodyguards, but in reality, it was simply a fan club. The exact number of members was unknown. I didn't think that there were more than 1,000 people at most. Since it wasn't an official unit, they were outside the jurisdiction of our country.

We don't know how many of them there are, nor their abilities; is it really going to be okay? It would be nice as long as nobody died. Shion was secretly raising them, so their strength was also unknown.

It seemed that Dagruel's sons were working hard as captains, and some adventurers with combat experience had joined the group as well. There may come a time where they would be useful in the future, but for now, I was more anxious than I'd expected. They were definitely not a unit that we could send to the front line. It was only natural that Benimaru hadn't listed them on his organization chart.

I handed the sheet back to Benimaru.

"I don't have a problem with this. It looks like we've increased our forces, but as far as I'm concerned, there are no changes for these units. I think we can safely put this behind us."

"I agree. I take pride in the fact that the Kurenai are troops that I've nurtured with my own hands. Souei and Shion would certainly feel the same way, so I won't include their units into the organization chart."

Shion nodded in agreement after hearing what Benimaru said.

I had no objections, so I gave my permission by saying, "Please do so."

Everyone wanted the unit that they had trained themselves close at hand. In fact, there was no need to add Gabil's Hirayuu to the new structure. It was just something he had suggested himself.

On that note, Gobta wasn't the one who raised the Goblin Riders, but they were his colleagues as well as brothers-in-arms, and they had all acknowledged Gobta's abilities. So, even in the case where we had to change commanders, we decided to take their feelings into consideration.

Benimaru brought out the third sheet of paper.

"I guess this is today's main topic. These are the corps that belong to people other than me, but I have condensed it all together here."

It was finally here. The table I've seen so far only contained current units and their subsequent increases and decreases.

The only thing that caught my eye was Gobta's appointment as the commander of the First Corps. This was something I'd suggested, so there wasn't anything new to surprise me.

Well, I wonder what will be written here this time.

With a pounding heart, I looked down at the piece of paper.



There was a chart of the left and right wings of the army. The number of troops we possessed so far was listed on the right.

The First Corps—commanded by Gobta—had approximately 12,000 soldiers. The Second Corps—commanded by Geld—had approximately 37,000 soldiers. The Third Corps—commanded by Gabil—had approximately 3,000 soldiers. In total, there were around 52,000 men. This was the entire standing army of the Tempest Federation, and in my opinion, it was quite a scary number.

Regardless, we still had plenty of room for more soldiers. The population of our nation had already surpassed one million and had been increasing at breakneck speed. Looking at it objectively, our national power had grown exponentially. It was precisely because of our nation's strength that we were able to support such a large army. On top of that, because the Second Corps acted as military engineers, we were able to maintain this manpower.

If all of them were unproductive, then we wouldn't have been able to get this far. I really needed to thank Geld and his team. Without him and his subordinates, the remaining number of soldiers would approximately be only 15,000. This was definitely not enough for a confrontation with the Eastern Empire.

As a result, Benimaru and I had pondered the question of what actions we should take.

"Once war breaks out, I'll recall Geld and his men; this was the original plan. However, even that would not be enough. Although the Western Nations appear to have their own armies, mobilizing them would be a massive undertaking," warned Benimaru.

"Indeed. We went through all that trouble to gain control of the Council's military authority, so it'd be remiss of me not to utilize it. With that being said, doing so may cause some major backlash," I replied.

"Moreover, if problems began to occur within the Western Nations, they'd have nothing to stop it. If that happens, things may get tough later on."

"It wouldn't be an issue if it was within our borders, but if the citizens of the Western Nations start to question our leadership, it'll make it harder for us to do our job in the future."

"Exactly."

And so, we repeatedly went through this back-and-forth exchange. Benimaru's response to these concerns was probably the army's left wing that was written on the paper. Let's take a closer look at the breakdown:

Western Reserve Force: 150,000

Mixed Majin Corps: 30,000

Volunteer Corps: 20,000

That was it.

"These numbers are huge, but what sort of army is this left wing?" I asked, confused.

"For the time being, they're soldiers under our command. The aforementioned army that belongs to the Western States Council is the Western Reserve Force. Unlike the armies of each individual nation, this one is hired directly by the Council—or rather, largely hired through our funding."

That was certainly the case since the Council granted us military authority, which bestowed our country the right to give orders to the Council's forces. I knew that, but—

"Why is the number so high then?"

The army that belonged to the Council existed for formality's sake. Moreover, it consisted mainly of knights and soldiers that were brought in from each of the council-member countries. There were only about a thousand of them, and their duties were mainly to oversee the security of the council venue in the capital of Ingracia.

In principle, each member of the Western Nations had its own army and was responsible for its own security. There was no need to maintain a full-fledged army since instances where the Council would actually need to mobilize its military were exceedingly rare. It was for this reason that they handed military command over to us without a second thought...

Although, the reason I wanted military authority had nothing to do with handling emergency situations in the first place. It was simply for laying down tracks so that each nation had access to the magitrain. It would've been a hassle to get approval from every single one just to dispatch Tempest's engineers.

If there really were some emergency, our nation would dispatch troops to handle the situation. Based on this consideration, I sent the soldiers under the Council back to their own countries. This was also because we had decided to establish a security force on the condition that our nation would fund the whole operation. To achieve this, I limited recruitment only from the local population as it would probably be more reassuring if the soldiers were humans and demi-humans, rather than monsters.

"After the disbandment of the previous army, the new one surprisingly increased in numbers. According to Testarossa's report, rumors spread like wildfire claiming that you could earn a living if you enlisted, which ended up attracting a lot of recruits."

"But wasn't the purpose of this force just to maintain public order? Why would we need 150,000 soldiers?"

Since all the nations still retained their own jurisdictional rights, we would be overstepping our authority if we arrested criminals. Even if the new force was meant to preserve law and order, that was mainly for disaster prevention, and to be quite frank, their real purpose was to assist the engineering unit and provide logistical support. We wouldn't even need more than 10,000, let alone 150,000.

"Regarding the matter, Testarossa stated that this was the result of what the nations requested," Benimaru explained in detail.

Testarossa had seized control of the Council and pushed for a bold structural reform. I was aware of that, but it was apparently causing more of a stir than I had expected.

At the end of the day, this reform was the result of mutual consultation. The nations themselves would have the initiative, and our nation would provide the

technology to do so. It was kind of like the ODA⁷—Official Development Assistance. The Council would invest official funds, and our nation would dispatch laborers as a national project to any country that needed a helping hand. We would hire local workers and give them technical guidance and fulfill the concerned country's request. This way, we could secure job opportunities and wages for ourselves while our partners would receive our assistance. It was a win-win situation.

However, there was no such thing as a free lunch in this world. Of course, there was more to this support system than meets the eye; it demanded something in return. For example, if we built a dam, depending on how much we invested in the construction, we would acquire an equivalent value in water rights as compensation. As for laying railroad tracks, we would charge a tax on the train fare and collect the profits in perpetuity. Just like what we had accomplished with the roads, we would be responsible for maintenance, but in exchange, the benefactors would have to agree to forgo tariffs and grant all kinds of privileges.

This was definitely something a demon lord would do. While acting all nice and friendly on the surface, I was committing rather wily acts. With that being said, since those who utilized our services would ultimately enjoy its convenience, they barely lost anything in this transaction. They were only paying the toll for future profits they had yet to see.

Naturally, I expected the more powerful nations would try to take their own initiative. Even though it would take a while, they could mimic our technology after seeing it physically for themselves. Secretly stealing it for their own use—I had anticipated this as a normal response.

What I didn't expect was—

“On that note, many of the larger nations are also demanding the trains to be operational as soon as possible.”

“In other words, they felt like there wouldn't be enough manpower relying on our nation's engineering unit alone, and therefore even mobilized those they hired as logistical support?”

“Correct. And that didn't seem like it was enough, which is why they decided to hire locals to help.”

Is this the reason why the number of troops is absurdly high...?

I gave Testarossa full authorization as the military attaché and told her to not report minor details of things to me when verifying policies. Due to my orders, it appears that this was news even to Benimaru, until very recently. The result was this mass recruitment.

“Wouldn't that just be playing right into the hands of these nations? By making us train their engineers, they could operate more easily later on.”

In lieu of imitating technologies, this was a more efficient method. Although it was quite the forthright approach, I actually didn't mind it. It was only natural for the leaders to come up with a plan like this under these circumstances.

Moreover, the engineers we instructed would grow to become the pillars that supported these countries in the future. While it was a shame we couldn't keep

⁷ The ODA is part of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that assists developing countries

the sole rights of this technology to ourselves, it'd be fun to witness the healthy competition of technological innovation that would surely come about in the future.

"Apparently, that's not it. If that were the case, those nations wouldn't merely hand their engineers over to us like this."

He does have a point.

"—Wait...so what you're saying is you took Testarossa's newly trained support troops and incorporated them directly as the Western Reserves?!"

"That's correct," Benimaru grinned after witnessing my complete astonishment.

It'd be a shame to simply let go of all those engineers after we invest considerably in their growth. Under these circumstances, we might as well turn them into a full-fledged security force and train them in disaster response, VIP protection, and city defense—it seemed that Benimaru had quite the foresight.

"Testarossa was going to discharge them because she had no more use for them," Benimaru continued, "but it would definitely be a waste."

"Indeed it would."

"I figured that we could prepare work for them, so I made the decision to organize and name them the Western Reserve Force."

I see. Now I understand. Well, I don't think we could expect them to be proficient at anything yet in the short span of a year. However, if they continued to train, they had the potential to become an expert unit in disaster countermeasures. This would also be a good countermeasure against any unforeseen accidents, and as Benimaru mentioned, it could be utilized in a variety of different scenarios.

"I get it now. That was a nice call, Benimaru."

"That is not something worthy of your praise," Benimaru answered, looking rather abashed.

The Western Reserve Force, huh? A force of 150,000 men was truly impressive, but if we dispatched them all to the Western Nations at the same time, then even this many people would be insufficient. If they could secure some concessions, they'd be able to make enough money to feed themselves. I'd never expect this to happen, but I was pleased about the good news, nonetheless.

On to the next order of business.

"Now that we got the Western Reserve Force cleared up, what's this Mixed Majin Corps?"

There's 30,000 in total, are we conscripting monsters from the Great Jura Forest?

"It's a corps composed mostly of majins who were under Clayman. Geld had them working as prisoners of war, but I picked out and borrowed those who were decent at fighting. At the same time, the high orcs who had nothing to do after completing their construction work filled in the missing gaps."

Based on what Benimaru shared, he was taking proper precautions so that the progress rate of Geld's construction projects wasn't negatively affected. In that

case, good. It would've been better if the corps were made up of experienced fighters rather than a bunch of amateurs. However...

"I thought they weren't being cooperative?"

The majority of Clayman's men were rank B. But there were a few of them that were over rank A. They were a fairly strong group, but as a corps, they were clearly weak. Monsters who only followed orders out of fear were obviously no match for trained, professional soldiers. Gathering them now, just like that—I don't think there was enough time to give them any military training.

"Thanks to Geld, none of them are selfish miscreants anymore. Besides, even if there were someone that stupid, I would've personally shut them up."

Well, yeah. It's easy for Benimaru to subdue people by force.

"But, you know, they just got used to the job, so forcing them to fight is kinda..."

Although I was reluctant, Benimaru quickly reassured me. "This is something they've been saying: 'We want Rimuru-sama to see that we can be useful too!'"

"Huh?"

Benimaru said something unexpected. Those selfish majins had volunteered to help on their own accord.

"Good food, good friends, bosses who rely on them, and rewarding work. They kept going on and on about how their strength should be used to protect all of this."

"Seriously...?"

This was a happy little miscalculation, and their offer was very helpful. Conscribed troops were of no use in actual warfare. Sometimes, it was unavoidable for the sake of national defense but other times, it was wiser to surrender unconditionally when weighing both costs and benefits.

I couldn't bear the thought of being a slave to another country, but if it were only about being heavily taxed as a vassal state, temporarily bowing your head and secretly plotting your revenge was always an option. I was trying to play it cool saying it like that, but the point was that they could wait patiently for their chance at vengeance.

There was also the option of willfully accepting the slight losses so long as the invaders didn't commit extremely atrocious acts. But that wasn't an excuse to ignore the feelings of the citizens who originally lived in that country. Those people should be responsible for choosing their own future. As a ruler, you could only respond to those feelings. That was why I felt conscription was the worst way to go about it and that patriotism should never be forced.

Tempest was a country under my protection. I had no intention of obeying outside influences who made arrogant demands. If we didn't intend to relinquish our rights easily, there would always be disagreements. Furthermore, if the other side refused to give in, then war was an inevitability—it would be such a pain being antagonized.

For me, if they didn't have the will to defend their own country, then I wouldn't mind if they simply ran away. *I shouldn't get the wrong idea about who I'm supposed to be protecting.* It was only natural that my priority should be the

citizens that I shared hardships with since the founding of this nation, and I had no intention of taking care of freeloaders that came later and purely insisted on their rights.

If I had nobody to protect, then I would flee as well. In that case, I'd just go off and create a new country somewhere else with like-minded friends again. For me, this land itself wasn't something I needed to cling onto.

However, as long as everyone loved our home, Tempest, I would do everything in my power to meet their expectations. Regardless of what kind of foreign enemy they are, I will crush them with all my might. Even if the enemy were the Demon Lord Guy. I'm prepared to kill him no matter what it takes. Well, Guy was horrifying, so I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"I could sense their motivation, and I'm sure their feelings are genuine. Besides, people from all over the Great Jura Forest have heard rumors of the upcoming war and have offered their assistance. This Mixed Majin Corps is the unit that brought them all together." Benimaru then added with a wry smile, "Although I *have* removed the weaklings."

Yeah, that's great. With this move, they could really do their best—the thought made me glad.

Lastly, we had the Volunteer Corps. This was a unit derived from humans residing in Tempest and neighboring countries.

In any case, if we were defeated, the nations surrounding the Great Jura Forest would also surely fall. Because of that, it was better to cooperate with us from the beginning and so a group of people had gathered to offer their full support.

Most of them were adventurers and mercenaries. It seemed that many of the immigrants we had accepted also volunteered. A lot of the idiots who risked their lives to explore the Dungeon—who fed our monster avatars every time—also joined.

The total number of these people was 20,000, and while we couldn't expect too much from them, they were still a considerable force.

"Well, that's everything on the left wing. The only difference between the right and the left wings is the level of loyalty to Tempest, or rather Rimuru-sama."

"Me?"

"The right wing troops are those who are willing to risk their lives for Rimuru-sama and this country. The left, in contrast, is a hodgepodge of different people with their own agendas. Some of them may truly have noble aspirations, but we didn't have time to conduct personal interviews, so we had to organize them like this."

"I see..."

Behind me, Shion and Diablo were nodding their heads in agreement. I could swear I heard them talking about disturbing things, such as how the left side were merely pawns waiting to be used and thrown away, or how they planned to hold trials in order to find the cream of the crop, but I must've been imagining things.

"So, the last question that remains is who we should appoint as the commander of each corps."

This was where we finally got to the heart of the matter.



Well then, let us begin with the Western Reserve Force. This corps was by far the largest. Its allegiance was with the Council and its members were scattered all across the region.

"Looking at sheer numbers alone, this wing is a large army of 200,000 strong. That said, I do not intend to move the 150,000 soldiers of the Western Reserve, so they will be deployed where they are stationed," Benimaru revealed.

"I suppose. Technically, they're a unit under the command of the Council so we could move them at our discretion, but I believe there's no need to summon them here."

Although, if they gather in one place, I could use my magic to teleport them all at the same time. If we moved 150,000 people simultaneously, just trying to manage that would already be a gargantuan task. I had my doubts whether they'd be able to take proper military action until we set up a clear chain of command. It would be smarter to have strict security measures in place to prevent the Empire's spies from launching diversionary attacks in each country.

"I think so too," Benimaru agreed. "Although it wouldn't be impossible for me to organize them with my power, I'll maintain the status quo as far as the Western Reserve Force is concerned. The corps commander is also absent but I'm thinking of having Testarossa, the military attaché, take on that role as well."

"I think that's for the best...but if war breaks out, Testarossa may be asked to return home as well. I'm worried about whether or not they'll be able to keep in touch with each other when that happens."

How would she keep in touch with the troops scattered throughout the Western Nations? By using various means of communication like 'Magic Communication,' correspondence-specific transmission crystals and a transmission web made of magisteel threads, a network had been successfully established between countries and their respective major cities.

However, in towns and villages located in more rural areas, the deployment of the network was going at a snail's pace. I mean, it was the mission of our engineering unit to install them. There were wizards in each unit, so 'Magic Communication' would probably get through, but...

"Don't worry," Diablo reassured. "Moss can handle a few hundred companies."

"Yes, I heard that from Souei too. Moss is working with him on intelligence, but he can also take care of inter-unit communication in his spare time," said Benimaru, voicing his support.

Really?! Moss—what a handy guy.

"Then, shouldn't Moss be the corps commander?" I suggested.

"No, that would rather be bad for Moss..."

"Indeed, given Testa's temperament, it would be rather miserable for Moss. Not that it's any of my business but I do feel a bit sorry for him."

"...Okay. Let's appoint Testarossa as the provisional corps commander then."

Benimaru, not to mention even Diablo, felt sorry for Moss. Reading the room, I decided against giving the role to him.

The Western Reserve would concentrate on their main job of maintaining security at this time. We might need to deploy them depending on how things develop, but I ultimately decided that would be a last resort.

Testarossa would serve as the corps commander. This was a temporary appointment and I made it clear that she would be replaced when there was a suitable candidate.

That should take care of the Western Reserve for now.

Next was the Mixed Majin Corps.

How about we leave this to Benimaru?

"I recommend Rigur-dono," Benimaru proposed.

Rigur, huh? He certainly had experience in leading the security force, and his strength was over rank A. But on the other hand, he was already Rigurd's assistant, so I suspected that he couldn't afford to be a corps commander.

If at all possible, I would like to win the war by relying solely on our standing army. Yet at this time, it was unknown just how many troops the Empire had assembled. We had sent people on reconnaissance missions, but we failed to obtain any information from beyond their borders. Nevertheless, based on the bits of information gleaned from their military exercises and other events, we could estimate that at least 300,000 troops would be mobilized. If we were unlucky, that number might rise to over a million. In light of this, we couldn't afford to keep the Mixed Majin Corps in reserve.

I wasn't exactly dissatisfied with the idea of Rigur in command, but I was worried. No matter how you looked at it, sending in an unorganized force with barely any preparation was dangerous.

"Hmm, I think I'd rather leave this to Benimaru. As for this Mixed Majin Corps, let's call it the Red Numbers from now on. Select a couple members of Kurenai and have them each lead battalions of 1,000 soldiers. This will be the Fourth Corps, and Benimaru, you will be the corps commander and take direct command."

It's red because this corps screams danger...get it?

It's been a while since I've cracked a satisfying dad joke.

«...»

Yeah. Jeez, I can already hear crickets; I should probably keep that one to myself. Despite throwing around stupid quips in my head, I somehow kept a straight face. Thankfully, nobody noticed, and the meeting went on smoothly.

"I understand. If that's the case, please leave it to me."

Benimaru apparently anticipated this outcome and assented without a hint of surprise.

Since he had the Unique Skill 'Generalissimo' under his belt, he could easily compensate for the unit's lack of training. He was the perfect choice to handle such a random assortment of troops. Thus, in addition to commanding the entire armed forces, Benimaru also placed the Red Numbers under his direct command.

Lastly, we had the Volunteer Corps.

"What are we going to do about the Volunteer Corps?" I inquired.

"That's the problem," Benimaru replied with a furrowed brow.

The Volunteer Corps consisted largely of humans. Benimaru was evidently worried that appointing a monster as the commander of such a unit might stir up unnecessary discontent.

"That's true," I agreed. "If word gets out that humans can't get ahead in a monster country, our reputation is going to be damaged."

"Anyone who complains about such things is a weakling and a failure. We can't expect them to make it big anyway, so there's no need to worry about it!"

"No, Shion. I mean, that's not completely wrong, but it'd be easy for people to believe that if they don't know us."

"I see. Humans are difficult beings."

Shion remained skeptical, but our image-building strategy was important.

It'd be ridiculous if we were called discriminatory over this kind of thing, so I thought we needed to give it some serious thought.

"But is there truly no one else more suitable?" Diablo asked.

He was right, and that's why Benimaru was worried.

"You aren't wrong," I said. "They're volunteers, after all, so they're an unplanned addition, as far as I'm concerned."

"Yet, not taking advantage of their offer would be a waste."

That's right. I genuinely appreciated the sincerity of those who volunteered, and I didn't want to let it go to waste. However, if we wanted to make good use of it, we needed a capable commander. These guys were even more of a mess than the Mixed Majin Corps, which was now known as the Red Numbers. I couldn't imagine anyone other than Benimaru bringing them all together.

Well, I don't know what to do.

"What about Girard, who is under Souei's care?" Benimaru probed.

"Not possible. We took him in as part of an undisclosed deal with the Kingdom of Ingracia, and I doubt he wants to be seen in public," I admitted.

I haven't heard what kind of deal Testarossa made, but I don't think it's a good idea to let Girard play an active role in the public eye. Apparently, he was even labeled as a traitor to humanity, so they had to make an example out of him by publicly declaring his death. While I didn't have any obligation to protect him, I didn't want to force him to play an active role, either.

"He would be more than competent, but he isn't a realistic option..."

Benimaru made a case for him, but he wasn't really pushing for it. He quickly gave up on him and started thinking about other candidates. Yet the problem remained—we needed a human as the commander. Names were proposed one after another, but nobody seemed to fit the bill.

"How about asking the Holy Knight Order for help?" Shion suddenly suggested.

Benimaru and I glanced at each other, then stared at Shion.

"W-we can't do that, can we?"

"No, that's not—"

That's not possible—was what I tried to say, but Shion brought up a name and cut me off.

"Then, how about Masayuki-dono?"

Masayuki, eh? It was as if a light bulb went off in my head.



"That's it!"
"That was impressive, Shion!"
Benimaru and I shouted at the same time.
At that moment, we locked in Masayuki as the commander of the Volunteer Corps.

*

Although the decision to appoint him was made without his approval, it was a wonderful choice that everyone could agree on. Masayuki was the only person that remained skeptical.

"Why should I...?"
When I revealed the news to him, he had his head in his hands.
But it can't be helped, right? Sad as it may be, war was looming over us. His opinion didn't matter. Although that might be contrary to my earlier stance, there was no need to be concerned about Masayuki because if we left it to him, then everything would eventually turn out perfectly fine on its own. He was a good friend to have in troubling times like these.

"As for me," Masayuki began, "I've gotten pretty good at using my Unique Skill 'Chosen One.' I don't feel like I'm being praised for everything I do anymore, like I used to. But now, I can't use it even when I try, so don't expect too much, okay?"

I knew that he was lying, of course, and that he was making excuses so he could try to escape. After all, his popularity hadn't diminished one bit and he remained as influential as ever.

"Don't you want to show Kenya and the others how cool you are?" I prodded.
"Urgh, that's..."

If you go along with this, I'll let you off the hook for teaching the kids questionable stuff and gaining their respect.

"Don't worry, you can do it!"
"But..."

"No buts. Didn't I help you with your fight against Gozer?"
Masayuki and his team had already passed the 50th floor. During that time, I had been secretly helping him along by using my avatar to weaken Gozer, the floor's guardian.

"Thank you for your help back then..." he mumbled.
"You understand, don't you?"
"Yes."

After a little bit of coaxing, coupled with a few sprinkles of threats, he eventually came around to my idea and sealed the deal.

"Yes, I understand. I owe you a great deal, Rimuru-san, and I'd like to repay a bit of that debt at times like these..."

Although he was reluctant to do so, Masayuki agreed to be the corps commander. There were no complaints from the volunteers. Rather, I heard them shouting stuff like, "We did it!" and "Victory is ours!", all in a state of euphoria.

No matter how dour Masayuki looked, he couldn't change the outcome now.

"This is how I thought things would end up..."

He said he mastered the Unique Skill 'Chosen One,' so what gives? As I'd suspected, it turned out that Masayuki had lied about mastering his Skill. Or maybe this had nothing to do with his Skill and it was simply his natural luck? That'd be even more surprising.

Leon, for instance, was the polar opposite of Masayuki; regardless of what he did, it always came off in a bad light. He'd been that way since his early days as a Hero, and I suppose it wasn't easy changing one's natural disposition.

"Well, well. I'm sorry that I made this decision for you, but please shine brightly as the beacon of hope to inspire everyone!" I cheered, trying to console him.

Thus, the 20,000 members of the Volunteer Corps were led by Masayuki and fell under the banner of the Hero.



In the revised organizational structure, the right wing had 52,000 while the left wing had 50,000. Benimaru was listed at the top. Beneath him were the various corps commanders. In total, we had more than 100,000 troops, but even so, it was up in the air whether they could hold a candle to the Imperial Army. But there was no need to panic; our preparations were progressing steadily.

As a reserve force, there were 150,000 soldiers in the Western Reserve. Plus, each country also reported that they were making preparations to ready reinforcements from among their own knights. An allied western force would be organized to be the very last line of defense. The number of this army would probably come out to no less than 200,000, and we would be relying on them if the worst comes to pass.

We were scraping together as many mercenaries and aid from each country as possible. It was a lot, or pitifully little, depending on how you looked at it...

I heard that Testarossa had threatened them at the Council meeting, which was why they were cooperating. Either way, if we lose, then they would undeniably be the next targets, so they *had* to lend their support. Well, either way those forces would remain in place until our defeat became evident.

We had the home field advantage. We also had Veldora's presence nearby and the cooperation of demon lords like Luminas and Leon. Milim also promised to help us out. Karion said that his Beast Master's Warrior Alliance would always be prepared to deploy. And as my personal trump card, the Black Numbers under Diablo were at the ready.

Since I gave Benimaru command of the entire army, ostensibly I wasn't directly in control of a single unit—that was how we ultimately decided things, but it wasn't the whole truth. The Black Numbers would only accept orders from Diablo and the demoness trio, who were his subordinates. It was a unit completely independent of Benimaru's command.

This was the full picture.

We did not take into account how Yuuki would act.

"War, huh?" I muttered quietly in my room.

Did the Empire really want to annex the Western Nations? Guy had mentioned the word "game." There seemed to be some kind of connection, and perhaps the Empire had some disturbing ulterior motive. But even if that were the case...

"I don't care who comes, if they try to mess with our paradise, we'll crush them."

This was what I genuinely felt from the very depths of my heart. I'm not going to make the same mistake again. I am a demon lord. I couldn't afford to misjudge what my priorities truly were.



Meanwhile, within the Eastern Empire, preparations for the war were moving smoothly forward, just like in Tempest.

—Or rather, the Empire's investment in the matter was orders of magnitude greater in scale and time, so immense that the two could not even begin to compare.

They had planned meticulously for a long, long time, all for a major offensive. Soon enough, the Empire was about to awake from its slumber. The days before their ferocious advance steadily counted down.

Interlude

The Internal Affairs of the Empire

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

Interlude

The Internal Affairs of the Empire

The Eastern Empire—one of the oldest nations in the world. It was more formally known as the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire.

The history of the Empire was said to be ancient, and that its foundations were laid out by a nation as far back as two thousand years ago. The long-standing minor Kingdom of Nasca gradually absorbed the large nations of the Magic Kingdom of Namrium and the Eastern Union of Ulmeria, thus giving birth to the Empire known today.

Its overwhelming military power was its backbone. During the past two thousand years, under the reign of the uniting emperor Rudra Nam Ul Nasca, the Empire grew immensely powerful, quashing any signs of rebellion from the nations they had absorbed. It acted as the hegemonic power, dominating these states.

This was the truth behind the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire, commonly referred to as the "Eastern Empire."

The emperor could be described as an absolutist and was born from a pure bloodline of overlords who all passed down the name "Rudra."

Regardless of the truth of this matter, the emperor advocated absolute meritocracy—and firmly stood by it. Thus, the core philosophy shaping the military was "Power is everything," and a special system was established that allowed a person to climb the ranks, if they had the strength to.

There was a rumor going around among the citizens of the Empire, pertaining to the reason why they had yet to begin their invasion of the Great Jura Forest. The reason many believed: The Empire had not finished preparing.

Around three hundred and fifty years ago, an attempt to subdue the Storm Dragon Veldora failed, and a city was destroyed in the process. Those who had provoked the capricious dragon had no time to regret it, as they shared the same fate as that city.

It had been the largest city of the Empire at the time, boasting a population over a hundred thousand, and was a fortress city adjacent to the eastern side of the Great Jura Forest. It had been built over a hundred years to serve as a bridgehead to invade the forest. They had hoped to turn this city into a military stronghold in order to break through the forest and further expand the Empire's territories. Driven by this ambition, the military at the time began to draft an assault plan.

They had to cross the Great Jura Forest. They had spent the past century longing for this opportunity. They were already a prosperous nation, and so there was only one reason why they hoped to expand their territories further: It was their emperor's wish. There was no other reason, and none of the Empire's citizens had any complaints.

The plan proceeded smoothly, and as the Empire's army gradually accumulated power, they were ready to display their military prowess. Soon enough, they were given orders to invade the forest in the name of the emperor. However, all plans for the invasion were thwarted by the foolish idea of a certain troop captain.

Since we are here, we might as well subjugate the ruler of the Great Jura Forest too. It's just a giant lizard, after all, it doesn't stand a chance against us. This hubris led to their ultimate downfall.

As for what exactly they had done, it was not accurately recorded. After all, the people in charge of keeping records as well as the places holding said records were all turned to dust. The Empire's wish and the emperor's ambition were reduced to ashes.

Time passed, and in the present day, the Empire found itself in a state of limbo. They had finally recovered from Veldora's blow, however, the emperor had yet to give his permission to invade.

Any act of invasion towards the Great Jura Forest was strictly prohibited. After three hundred and fifty years, they had rebuilt their power once more, waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

Then, let us have a look at the political structure of the Empire.

Within the Empire, the political department and the military department were the left and right hands of the emperor—he had both political dominance and military command, holding absolute authority.

Within the political department, the nobles within the Empire were organized into the House of Peers and enjoyed extraordinary authority. Yet it was merely superficial: in reality, these nobles had no actual decision-making power. They merely enjoyed the honor and privilege, while staying beholden to the emperor's will. At most, they were just bureaucrats.

The power of the nobles was hereditary, and they could become senators without being elected. Even if they were extremely ambitious, they would never have enough power to achieve their dream. All of the territories of the Empire belonged to the emperor. The nobles were merely leased the land for temporary management.

The ones supporting the nobles were highly-educated officials. It was these officials who handled all the planning. They were directly supported by the emperor, since these officials had all sworn allegiance to him.

Up next is the military department. The supreme decision-making power of the military did not belong to the nation, but the emperor. All of the Empire's military power was centered on the emperor. This also applied to the nations that had been annexed by the Empire. All of their territories were claimed, and their land now became the property of the emperor. So were the defense troops deployed there, where they were considered as a generous gift from the emperor.

This policy was effective in completely eliminating any form of rebellion in the provinces. The overwhelming difference in national power was the key to its success.

The Empire would accept the surrender of other nations, but it was the equivalent of forfeiting all of their rights. If one of them rejected those terms and launched a rebellion, they would be met with a bloody purge. The Empire did this to deter even the thought of insurrection, cutting off the very roots of rebellion.

In that manner, the Empire managed to maintain order. On the one hand, the fear of their tyranny, and on the other, ensuring the livelihoods of its loyal subjects—the quintessential carrot and stick policy. Through this, the Empire managed to maintain peace and prosperity with its complete authoritarian control.

It was normally impossible for an empire of this scale to be ruled by a single person. Yet even so, throughout its two millennia of history, the dominance of the emperor had never been shaken. Generation after generation, the emperor's authority never faded. By all accounts, it was an extraordinary feat. If all of this truly was the emperor's own doing, he was a being that transcended the mortal realm.

Moving on, let us have a look at the military strength of the Empire. The structure of their military could be roughly divided into three major corps.

The Armored Corps—an army modified by armored technicians consisting of mainly mechanized troops. They were the modernized Armed Corps and their arsenal included heavy weaponry, such as tanks. They symbolized the Empire's technology.

The Magic Beast Corps—an army consisting of all sorts of magic beasts captured by the Empire from various regions across the world, within their domain and otherwise. The corps manipulated the magic beasts and wielded their power. They symbolized the Empire's strength.

The Mixed Corps—a cesspool where nonstandard mechanized troops and uncontrollable, ferocious magic beasts were dumped, loosely resembling an army. This corps was considered to be too reliant on individual strength and unsuited for organized group action. However, their total strength was unknown, and if united, could potentially pose a tremendous threat. They symbolized the Empire's heart. Though, this "heart" was not mature enough yet.

Unlike the Western Nations, which focused its military power on swords and magic, the Empire was pioneering a new era with magic and science. The existence of otherworlders played a major role in the growth of the Empire's military power.

Someone had seen potential in the knowledge brought from the other worlds, an archmage, one who had lived for a long time within the palace, named Gadra. Despite his elderly appearance, the man was extremely energetic. He craved knowledge of all kinds, even outside the field of magic. He was also very fond of hearing the stories told by people from other worlds. That was how he learned that there were many other nations in other worlds as well. Unlike this world, the

residents of these other worlds spoke different languages and had different ideologies. Yet, even then, they were able to overcome their differences and coexist. He also learnt that other worlds had no magic, yet their civilizations were highly developed and completely different to this world's.

Gadra had lived for a long time. Every time his life was about to come to an end, he would undergo the secret ritual he invented—the mystic art of 'Reincarnation'—in order to rewind his lifespan. It was this ability that allowed him to study otherworlders over many lifetimes. He amassed a wealth of knowledge, including several otherworld languages. In addition, whenever otherworlders arrived in this world, he would send his subjects to ensure that they were under his personal protection. Magical beasts weren't the only thing the Empire was collecting.

Gadra also appealed to the emperor on the practical use of otherworlders and was given the permission to do as he wished with them. Some of these otherworlders possessed unusual abilities, and some possessed vast knowledge. The otherworlders arriving at the borders of the Empire received special treatment, and far more had gathered there than any other nation. As a result, their cultures and traditions were seen across the Empire.

Naturally, the Empire realized that many of them possessed Unique Skills and thus carried out further research. Because of them, the Imperial Army's technology continued to develop to the point that it likely surpassed all the other nations in the world.

The Empire had abandoned the use of knights. Fighting on horseback had long since become obsolete, and in its place, battles were fought with modernized weaponry. Soldiers who replaced their flesh and bones with steel and machinery were called "mechaknights,"⁸ and they soon played pivotal roles in the Empire's war force. The Armored Corps, the main force of the Empire, strongly exemplified this feature.

In addition, the Magic Beast Corps also cleverly used the knowledge of the other worlds. DNA, also known as deoxyribonucleic acid, was a biological macromolecule that held the genetic information of biological beings. Having gained this knowledge from the otherworlders, the Empire was able to analyze the strength of the magic beasts. They even went a step further in their research...

As for the Mixed Corps, it consisted of many powerful otherworlders. Every one of them had awakened their Unique Skills. They were a force to be reckoned with.

And so, by cleverly combining the technology from the other worlds and special abilities, the Empire created an incredibly powerful army. You wouldn't be wrong to attribute much of the Empire's steady growth to Gadra's passion.

However, separate to the three main corps Gadra developed, there was another group in charge of protecting the emperor. This group was, at most, the size of a company, which was a hundred men. It was called the "Imperial

⁸ For clarification, the author made a wordplay on the phrase "Knight" (Kishin) in Japanese. He named these soldiers of the Empire "Kishin" but with a different kanji spelling, making it "Mecha Soldier".

Guardians.” The members were called “Imperial Knights,”⁹ despite the term “knight” being a relic of a bygone era. A clueless outsider might think that they were merely a formality, or like their name, a remnant from the past. But that was far from the truth. The Imperial Knights of the Imperial Guardians were the elite of the elite, handpicked from each of the corps.

Among them were otherworlders, which only further proved their commitment to the credo that “Power is everything,” by disregarding any prejudice over a person’s home country. These people had not gained their titles through their family’s name or influence in this old empire, but purely on their own merit. There were rumors saying that the Imperial Guardians were all gifted legendary-grade weapons as proof that they were the strongest among men. These powerful elites paired with the best gear could take on thousands of foes on their own. Their combined strength was superior to that of every corps combined.

They were also guaranteed the best treatment. Each one of them had the rank of a senior officer. When they carried out special missions, they were granted the authority of a colonel, at minimum. They were the Imperial Guardians, admired by the Empire’s soldiers as the greatest force of the Empire.

In conclusion, there were four military corps within the Empire. To be the commanding general of these corps, one had to demonstrate adequate military prowess to force those below into obedience. They had to make sure that everyone recognized why they were the strongest within the Empire.

So, how would they prove this?

This was done through competition for ranks—a rank battle—within the Empire’s military. So long as the battle was supervised by a neutral third party, this system allowed a lower-ranking individual to challenge his superior. In other words, it allowed insubordination. As a result, ranks within the corps often fluctuated.

Naturally, several conditions had to be met for these rank battles to be approved. They could not be held during a military operation. It would be rendered invalid without the presence of a witness. Moreover, if the challenging party were defeated, they would need to wait another year before regaining the right to challenge. The same rule applied if the challenger killed their opponent.

Since superior officers were allowed to kill their challengers, these challenges had to be treated with caution. The challenger had to utilize an overwhelming amount of strength in order to make their opponent admit defeat. This system was very much in line with the Empire’s philosophy, “Power is everything.”

Nevertheless, there was no shortage of people who hoped to climb the ranks to become Imperial Guardians. The Empire’s ideology was engraved on the people’s hearts.

This was how the rankings within the Empire were decided. However, Gadra was exempted from this rule. Due to his special position, he was like a foreigner to the Empire.

⁹ The Imperial Knights had the ruby text “Royal Knights” in the original Japanese, which is a misnomer.

Excluding Gadra, the Empire would select soldiers from the rest of the military to join the ranks of the Imperial Guardians, as well as elect the corps commanders. When a replacement was needed, candidates would be chosen from among the top 100 ranks.

Those who wished to climb the ranks of office were given equal opportunity. That was why those who truly possessed strength would not go unnoticed. Everyone continuously honed their skills, eager to demonstrate their talents.

Through this method, the Empire would elect one marshal, the most highly-ranked officer, and three generals. In addition, the highest-ranking individual would automatically be elected as the marshal. In contrast, only after the emperor, the marshal, and Gadra had discussed the matter would they appoint the appropriate candidates as the generals. The reasoning was very simple: strength didn't always translate to strategic command.

All in all, the members who remained in each corps were weaker than the Imperial Guardians, so there was no doubt that the generals who became the corps commanders would all be the most capable elites in their respective corps. This was how the commanders of the corps were decided. These four individuals were the highly esteemed people representing the Empire to the public.

The marshal and the three generals would receive gear appropriate for their position. Since the members of the Imperial Guardians received legendary-grade gear, the gifts to these four individuals must therefore be superior, secret treasures of the Empire. These were the strongest treasured items, those whose power was wielded during the many conquests in the ancient times—mythical-grade gear.

The fact that the Empire possessed multiple mythical-grade items, the existence of which itself was often questioned, underpinned their prestige. The ultimate gear that no mortal human could ever dream of touching. Only those worthy could wield it. Once the gear itself approved of them could they unleash their true power. Only the strongest deserved this ultimate power. These individuals seemed almost invincible, and so the Empire managed to stand, unshaken.

Yet as time passed...

An anomaly appeared in the Empire. For the first time in several decades, a new face took the place of an old corps commander. With a feat that had seemed unfeasible, one man brought the disjointed Mixed Corps together under a single, strong will. He had been a part of the corps for less than a year, but the rate of his progress was unprecedented, beyond all reason. Following triumph after triumph, defeating countless experienced warriors, this young man had managed to climb to one of the Empire's top positions.

His name was Yuuki Kagurazaka.

With the rise of Yuuki, things were about to escalate rapidly.

ROUGH SKETCH



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

**Chapter
3**

**Visitors from
the Empire**

Chapter 3

Visitors from the Empire

In a luxurious room, three men stood close to one another, faces plastered with nervous expressions. They straightened their backs, waiting for the master of this room to return. That was the man who had become one of the corps commanders of the Empire in the blink of an eye—Yuuki.

But in the eyes of these three, that was nothing surprising. After all, Yuuki was their overlord, as well as the grandmaster of the secret organization they were all a part of—Cerberus.

"Hey, sorry for the holdup, you guys! You could have sat down while you waited," Yuuki greeted, entering the room.

Kagali followed closely behind him like a true secretary.



"No no, Yuuki-sama, we are your loyal subordinates, there is no need for you to be concerned about us," one of the three replied for everyone. He was one of the leaders of Cerberus, Damrada the Gold—a suspicious and seemingly unpredictable man.

As for the other two, one of them was Misha the Lover. A beauty who simultaneously possessed both the appearance of a young girl and a mature woman, although with an unusual allure which one might even call eerie.

The last person symbolized raw strength, Vega the Power. His body was muscular and tenacious, like that of a ferocious beast, while the aura he exuded was oppressive enough to kill a person with just a glance.

These three were the leaders of Cerberus.

They bowed to Yuuki before taking their seats.

"Congratulations for taking the office of corps commander, sir."

"Since Yuuki-sama has even managed to escape from the hands of Demon Lord Guy, this was only to be expected."

"Hmph, if you had handed over the matter to me, running the corps would have been a piece of cake."

While Damrada and Misha both congratulated Yuuki, Vega seemed extremely displeased. But Yuuki didn't mind.

*Indeed. A meathead like you would have no trouble fighting his way to the top, but they'd never elect a corps commander that hopelessly inept at leading—*Yuuki smirked to himself.

"Either way, this was all thanks to Damrada's recommendation to seek Master Gadra," Yuuki said, trying to change the topic.

"You are too kind," Damrada replied with a smile. "Our progress to this day has all been thanks to the prior arrangements made after we predicted how things would develop. I merely introduced the otherworlders prepared by Yuuki-sama to Gadra-dono. It's nothing worthy of praise."

"Hahaha, you're as stubborn as a mule. You could've just acted happy at my compliments."

"I deliberately chose not to. It would be a burden if someone were to set their expectations of me too high."

"Haha, you sure are a funny man."

Yuuki and Damrada exchanged looks as they both smiled. This alone was able to communicate each other's thoughts, since both of them had confidence in each other's abilities.

After they continued chatting for a bit, Yuuki cut to the main issue. "Now then, Kagali, please give the report on the movement of Demon Lord Rimuru."

"Understood, Yuuki-sama. Currently, Demon Lord Rimuru is—"

Hearing Yuuki's order, Kagali began to speak. Her source of information came from the members of the Freedom Association in the West. Most of Yuuki's subordinates had already fled, so by using this distraction, they had managed to leave behind a few spies.

Kagali spoke in a very clear voice and gave a concise explanation. She revealed that the Western Nations were now completely under Rimuru's control. Furthermore, they had organized a massive, fearsome army as a countermeasure against any invasion initiated by the Empire. In addition, at the capital Rimuru, there were often sightings of incredible phenomena, and so on.

"I see. There is a small town near the bank of the Great Ameld River, meant exclusively for hosting taverns; did he turn that into a military outpost?" Yuuki murmured to himself. "Now that I think about it, if he intends to expand his defensive perimeter to our nation, he would have to do that."

"Indeed, nearly 20,000 soldiers have already been deployed there. It looks like they utilized something called a 'magitrain' to transport the supplies. I heard that there were enough rations for a protracted war," Kagali explained.

"Impressive. If that is the case, it will be difficult for the Empire to win."

"That's true. That nation has imported rations, enough to feed over a million people, directly from the Kingdom of Farmenas. While Farmenas could hardly compare to its strength a year ago, the nation right now could probably fight a war with the Empire all by itself. Moreover, if the Western States Council, controlled by Demon Lord Rimuru, were to gather all their might, they would certainly become a force to be reckoned with."

"That would be hard to say. Rimuru-san has already decided to embrace cruelty and ruthlessness; however, considering his personality, he's still as soft as ever. If we were to fight seriously with our numbers, the casualties would only increase. That's why he would probably want to push back the Empire with only the elite forces of his own nation."

"How would that be possible..."

"He managed to become a demon lord, after all. Surely he wouldn't do something that foolish..."

While both Kagali and Damrada rejected the idea, Yuuki remained steadfast in his view.

That person is incredibly naive and abnormally powerful at the same time, there's no telling what he can and cannot do...

That's what Yuuki believed deep down, but he decided not to voice that opinion and asked Kagali to continue.

"Excuse me," Kagali apologized, "I shall resume with the report. There are over fifty thousand soldiers waiting for orders at the capital city Rimuru. Reinforcements sent by the former Beast Kingdom Eurazania are gradually arriving as well. The estimated number of soldiers would amount to over a hundred thousand."

"That does sound very surprising, but the Empire still has the numerical advantage."

Kagali voiced her genuine thoughts. "Indeed, the difference in numbers is huge. The Imperial Army has more than a million troops. Even the least competent soldiers have undergone those suspicious physical modifications and their average strength is at least rank C or above. Plus, they are armed with many strange pieces of equipment. Honestly, Demon Lord Rimuru will not stand a chance against the Empire."

It was astonishing to have an army of 100,000 men. Every single one of those soldiers were highly trained and had high morale to boot. Normally speaking, this was a size to be praised. However, it would quickly seem trivial when compared to the scale of the Empire's army.

Centuries ago, when Kagali was still Demon Lord Kazalim, even her castle's defense mechanism—which she was quite proud of—faced defeat against the Empire's military might. This great difference in numbers couldn't help but make her think that an army of merely 100,000 soldiers was pointless.

However, Yuuki had a dissenting view.

"I'll keep your opinion in mind, please proceed with the report."

"Then," Kagali calmly continued, "next I shall report regarding his nation's technological strength—"

She mentioned that Tempest had suddenly begun to sell some extremely rare, new products. There were items that could make life more convenient, as well as high-quality equipment. It was a strange assortment of items, yet all of them were very useful.

Naturally, many people wanted to get an exclusive contract with the producer of these items; yet, no matter how hard these traders tried to locate the source of these products, they could never find it. The whole ordeal remained a mystery.

"...The aforementioned 'magitrain' is also one of these items. That nation seems to be experiencing a wave of technological innovation, just like the Empire. Unfortunately, they seem to have completely prevented any leaks of their confidential information. Despite the best efforts of the Freedom Association, we were not able to find the source of these items."

It was certain that the development was being carried out somewhere in that nation, but they had no clue as to where that exactly was. This seemed to have frustrated Kagali as well. They couldn't even send their subordinates to try and find the source; if they were to draw any suspicion, it would all be over. Besides, their opponent was Demon Lord Rimuru and even she could not face off against him.

It was then that Kagali suddenly recalled something. "Now that I think about it, they are also developing some new forms of weaponry. Considering this, we should be more cautious. We must not be blinded by the number of soldiers alone."

Hearing this, Yuuki suddenly laughed. "Clever as always, you noticed. That's it. While the tanks developed by the Empire were shocking enough, Rimuru-san has also managed to develop the magitrain. Now, scientific weapons are not exclusive to the Empire, so we cannot treat them as our ace in the hole."

The Empire was not the only one who possessed technology from another world. Rimuru also possessed the memory of an otherworlder—there was no telling what type of weapons he was developing.

Any other nation would surely descend into panic when faced with the unknown strength of the Empire. Even if they had otherworlders who understood its weaponry on their side, knowing what they were up against would only make them fall further into despair... The difference in strength between the two would be very clear to them, and they would realize they have no chance of winning.

But what if the Empire's enemy possessed sophisticated technology and the ability to develop the same type of things as the Empire? They could quickly come up with a solution and crush this supposed superiority the Empire enjoyed. On the other hand, if they let their current advantage get to their head, the dynamic nature of the situation might prevent them from responding quickly and leave them behind.

Yuuki had the foresight to notice this, and that was why he thought that the chances of Rimuru emerging victorious were, in fact, quite high.

"How boring!" Vega snapped. "We'll just beat the shit out of them, or better, kill every last one of them! That way, we'd be able to solve all our problems!"

Whether it was weapons or armies, they should just eliminate any hindrance in their way—Vega declared so confidently. Yuuki was quite frustrated having realized that nothing they said till now had gotten through to him.

This guy sure has strength, but not the brains to match—or rather, he doesn't have a brain to begin with... If only he were smarter, I could have given him some more useful roles to play—Yuuki sighed internally.

"When that time comes, I'll leave the matter to you, but don't underestimate the enemy."

With this vague statement, Yuuki otherwise told Vega to shut up. However, what Vega said was not entirely unreasonable. Yuuki began to ponder, thinking: "After all—" In this world, quality was more important than quantity. No matter how large an army you managed to organize, it would not stand a chance against Demon Lord Guy. It was easy to tell from this example that the individual strength of a combatant was something that could not be ignored.

In order to achieve strategic goals, judging your enemy's strength was crucial—essentially, information warfare was vital. And in order to achieve this, it was imperative to send someone who was actually capable, as it was remarkably common to surrender when faced with an insurmountable foe.

Regardless of how strong the opponent was, the more people joined in on the attack, the greater the chances of achieving their strategic goals. Merely looking at only the combined strength of the troops was meaningless; to consider what type of troops you had and how to use them effectively was more important.

From this perspective, the Tempest Federation was one tough enemy. The demon lord, Rimuru, was not the sole threat from this nation. Within Tempest, there were several powerful majins. For instance, the famed Four Heavenly Kings—Benimaru, Diablo, Shion, and Gobta. Simply having these four deployed would be equivalent to four tactical units, and defeating them alone would be a highly challenging task.

It's not just their technological prowess, there are plenty of tough warriors too. It doesn't matter how many people we gather; they won't stand a chance against these guys. In hindsight, it makes me feel like surrendering to Demon Lord Guy really was the right thing to do.

As far as Yuuki knew, he could name several people in that nation who were even stronger than Gobta. In other words, there were definitely monsters who could rival the strength of the Four Heavenly Kings.

"The problem is those majins, who seem to rival saints and demon lords in strength," Damrada muttered, agreeing with Yuuki.

"Exactly. His country not only has the Four Heavenly Kings, but also majins like Geld and Gabil. It is a bit hard to understand how he was able to gather a number of demon lord-class individuals like them."

The more Yuuki thought about it, the more dubious it became. A number of people with strength that could rival Clayman's were under one demon lord—Rimuru. And to those who knew this, it wasn't a joke but a real headache.

"I guess it's fortunate that we aren't antagonizing Demon Lord Rimuru right now."

Everyone but Vega nodded silently at Yuuki's comment.

Because of their agreement, it could be said that Yuuki and his comrades had come under the umbrella of Demon Lord Guy. In other words, making a move on Tempest was an affront to Guy himself. As long as they did not intend to meddle in Rimuru's affairs, one could say that they were in a temporary ceasefire with Rimuru, which was rather convenient for Yuuki, who intended to make the most of this situation.

And if they ever did become hostile, it would only be after they had regained all that they lost in the West.

Yuuki returned to the main subject.

"So, was that everything you had to report?" he questioned Kagali.

"It seems that detailed military information could not be investigated," Kagali added, "and thus concludes all the highly accurate information I obtained. But there's one topic that is quite interesting."

"And that is?"

"In the capital city Rimuru, they have a kind of event called 'emergency drills,' and now they have supplemented an 'evacuation drill' to this event."

Up until now, their disaster prevention drills had been very specific, such as taking shelter in a sturdy building or training to put out a fire. However, the purpose of this latest disaster drill was unclear, which involved getting into the town as quickly as possible through any of the gates.

"Just getting into the town?"

"Yes. The spies were puzzled by it too, so they decided to split up and act in two groups."

"From the inside and outside, I reckon?"

"That's right. As a result, they reported seeing a strange sight, like something straight out of a dream."

"A strange sight?" Misha suddenly inquired.

"Yes, Misha," Kagali answered. "Unbelievable as it may seem, the whole town suddenly disappeared ten minutes after the announcement was over. And they claimed that the only thing left remaining was one big gate."

According to the reports of the investigators who were outside, other than the gate, there were several guards left to guide the people who failed to enter the town in time.

After confirming that nobody was there, the investigators decided to enter the gate. What welcomed them was a stone-built labyrinth. The investigators were able to flee outside as they panicked, which suggested that it was possible to go in and out freely.

"Hmm... That might be the Dungeon..."

"Is there something you'd like to share with us, Yuuki-sama?"

"Yeah, I think Kagali knows about this as well; that town has a tourist attraction called the Dungeon, right?"

"Ah yeah, the place that's crawling with monsters just waiting to be slaughtered by adventurers, was it?"

"That might be it. After all, there was a rumor that there is a city in that Dungeon..."

"A city inside the Dungeon?" Damrada repeated, unable to believe what he had just heard.

It was hard to explain all this to someone wholly unfamiliar with it. All they could do was attempt to convince him of the truth. "Yeah, you have every right to think it's absurd, but considering this is Rimuru-san we're talking about, it may very well be possible. I mean, that labyrinth is a hundred floors deep, with Veldora guarding the very bottom."

"...Is that true?"

"Of course. I heard it from Veldora himself."

Damrada was rendered speechless by Yuuki's words.

"Well, it makes sense if you think about it," Kagali conceded with pity in her eyes. "There might be an important facility in that city, such as a site for developing new technology."

"Ah, I see. It's possible—no, it's reasonable to think so."

Yuuki was getting more and more excited, beyond stunned, at the idea of doing something so outrageous. His vapid speculation didn't seem far off anymore. He was convinced that it was possible for Rimuru.

"But if that's the case, what will happen with the war?"

"I don't know either. Although I've always thought that he wasn't the kind of opponent to launch a frontal attack, protecting the city with that method is just unbelievable. I'm sure the Imperial Army will also be shocked."

Yuuki was convinced that Rimuru would never bring a ruinous battle to his doorstep, because there was no way he would allow the residents of his town to get in harm's way.

But what if the town is fully protected... We have to reassess all the tactics we had anticipated.

"We'll just wait and see what happens in the inn town, and besides, the real battle will take place in the capital, right? I surmise that if the Imperial Army ignores the gate, they will be attacked from the rear by Rimuru-san's forces."

"In that case, it would be possible to launch a pincer attack together with the allied western forces."

"Their vanguard will explore and analyze the war potential of the Imperial Army. And while the allied western forces and the Imperial Army are engaged in a war of attrition, the remaining Tempest forces can deal with the enemy slowly but surely."

"What a scary plan to think of. As expected of a demon lord."

Understanding Yuuki's words, Kagali, Damrada, and Misha looked astonished. He knew that Demon Lord Rimuru wasn't someone that could be dealt with using conventional forces alone, but he hadn't thought that it would go this far.

The difficulty of even envisioning future hostilities towards him seemed to bother Yuuki. Hence, he and the others were even more excited to see how the battle between the Imperial Army and Demon Lord Rimuru would turn out.



"So, Yuuki-sama. How should we proceed going forward?" asked Misha, looking for the right moment. She and the others followed Yuuki even after knowing he had lost to Demon Lord Guy. But even now they were not able to read what he was thinking.

It was in their favor if the Empire was made to suffer by Demon Lord Rimuru and his subordinates. But if that failed to occur, they didn't want to be the ones to make it happen. With his agreement with Guy, they didn't think that Yuuki would seriously back the Empire. However, they feared that now that he had become a corps commander, he would fall into his own trap.

To Cerberus, the fact that a top-ranking officer of the military was on their side was very appealing, but on the contrary, it implied the risk of being taken in by the military. To eat or to be eaten—it would take only a single wrong turn to meet their doom.

It was this worry which prompted Misha's question, and Yuuki was well aware of it.

"There's no need to worry," Yuuki reassured. "If Rimuru-san does hold out against the Empire, that's good for us, too. The Empire will be in the way of achieving our goals. So, it's not just because Demon Lord Guy told me to do so; I will have to eat away at their strength, one way or the other. Now that I've become a corps commander, I can control *when* it happens. Think of the situation this way."

Now that Yuuki had become one of the three generals of the Empire, it was safe to say that he had the inner workings of the Imperial Army in his hands. If he knew the military strategy of the Empire, he could even predict its faults, too. This meant he'd be able to accurately predict when the Empire would take military action, what the size of their army would be, and even when the Imperial mainland would be at its most vulnerable.

If resistance in the West was strong, the Empire would have to exert more military force. And if that were to happen, Yuuki thought that no matter how tight

of a defense the Empire had, an opportunity would surely show itself, sooner or later.

"We will seize that opportunity!" Yuuki declared, slamming his fist on the table.

Kagali smiled while standing up straight, and Damrada and the other two, still sitting, got excited at the meaning of those words.

"Do you mean a coup d'état..."

"Aah, I can't wait for that to happen. Just what you'd expect from Yuuki-sama."

"Hehe, ain't that interesting. Whether it be the Empire or a demon lord, I'll destroy them all!"

Yuuki ignored Vega, who was evidently excited, and got back on track.

"Well, that's our ultimate goal. At the end of the day, my promise with Guy was to throw the Empire into chaos. I need to keep my promise. Incidentally, we will also stir up the West, so I don't think that's something we have the right to complain about," Yuuki said with a grin.

Guy hadn't forbidden him from interfering with the West, so Yuuki was free to do whatever he wanted.

"So, you want the Empire and the West to fight each other, and then crush the Empire's head in the meantime..." Damrada trailed off.

Misha revealed a brilliant smile. "You always come up with the most devious of plans."

"Not really. I think anyone could have come up with such a thing."

Some may have been able to come up with such a plan, but fewer were willing to carry it out. No, there might've been people who wanted to do it, but lacked the strength required to see it through. Yuuki was different—he could both come up with such a plan *and* bring it to fruition.

"I've also leaked some information to Master Gadra. That old man is a trailblazing, flexible thinker, and for some reason, he holds a sharp grudge against the Western Nations. Developing various weapons—one of his contributions to the Empire—is a product of this animus."

"Indeed, his reputation has spread far and wide."

"I know, right? Once he investigates those tidbits, he will surely recognize Demon Lord Rimuru as a threat to the Empire's ambitions and see how dangerous he really is."

"...And what do you think will happen then?"

"Master Gadra has a lot of influence over the Imperial Army. However, he doesn't actually have any authority. That's because that old man's interests revolve around getting revenge. So, in my opinion, if I steer him properly, I can pit him against Demon Lord Rimuru."

At the same time, Yuuki wanted Gadra to look for more information about the Dungeon.

"If that happens," Damrada speculated, "then it will be possible to weaken both Demon Lord Rimuru and the Imperial Army, wouldn't it?"

"Exactly!" Yuuki nodded with satisfaction.

Yuuki didn't intend to make a move on Rimuru himself, but he was more than welcome to have someone else challenge him of their own accord. That was why he had devised many cowardly measures.

"In my opinion," he continued, going further into detail, "there are three people that we need to be wary of in the Empire, and one of them is Master Gadra."

Gadra was an archmage who had lived for a long time. He was a majin who knew all about the inner workings of the capital and was also a champion who had survived the last "battle to subjugate" the Storm Dragon Veldora. Those who knew all this feared him.

"So, who are the other two?" Kagali wondered, showing genuine interest, much to Yuuki's chagrin.

"Actually, I haven't been able to figure out their identities. That's why I can say that they are definitely a troublesome bunch."

Yuuki wasn't able to nail down their real identities even after making full use of his information network. So, from this fact alone, it was obvious how vexatious these people were.

"Could it be that they are top-ranking members of the Imperial Guardians?" suggested Misha, as if she suddenly remembered something.

Yuuki vaguely affirmed the question. It was rumored within the army that the Single Digit Imperial Knights were stronger than the corps commanders. Yuuki personally felt that it wasn't a mere rumor. Although he rose to the position of corps commander, his rank was only at Double Digit.

There was no point in trying to contest a 'rank battle' unless you knew who your opponent was. And, in order to become a Single Digit, one was required to appeal directly to the Emperor and win the battle in his presence. This fact was only known to those who were privileged enough to consider the position.

"I think I might be able to beat a Single Digit. However, I didn't want to show my trump card in front of our enemies, so I didn't apply for a rank battle before the Emperor."

Nevertheless, Yuuki was chosen as a corps commander, but that was because of the connections he had with Gadra.

"But if that's the case, then you must fight them first, so that we can know for sure if you're stronger than them or not. Anyway, who are these troublesome folks you're talking about? D'ya mean there are more than nine people behind the Single Digits?"

Vega raised an excellent point. Yuuki nodded, a bit shocked at that.

"Well, you're right. There is a possibility that a nasty guy is hiding among those nine people. But hey, you can't be wary of someone you've never seen before, can you? Guys, I'm talking about the people who have already shown themselves in broad daylight."

"And who's that?" Damrada inquired.

"The Head of the Imperial Intelligence Agency, Tatsuya Kondou."

"You're right, I can't get a handle on the man's identity."

"It's creepy that we know his name and appearance, but we don't know what he's really like."

Tatsuya Kondou, as his name suggested, was an otherworlder. But as far as personal details went, that was all anyone knew about him. There was even a rumor that he was "the specter that fed on information." He was just a first lieutenant in rank, but none of the corps commanders had the authority to command him. It meant that the Imperial Intelligence Bureau stood above the military complex in the power hierarchy.

"Weird, right? It's only an assumption, but I think he's also a Single Digit."

"...I see."

"Now that you mention it, that does add up." Damrada and Kagali nodded firmly. Misha was also contemplating the possibility but appeared to have no objections.

"Then, who is the last person?" Vega, apparently the only one disinterested in the matter, asked Yuuki, urging him to cut to the chase.

"Hahaha, how impatient. About Tatsuya Kondou, it's best to meet him first. I'll find an opportunity to arrange just that with him. As for the last person, I'm not sure about this either."

"What? What does that mean?" Vega demanded in a slightly rougher tone. The excitement must've gotten to his head.

"Calm down, Vega," Yuuki lightly warned him.

"Y-yeah. Sorry."

Vega, who was reprimanded, broke out in a cold sweat. The difference in class between him and Yuuki was apparent.

"The last person is the one who sits next to the Emperor. She had such a tremendous presence that you could feel it from the other side of the blinds."

" " "..." "

No one but Yuuki was aware of her true identity—or even the fact that she existed. From this alone, one could tell how dangerous that person was.

"...That kind of big shot, huh? I never heard anything of the sort..." Damrada replied on everyone's behalf.

"As I thought," Yuuki muttered. "Despite such a presence, no one seems to have noticed her existence. I can only imagine how dangerous she is."

The room fell silent.

"Does that person really exist? I haven't heard any rumors suggesting that sort of thing."

"On the other hand, none of us would have believed it if we hadn't heard it from you."

"..."

Yuuki smiled at his subordinates who still eyed him skeptically.

"Don't worry about it. Just remember that these three will be the major obstacles when we stage a coup in the Empire. I'm going to get rid of Master Gadra first; so, Damrada, start digging about Kondou Tatsuya."

"Very well."

"Misha, just continue your mission."

"Understood. I'll continue to focus on wrapping the commander of the Armored Corps around my little finger."

"What about me?" Vega pointed out.

"You're going to infiltrate the Magic Beast Corps. With your strength, you'll become an Imperial Guardian in no time. However, you're not allowed to kill the corps commander, got it?"

"Got it. I'll do my best," Vega laughed ferociously, happy with the fact that he had finally received his order.

Is it going to be all right? Yuuki was a little bit worried but decided to trust Vega, nevertheless. If, by any chance, he *did* kill a corps commander, the military actions of the Empire would be delayed. Yuuki was anxious about that, but he decided to dismiss it and planned to cross that bridge when he got to it.

The three heads of Cerberus left, making Yuuki and Kagali the only people in the room.

"Say, Yuuki-sama, will they be able to perform their missions successfully?"

"Beats me. Even in all my efforts to be careful, I stepped on a tiger's tail named Guy. So, I don't mean to be hypocritical, but I want them to carry out their missions as best as they can."

Damrada would investigate Tatsuya Kondou. Misha would ensnare the commander of the Armored Corps. Vega was ordered to rise up in the Magic Beast Corps. Each of them embarked on a perilous mission under Yuuki's command. As their leader, he could only wish for the success of his subordinates.

"But we've finally come this far. The war is going to start soon."

"Yeah, that's right. Now then, it will be interesting seeing which side wins."

"Please don't get ahead of yourself. Even if the coup succeeds, what happens after that is way more crucial."

"Yeah. That's why we have Laplace and the crew working on it. Our plan is flawless." The two smiled at each other.

Their goal wasn't to let the Empire win. The more the war became bogged down, the more the national power of the Empire declined. That was what they were aiming for, and then, they would carry out a coup d'état. The success or failure of that was the linchpin to Yuuki and Kagali's plans.

"We will turn the emperor into a puppet and establish a new empire. And then..."

"We will reconcile peacefully with the Western Nations."

"And when that happens..."

"We will assassinate the emperor!"

If defeating Demon Lord Rimuru proved difficult, then they didn't need to push their luck. After losing to Guy, Yuuki had given up and settled on medium-to-short-term world domination. He realized that until he gained absolute power, going ahead with violence was the height of folly. Instead, focusing on increasing his own trump cards for now, was far wiser. If the devastation from the war spiraled into rivers of blood...

"I will awaken as a True Demon Lord."

"Looking forward to that, Kagali. By then, I will have mastered my new power as well."

Yuuki had awakened an Ultimate Skill. And with it, he had felt that his life span was extended several times over. Not only that, but he had also learned the fact that there was a superior existence in this world, the absolute being—Demon Lord Guy. Disregard such an existence, and world domination would be nothing more than a pipe dream.

He had slipped under Guy's radar and was now accumulating strength. They would incite the Empire and prolong the war to exhaust both East and West. If the emperor's assassination happened at a time when the masses grew weary and turned their backs on the war, the world would face a more chaotic and horrific period. By taking advantage of this confusion, they would aim for further awakening—that was the gist of the plan Yuuki and Kagali had drawn up.

"In any case, we should be exceedingly careful."

"Indeed. Really careful, I suppose."

Then they looked at each other again and smirked.

...Despite their massive intellect, these two big brains didn't attribute much importance to the Dungeon. They only saw its value in hiding important facilities—and even a whole city—and to pique the interest of Master Gadra, just to make him a nuisance for Rimuru.

They might also go into the labyrinth someday, so they had a fleeting thought about the necessity to, at the very least, have it investigated in order to find clues on how to conquer it. As a result, the dungeon attack team would return with unexpected findings, which Yuuki hadn't foreseen.



Master Gadra was grim-faced, deep in thought, upon receiving information from Yuuki.

Hmmm. Why now, when the Empire finally has the opportunity to destroy the god Luminas...

With the revival of Storm Dragon Veldora, drastic revisions were made to the plan. That couldn't be helped. Since, in the last expedition, the Storm Dragon had completely ruined the project.

And now...opinions in the Empire were greatly divided. The first faction proposed waiting for the Storm Dragon to disappear to ensure the success of their plan. The second faction sought to subjugate the Storm Dragon with the power of their newly developed weapons. Lastly, the third faction urged to avoid the Great Jura Forest in its entirety so as not to stir trouble with the Storm Dragon.

The schism between these three factions threw a wrench in the Empire's ability to move forward. As a consequence, they had allowed the revival of the Storm Dragon. The faction seeking the Storm Dragon's subjugation was infuriated at this turn of events, but the other two factions held the majority, and thus, their opinion was ignored. After all, if the new weapons *didn't* work, they would've been setting themselves up for another abysmal failure.

As for Gadra, he didn't care about the Storm Dragon. His goal in life was to destroy Luminism in the West and take revenge on the Seven Luminary Clerics who had killed his close friend.

A newspaper he got from the West described the Seven Luminary Clerics' evil deeds under the headline "The Downfall of Champions." At the same time, he had heard news that the Seven Luminaries had perished. In spite of this, Gadra didn't want to believe this to be true. He was firmly convinced that at least Gran would have survived and was lying low in the shadows.

In the past few months, a lot of disinformation had come from the West and it made it incredibly difficult to corroborate information. Because of this, he did not know whether or not it was true, but there was a rumor that the Rosso family had fallen, too.

Well, it's still unconfirmed. The Sun Priest, Gran, is probably that wreck of a Hero. Even though he is old, he's not someone you should ever underestimate.

Besides, the rule of the Western States Council seemed to be rock-solid on the surface, but behind the scenes, various developments had been confirmed. There was no indication among these rumors that the Western Holy Church had been weakened, which seemed to prove to Gadra that the Sun Priest Gran had managed to survive.

We should just ignore that Storm Dragon and attack the West...

But he knew exactly how hard that was.

The Storm Dragon and a demon lord are joining forces, huh. It is the height of folly to send an army against such a monstrous creature that lives beyond the laws of magic. I helped to develop the new weapons, so I'm sure they can be used to halt it in its tracks. But to destroy it is another matter. Let alone control it...

Gadra had survived the previous great expedition, so he had experienced first-hand how big of a threat Veldora was. Due to this experience, he also thought that the belligerents were reckless.

Those fools don't know how hard it is to perform 'Mental Control' on spiritual life forms in the first place!

Achieving 'Mental Control' over spiritual life forms wasn't entirely impossible. The varying degrees of success from the experiments conducted on demons had proven this. Gadra knew this very well given that he was the one who had come up with this theory. Based on the results from these various investigations, he had arrived at the conclusion that the Storm Dragon Veldora should not be messed with.

He had submitted this report to the emperor, but, unfortunately, it was rejected—"There are people who want to do this, so I won't stop them." Gadra's advice fell on deaf ears. There was nothing more he could do.

This time, a new problem had appeared—Demon Lord Rimuru. He was the demon lord who had unified the Great Jura Forest, established it as a country, and ruled over it. And he had done all this at a terrifying pace... If that demon lord had partnered up with the Storm Dragon, attacking the Great Jura Forest would be a fool's gambit.

It would be a different story if the Empire mobilized its whole army. Still, it would be necessary to lure the enemy out into favorable terrain in order to deploy the entire army effectively. And normally, that was impossible. Then, how about fighting in the opponent's own ring?

"Dungeon, eh?" Gadra mumbled to himself. "They may also be developing weapons from the otherworld. I have no choice but to look into it. It would be advantageous if we could defeat Veldora and Rimuru without sustaining more than thirty percent in casualties. Otherwise, our following chances for a decisive victory over the Western Nations would look bleak." He was giving himself his very own pep talk.

Gadra failed to notice that he'd made a grave error. He believed that Luminism, the religion that dominated the Western Nations, was the one they should be more cautious of, not Tempest. Whether Gadra would realize this mistake or not was the key that would decide his fate.



At the behest of Yuuki, three people were selected. They were chosen because they were members of the Mixed Corps and, perhaps most importantly, acquainted with Master Gadra. In preparation for the upcoming introduction, Yuuki had invited Master Gadra to his room so he could meet the men that were to become his entourage. They were:

Shinji Tanimura: A university student from Japan who had spent most of his days in the lab doing research. Even in this world, he loved wearing a white coat, which had now become his trademark look.

Mark Lauren: He was a brown-haired, muscular man in his mid-twenties, making him the oldest of the three. As a guy in peak physical condition, he was the type to wear a tank top and jeans all year round, even in the winter.

Xin Liuxing: This was a young man of few words. While you could never quite tell what he was thinking, he would carry out his orders to a T. He wore a loose Chinese-style outfit with his braided, black hair running down his back. It seemed like he always had various weapons tucked away underneath his loose clothes.



Both Mark and Xin followed Shinji's words obediently. And before he knew it, Shinji had established himself as their leader.

The three of them lined up straight in front of Yuuki and Gadra.

"Long time no see, Teacher!" The black-haired young man, Shinji, greeted Gadra on behalf of the group.

"Indeed Shinji, long time no see. And you too, Mark and Xin, have you been well?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm glad that you seem to be doing well, too."

"...Master, I'm not well."

Gadra grinned widely upon hearing Mark and Xin's replies.

"You haven't changed one bit. I am relieved to see that the corps is thriving."

These three were otherworlders protected by Yuuki. He gathered otherworlders from all over the world under his protection and sent them to the Empire, whether they had any affinity for combat or not. They were received by the secret society Cerberus and brought to Master Gadra, the archmage of the Empire. Although his goal was to elicit otherworld knowledge from them, Gadra trained those who had the will, as well as talent, for combat. And those he instructed belonged to an exceptional group, a place for individuals with unique and special talents—the Mixed Corps.

The Empire wasn't quite so naive as to bestow high military ranks upon people simply because they were otherworlders. It was due to the fact that these people were able to masterfully wield their power, making them excellent warriors in their own right. That power was the Unique Skill that manifested in each of them. The three, having achieved full command of their Unique Skills, had earned themselves unshakeable positions in the army.

"Yeah, Shinji and the gang are top-notch even among my Mixed Corps. I believe that they are the perfect candidates for this investigative mission."

"If Yuuki-dono says so, then I have no qualms about it. You guys can take a seat, too."

The trio sat down in their chairs as suggested by the stern wizard, feeling a slight sense of dread. Gadra chuckled as he watched them. Even though they had become competent soldiers, he still got a kick out of seeing them so nervous around him.

"So, Yuuki-dono, you will lend these three to me for the investigation?" Gadra broke the ice, not dwelling on the little fun he had.

"Yeah. I wanted to do the investigation myself, but, unfortunately, I really can't go to that country. Sending only these three does worry me, so as their supervisor, I wonder if I could ask for your help too, Master."

"Hmm. The report I read was quite intriguing. If what's written in it is true, then it's imperative that we investigate it before the great expedition."

Gadra looked at Yuuki inquisitively, waiting for his response. Yuuki nodded as if he'd seen it coming.

"They are all true. I will explain it to you three as well—this mission is a little bit special: I want you to investigate a certain labyrinth."

"Whoa whoa, please wait a second! We've been summoned here to do some kind of obstacle course? Are we that unreliable to you? Even if it's a request from Master Gadra, that kind of thing should have to wait until after the great military invasion!" Mark, the hot-head among the three, flared up at Yuuki. This was business as usual with Mark. Yuuki would let him blurt out as many questions as he wanted if he wasn't convinced.

"Calm down, Mark," Shinji chided him. "This is a serious matter, okay?"

"But!"

"Just be patient, Mark. Yuuki-san has something in mind, right? First let's listen to what he has to say." Having placated Mark, Shinji turned to Yuuki. "Well then, please explain."

"Of course. If you hear me out, I'm most certain you won't have any complaints."

And so, Yuuki began his thorough explanation of their mission.

.....

.....

...

Gadra had heard it all beforehand, so he just sat there listening to Yuuki, checking if there were any inconsistencies in his statements. The trio, meanwhile, was astonished.

Yuuki's protégés—warriors possessing Unique Skills—had infiltrated every corps as sleeper agents. Once awoken, they were to simultaneously create an uprising and seize control over their corps.

The trio wasn't given any specific details, but they had reason to believe that day was near. These three were part of it, too. They believed it was only a matter of time before they got their orders, now that Yuuki had taken control of the Mixed Corps.

World domination.

When they heard Yuuki's dream, it seemed so childish that none of them thought for a second that they could pull it off. But as time went on, they began honing their abilities and started becoming aware of the state of the world at large—cracks started forming in their doubts, and soon enough, a belief that this was possible started to take root in their minds.

Shinji and the others had come to admire Yuuki and eagerly awaited that moment. But when they were called out of the blue, they instead received an order to conquer the Dungeon. The three of them were understandably puzzled. Still, as they listened to the explanation, they began to come around to the idea.

According to Yuuki, of all the preparations and investigations done for the war, only the labyrinth remained a mystery. And they thought it was highly likely to house a number of secrets within its walls. After hearing that a whole city was hidden inside it, they knew they had something significant on their hands.

.....

.....

...

"I understand... The Imperial Army can't ignore the Dungeon before making its move."

"A whole city? I won't believe it until I see it with my own eyes."

"...So that's why we are going, right?" The three of them muttered as it finally clicked.

"That's all I have to say. You guys get it now, right? If the Empire invades the Great Jura Forest in this expedition, then we will stage the coup d'état once the front lines become entrenched. To have the advantage when that time comes, we will need as much of the Imperial Army as possible lured away. Demon Lord Rimuru's forces and the Storm Dragon Veldora alone are not a reason enough to set the whole force of the Imperial Army into motion. We need a stronger, more compelling reason to make them move."

Yuuki indicated that such a reason may or may not be found in the labyrinth—and if there really wasn't one, then they should just make one up. And while that "reason" kept the Imperial Army occupied, Yuuki would seize control of the Empire's capital.

Shinji and his crew were shocked when they heard this. They had expected the coup, but this was the first time they had heard the details of it. Moreover, Gadra was right there with them. They never expected the conversation would wind up on that topic when they walked in, given that one careless word was all it took to leak their conspiracy.

"Wai—Yuuki-san?!"

Shinji hurried to cut him off, but Yuuki answered him with a smirk.

"Aah, don't worry. Master Gadra is aware of my plan."

"What!"

"Kukukuku, what else did you expect? While I do feel indebted to His Imperial Majesty, I don't really care what becomes of the Empire. My objective is to destroy Luminism. I was blind to the fact that the god Luminas is, in reality, Demon Lord Luminas. What becomes of her believers is of no concern to me. However, I must bury those who killed my friend with my own hands, or else, I won't ever find peace. First, I want to dispose of this Rimuru, who is rumored to be on good terms with Demon Lord Luminas. I also plan to join you in the conquest of this labyrinth."

I don't care what happens after that, Gadra said internally, a mad smile on his face.

Of course, Gadra had heard rumors about Demon Lord Rimuru. A year ago, the Kingdom of Farmus had incurred the wrath of the Storm Dragon Veldora and brought upon themselves their own destruction. And once that violent act exhausted the Storm Dragon's strength, it allowed Demon Lord Rimuru to subjugate it. It was unclear whether he really subjugated it or if they were simply allies. Nevertheless, since then, the Storm Dragon had not shown any signs of an outburst, or even released a colossal amount of youki. This led Gadra to believe that there was some truth to these rumors after all...

In addition, there was some disturbance among the demon lords. It was said that several demon lords had withdrawn from the Ten Great Demon Lords,

consequently turning it into the Octagram. The human society was notified of this change, and Demon Lord Rimuru was undeniably the root cause behind all this.

The fact that Clayman, one of the Ten Great Demon Lords, had disappeared, and the newcomer Rimuru had earned a spot, clearly meant that Rimuru was stronger than Clayman. Clayman was a cunning and formidable demon lord, but Rimuru was an even greater threat. Moreover, Rimuru had established diplomatic relations with mankind and had buried his roots deep into the Western States Council. He had no idea what the Western Nations were thinking, but Gadra was certain that it was dangerous to anger the demon lord named Rimuru.

Besides, there was something else that bothered him: Only three people survived the military campaign of Farmus, in which 20,000 were thought to have participated. Out of these three, one had been murdered, leaving only the former king and Gadra's own former apprentice, Razen.

I guess I'll have to ask Razen about this. There are so many things that I don't know about Demon Lord Rimuru, Gadra thought to himself, reminding himself to be cautious.

It was disconcerting that there was no proof of the Storm Dragon destroying the army of Farmus. In a normal war, losing 30 percent of your forces as casualties spelled the failure of a campaign, and usually led to a definite surrender. Yet, there was no record of any such action taken by the Farmus army. And, of course, some believed that the Storm Dragon didn't accept any would-be prisoners of war.

But Gadra remained skeptical. After all, he was a survivor of the previous great expedition and had an idea of how Veldora would have reacted. The Storm Dragon wasn't the type to chase down people who were trying to escape; it would cause unimaginable damage, but only to those who were caught in its opening attack. Knowing this, it was hard for Gadra to assume that all 20,000 soldiers were annihilated at the hands of Veldora.

Then, Demon Lord Rimuru must've had a hand in this... Given his reputation, that didn't seem to be the case. It was likely that he wouldn't have taken their lives if they had surrendered. Yet, the reports stated otherwise—complete annihilation.

I suppose I ought to assume that Veldora turned them to ashes before they ever got the chance to surrender.

Gadra was honestly horrified. For that reason, a head-on battle with Veldora should be avoided at all cost, and thankfully, measures for that had already been prepared.

The bad news was Demon Lord Rimuru, but once their investigation took place, they would be able to develop countermeasures to put their minds at ease.

On that note, Gadra took a step back to reflect on his position. He didn't hold any personal grudge against Demon Lord Rimuru, but if he was in league with Demon Lord Luminas, that made him an enemy. While yes, Gadra would've liked to defeat his enemies, he couldn't afford to throw caution to the wind. He had spent many years planning the downfall of the Western Nations at the hands of the Empire. Now that his goal was within arm's reach, he couldn't get ahead of himself.

Yuuki's and Gadra's interests aligned, and as a result of their discussion, they had decided to share information and help each other as brothers in arms to form a united front.

Shinji and the others were taken aback by this striking revelation. You couldn't blame them for needing a moment to digest it.

Th-this mission... One slip up and we're done for...

Shinji wasn't stupid, he knew they didn't trust his team, but he didn't get the impression that they viewed them as mere sacrificial pawns. Instead, he believed that they were testing them. Mark and Xin felt the same.

"Understood! We won't leave a single stone unturned."

"Well, we sure won't be slowing down the old man, so look forward to it!"

"...I will do my best."

The importance of their mission couldn't be overstated. If they were successful, then... No, it dawned on them that they *had* to pull it off if they wanted to make it through alive.

"Then let me ask you. Do you guys know how many demon lords there are?"

"Yes, eight, right?" Shinji replied.

"—What?" Mark gasped. "Weren't there ten? Wait, didn't it increase to eleven?"

"...Mark. It just changed last year..." Gadra sighed, then began ranting. "Shinji, feed that idiot the right information. Any soldier who can't be bothered to inform himself will be dead before he knows it!" After taking a moment to calm down, he began to explain. "There are eight demon lords. They call themselves the Octagram. It may mean that they liken themselves to stars, and it's not entirely wrong for some of them. I'm bringing up this topic because our enemy this time is Rimuru, the Newbie in the Octagram. We can never be too careful around him, but let's set that aside for now. Let me tell you the main reason: One of the other demon lords is called the Fairy of the Labyrinth. Well, what do you think this means?"

The trio was stunned by his words. Even Yuuki couldn't hide his surprise as he glanced at Gadra.

"It's the labyrinth, isn't it?" Shinji answered with a tinge of fear in his words.

Gadra nodded deeply and pulled out a book and showed it to them. There was a labyrinth called the Dwelling of the Spirits, located in the Republic of Ur-Gracia in the West. It was believed to be an underground or aerial labyrinth, but the truth of the matter was something else entirely. Those descriptions were, in a sense, both right and wrong. In the book, it was written that the Dwelling of the Spirits was not only inhabited by spirits, but also by their queen who had transformed herself from a spirit into a fairy.

"That queen is this 'Fairy of the Labyrinth,' Ramiris—one of the ancient demon lords."

Gadra's words weighed heavily on the trio. And then, he hit them with the bombshell: "The door to the labyrinth that once existed in the Urgr Nature Park has vanished. Believe me, I've checked it out myself. Judging from the information

that I heard, it disappeared around the same time that Rimuru declared himself a demon lord, followed by opening the Dungeon in his country to the public."

"So, this has already been confirmed then? I was wondering how he was able to create such a huge labyrinth, but now, I'm certain that it's the work of Demon Lord Ramiris. In other words, the demon lords Rimuru and Ramiris have joined forces," Yuuki concluded with confidence, grinning from ear to ear.

Shinji and his crew found no faults in that logic. On the contrary, they were downtrodden as their investigation was looking more and more difficult.

"I'm counting on you."

"Please, be vigilant."

Then, the trio departed after Yuuki clued them in on Rimuru's cunning reign of terror as a demon lord.



Following their meeting with Yuuki and Gadra, the three men were brought to the outskirts of Tempest by Kagali the very next day. Ten days after sending them off, Gadra went somewhere else on his own. Given how Yuuki frightened the three, Gadra decided to leave the initial investigation to them.

Yuuki probably didn't see them as disposable pawns. He *did* threaten them a little, to make sure that the trio took their mission seriously. *Hm, I guess Yuuki-dono is not particularly honest, either. He's too competent and hence he expects the same of others as well, huh?*—Gadra perceived it like that. But the same could be said of him. He had no intention of leaving his disciples to their deaths and intended to help them in times of need. Others thought he was scary since he never expressed these thoughts verbally and silently intimidated the people around him.

While being oblivious of this fact, Gadra headed towards the former Kingdom of Farmus. He remembered his former disciple was still there and decided to collect information about Demon Lord Rimuru from him.

Gadra rushed over to the former royal capital of Farmus, Malis, and then headed straight to the royal palace.

Razen was busy working in his office when he suddenly jumped up from his chair. He felt the presence of his great mentor, Gadra, who he thought was dead.

"I can't believe it... He's still alive..." he murmured, as if it was a bad thing.

He didn't know what Gadra's intentions were, but he had probably come to look for him. He didn't hold out hope for anything casual like rekindling an old friendship.

The problem was that the soldiers of Farmenas didn't know who Gadra was. At this rate, they might begin arguing with Gadra at the castle gates and get on his wrong side, which certainly wouldn't be good for their lifespan. If by any chance they did end up fighting him... *Heaven forbid. If that really happened, I certainly wouldn't be able to calm down Gadra-sama.*

Razen rushed to action. He called someone who recently became his disciple through 'Magic Communication.'

<Can you hear me?>

<Tsk, don't call me out of the blue...>

<I believe you are aware of the situation.>

<Yeah. Grigori doesn't seem to have noticed, but an abnormal presence just appeared. That guy will arrive at the gate soon.>

<If you know that much, we don't have to waste any time. You guys should come to the gate as well.>

<...Very well. I'm indebted to you.>

Then he cut off the 'Magic Communication.'

He had two new disciples. Sare and Grigori. They were the former members of the Three Martial Sages—Imperial Guards affiliated with the Church of the Holy Empire of Lubelius.

Razen became their acquaintance when they had come to the country for a survey mission. They had committed a grave mistake and couldn't return to the Church, so Razen made them his disciples. It was not out of kindness, but simply because he sympathized with them. He had heard about their total defeat, particularly that of Sare and his companions in front of international journalists. After coming to know that their opponent was Diablo, Razen was able to relate with them.

Although Sare was impudent, he recognized Razen as his teacher. And Grigori, who had developed a particular animal phobia, was regaining the fearless attitude that he once possessed.

These two were impeccable in terms of strength, so Razen planned to train them and eventually let them work behind the scenes for the Kingdom of Farmenas. That included crisis responses such as this one.

So it's going to be me, Sare, and Grigori. And if Grucius-dono can make it in time, we can hold off Gadra-sama.

Soldiers were useless in the face of an individual with overwhelming strength. The current Kingdom of Farmenas suffered from a lack of champion-class talents. The former Farmus Knight Corps, with the late Folgen—a departed associate of Razen's—as its commander, was now a thing of the past. The same went for its many brave, similarly highly-classed warriors. Finding talents to replace them was currently a major issue for Farmenas.

His sluggish response to the problem had come back to bite Razen.

By the time he reached the castle gates, the other two had already arrived and were confronting Gadra.

"Hey, man, I'm not sure what sort of business you have here, but we are the ones who guard this castle. You understand that we can't just let an unidentified person enter it, right?"

"Ya heard him, old man. I don't wanna say anything bad, so you'd better go home for today, will ya? If you wanna meet someone, apply for a visit at the reception, you'll get a reply in a few days."

The two thought they were quietly blocking the way so as not to let Gadra pass through. However, from Razen's point of view, they were bringing doom upon themselves.

"Stop! Let him through!"

"Huh? Aren't we supposed to stop him?"

"Then what did you call us for?"

They seemed miffed about the order, but Razen had bigger fish to fry.

"It's been a long time, Gadra-sama. I'm very sorry for the delay in greeting you, for I had not known that you were still alive," said Razen, kneeling down in front of Gadra.



Razen wanted to avoid antagonizing Gadra. In the worst case, he was prepared to go all out just to stop him, but it appeared he was wound up over nothing.

"Long time no see, Razen. You look completely different from what I remember, but it seems that it really is you."

"Yes, unlike you, Master, I preserve my life through transference of flesh."

"I don't blame you," Gadra replied, "so don't humble yourself too much. I came here today because I have something to ask you. Also, that beastman hiding there doesn't have to be so alarmed. Had I come to stir trouble, I would not have come here alone."

The tension finally lifted. Nevertheless, they did not let down their guard, and left the scene after arranging a meeting with Gadra.



The following day, a conference was set up in one of the rooms of the castle. The participants were Youm, Grucius, and Razen. Sare and Grigori were on standby in the room as escorts of Youm. Myuran had also wished to join the meeting, but her request was declined. Youm insisted that she get her rest after giving birth to their child. It was a baby girl whom they named Meme. She was adorable like Myuran and now affectionately being cared for by Edgar.

"Now then, Master, what did you want to ask?"

"Hmm, before we get into that, there are some things I have to point out. Sare, young lad, you seem somewhat strong, but you are horrible at magic, aren't you? You see, that isn't something you can learn to use. You need to have proper control over your mana. That beastman there, you're Grucius, right? You—"

Gadra started picking at everyone's flaws one by one.

According to him, Grucius needed to develop an eye for judging an opponent's strength. "Transforming right in front of your enemy is like begging to be attacked first," Gadra sternly explained, as if he were scolding him.

As for Youm, Gadra started off: "You do seem stronger than the average guy, but..." then followed up by instructing him to figure out ways of defending himself, since an overreliance on the power of his gear rendered his own strength moot.

Turning to Grigori, he gave him a bitter pill to swallow: He simply had to work on his skills and get good.

Lastly, Gadra looked at Razen and said, "Razen, I can see that you've been working hard on your magic. Is that magic possession-type?"

"Yes, it is the great secret art Possession that I devised based on your theory of the mystic art Reincarnation."

"Hmm, that's an interesting experiment. Unlike my magic, you don't place yourself in a temporary weakened state, turning yourself into a baby, when using it."

"Thank you for the compl—"

"However, it's useless if you can't master it. I'm sure you can't draw out the full potential of that body you've stolen."

"Yes, sir!"

Razen broke out in a cold sweat after hearing Gadra's words. He was well aware of this fact, and now that Gadra had pointed it out, he had to believe that everything he'd just heard was spot on. *How scary. He was able to see through our abilities even though we met just yesterday...* Razen didn't say another word and kept silent.

Sare and Grigori, on the other hand, weren't amused.

"Oioi, don't get a big head now that he's all silent. What did you see in me to make you spout such bullshit, anyway?"

"That's right. I am indebted to Razen-dono, but we have no reason to stand in awe of his teacher. If you're that confident, would you care to enlighten us?!"

At once, their argument became heated. Razen tried to shut them up, but the glint in Gadra's eyes told him to stay back. The old man had expected this turn of events and intended to give the rowdy upstarts a little taste of his abilities.

Well, if that's the road he wants to take this down, it would definitely shut them up good. Let me play along as you do your thing, Master, Razen thought quietly.

And so, as a light exercise before the meeting, a fight between Gadra and the team of Sare and Grigori was held. They faced off on the training ground, their battle ending in a one-sided thrashing at the hands of Gadra.

"I-impossible..."

"This old man... He was going at both of us at the same time without breaking a sweat. He got us good."

Gadra's strength was so overwhelming that he crushed their pride as two of the former Three Martial Sages. It turned out just as he had hoped; his little display of strength would be enough to speed up the following negotiations. Yet, their next words shocked him.

"But he's not as powerful as that demon, right?" Sare asked Grigori in a daze.

"You're comparing him to *that* guy? Though, I do feel like this old man's around the strength of that dog I fought."

"—Hmm?"

Sare and Grigori easily came to terms with their recent defeat. What's more, despite witnessing Gadra's strength, they were remarkably unperturbed.

—As powerful as I am? In fact, a demon more powerful than me...? Gadra was puzzled by their unexpected reaction, but it didn't sound like they were being sore losers. He felt their words were genuine.

And just as he was about to ask—

"Gadra-sama, we shall discuss that later. First, I will answer your questions," Razen announced as they walked off the training ground.



They went back to the reception room and resumed their meeting.

"I expected nothing less of Razen's teacher," Youm commented casually. "You're a true monster. There's no way I can win against you."

"While Majin Razen's name was known far and wide, there were only a few anecdotes about the teacher that taught him," Grucius added with a nod, visibly excited. "Myuran said that you were a great man who had built a new system of magic theory, and after seeing your fight, I believe it now..."

It came as no surprise; Gadra was a highly esteemed mage, after all. He could interfere with the mana of his opponent, obstruct the activation of their magic, and activate multiple spells simultaneously to achieve extraordinary effects and power.

He pulled out all the stops during their fight, turning the spectacle into a breathtaking demonstration. Grucius, even at full strength, was no match for Sare and Grigori. Watching Gadra effortlessly toy with them proved his strength beyond a shadow of a doubt.

While Youm and Grucius were in high spirits, on the flip side, the two recent losers sat there dejected. Nevertheless, they remained calm and focused on their duty as guardians.

"Well then, to what do we owe this occasion?" questioned Razen.

"The reason I showed my strength was to prevent unnecessary resistance. As Razen might know, I have a bone to pick with Luminism. I'm not interested in anything else, so I cannot bear to see this country suffer any unnecessary casualties when the Empire's invasion washes over it."

Gadra tossed that bombshell out like it was nothing.

"The Empire—"

"Are you for real?" Youm moaned. "Why does it have to be *now*, when I am the reigning king?!"

"Exactly," Grucius added. "I can't imagine us winning, and I don't want to endanger Myuran and my daughter."

"She's not *your* daughter. She is *my* treasure!" Youm shouted.

"Shut up!" Grucius yelled. "We aren't blood-related, but she *is* my daughter. I've decided to live as her father from now on!"

"That isn't your decision to make!"

The two of them broke out into an ugly spat.

Razen cleared his throat and silenced the two idiots.

"I see, I understand why you came here, Gadra-sama. In return for saving us from the ravages of war, you want us to change sides and support the Empire?"

"Correct. Do you understand how powerful the Empire is? In addition to that, I'll be there too, so if you join us, we should be able to bring down Dwargon with ease. That country is vulnerable to a siege. If you stop the supply of grains to Dwargon, they will be forced to surrender immediately."

That, of course, required them to do something about Tempest.

"That's impossible, Gadra-sama," Razen pointed out. "There is now a railroad between the Dwarven Kingdom and Tempest, which enables high-speed transportation. Even if we cut off food exports from our own country, they'll get supplies from that one."

"That's why I'm telling you to betray them. Tempest's self-sufficiency in regard to food is not that high. From this country—"

"Gadra-sama."

Razen knew full well how rude it was but interrupted him anyway. He could tell that Gadra was behind the times and hadn't grasped the current state of the world.

The world of today moved at a rapid pace, much faster than ever before. If they betrayed the Western Nations, it would lead to their ejection from the economic zone. In other words, the destruction of their nation would be inevitable. Even if this placed them under the patronage of the Empire, who promised them generous support, they could not expect to have the same prosperity they were experiencing now. That was how influential the West, or rather, Tempest was to the Kingdom of Farmenas. Razen clarified everything for him.

"...I see. The truth is, I already knew that, but I wanted to hear the precise story from you. But does Demon Lord Rimuru not fear the heavenly army? Of course, if he had the power, he could beat the angels; but even so, the damage to his creations would be enormous. The Empire had also considered introducing trains, but because of that, the plan had to be postponed..."

This was what Gadra said when he heard about the idea of connecting large cities with railways.

"His Majesty Rimuru isn't afraid of any damages."

"Indeed. Boss hates it when people die or get wounded, but other than that, I think he would accept the cost of material damages."

"Rather, he might even consider the need for reconstruction work a boon."

Razen, Grucius and Youm freely expressed their own opinions.

Youm's words in particular held a lot of weight. Humans by nature desired providing for others, giving them a drive to make the most of their skills. Anyone losing their job would become demoralized and labeled a waste of space. Some might even turn to crime. To prevent this from happening, it was the duty of leaders—employers—to prepare new job opportunities.

"Once the projects are completed in every country, the only work remaining will be maintenance and repair," Youm remarked. "Boss was nervous about what to do when that happens. He wants to do this and that, but the technology can't keep up. He grumbled all about it when we drank together."

"If the angels attacked at such a time," Grucius added, coming around to Youm's point, "it would undoubtedly call for plenty of disaster reconstruction. That might spark joy in Boss, though he'd likely feign anger over the destruction."

Sare and Grigori sat there with their eyes glazed over, apparently just nodding along.

"However, despite him being a demon lord, if he so brazenly stuck his nose into the affairs of the West, which is the domain of humans, the Rosso family would have a thing or two to say, don't you think?"

Razen's story matched the information Gadra had gathered. However, some key details were still missing. Seizing the opportunity, Gadra decided to squeeze out as much information as he could out of Razen.

The Rosso family would move to protect their own interests without waiting for the heavenly army. *If the matter was economic, wouldn't they simply concoct non-violent machinations to sabotage his budding country?*—is what Gadra was really asking. Of course, the question was really intended to get more information about the current situation surrounding the Rosso family.

Razen read his intention and gave Gadra the answer he wanted.

"The Rosso family has already fallen. The Kingdom of Dolan is alive and well, and it is where all the survivors have gathered. With that being said, they have lost all means to exert any influence in the Council. Still, the surrounding countries continue to trade with them only because His Majesty Rimuru has permitted them to do so. Plus, King Dolan himself conceded to His Majesty Rimuru."

Razen described the state of affairs, and, incidentally, he even told the truth behind the fall of the now Kingdom of Farmenas.

That revelation finally threw Gadra off balance, as that was news to him.

"...Demon Lord Rimuru destroyed the Farmus army *all by himself*? And the Rosso family got crushed as well...? No, wait! If that wasn't a rumor, then what happened to Gran...Granbell?!"

Hero Granbell was the strongest man Gadra had ever known. This, and the fact that he was the leader of the Seven Luminaries, were taken into account while they carefully planned their expedition to the West.

Yet, Razen was claiming that the Rosso family was gone.

"So the rumor that the Seven Celestial were vanquished is..."

"Master, that is also true. The Seven Luminaries were hostile to His Majesty Rimuru and intended for him to fight the captain of the Holy Knight Order, Hinata; but alas, their plan failed, and they all died."

Gadra was bereft of words after what he had just heard. Razen unmistakably declared that all of the Seven Luminaries had perished. Even Gran was reduced to atoms at the hands of Cardinal Nicolaus. Upon learning of this, Gadra bemoaned the sheer inadequacy of his own intelligence efforts. If Granbell was dead, the fall of the Rosso family naturally followed. Gadra wished he had gotten that information much sooner, since it threw a massive wrench in the current expedition plan. And also...

"That kid... He *knew* and yet he didn't tell me a thing..." Yuuki's face flashed before his eyes as he muttered in anguish over the fact. Yuuki must've surmised that revealing it would quench Gadra's lust for revenge. Nevertheless, it was by no means pleasant news for Gadra.

"Could you be referring to Yuuki Kagurazaka? We understand how you feel, Gadra-sama, for we have also been used by that man."

After an attempt at consolation by his apprentice, Gadra was left frustrated, ashamed, and ultimately speechless.

According to Razen, Yuuki had been a thorn in Rimuru's side as well. Still, both parties were currently lying low, which meant that their relationship had yet to reach a state of open hostility.

Yuuki, you bastard, you're still hiding several things from me, if I had to guess. Besides...you knew that I had it out for Luminism, so you fed me nebulous

information about the Western Holy Church. Were there some ugly truths you sought to keep hidden...? It dawned on Gadra that he'd been used, as he sat in front of the others with a perplexed look on his face, contemplating his next steps.



"This is troubling. Now I have to reconsider my approach to Demon Lord Rimuru."

Rimuru was a greater threat than Gadra had imagined. How would he tackle the problem now? His grudge over the betrayal and murder of his best friend still burned within him, so he had no intention of cooling his vendetta against Luminism. However, the ones he had an ax to grind with in particular, the Seven Luminary Clerics, were already dead.

Given the situation, it took the wind out of his sails in terms of destroying the West. It had been this common interest that Gadra and the Empire shared, which formed the foundation of their cooperative relationship. And once that crumbled, Gadra had no reason to stick with the Empire.

...No, there's still one more reason—the god who is the ultimate target of my vengeance, and very much still exists—Demon Lord Luminas. Gadra remembered his friend who died because of his faith in that god—a demon lord who masqueraded as a god. He couldn't tolerate the existence of that demon lord any longer.

Stewing in his enmity, Gadra decided to continue his plan with renewed determination.

—Or, he was about to.

"Gadra-sama, I may be asking for too much, but I beg of you to halt your plan."

"Hmm?"

Razen had been eyeing Gadra, before throwing this curveball.

"To this day, I hold pride as your loyal disciple. However, my loyalty is even greater to my lord. If you stir up trouble in that country, I will have to consider you an enemy."

"Could you be talking about Demon Lord Rimuru?"

"No, my master is one of his subordinates, Diablo-sama."

Gadra was taken aback by what he heard. Razen was a proud disciple of his. It was hard to believe that such a man would meekly submit to a mere subordinate of a demon lord.

"I know it's not my place to interrupt you," Sare interjected out of the blue, "but since you're on the topic, allow me to mention that this Diablo he's talking about was the demon that defeated me."

A demon stronger than me. It's hard to believe, but if it was able to bring Razen to heel, I can't count that out. Even then, he didn't think that he would lose against this demon; still, he engraved the name Diablo in his mind.

"Gadra-sama, please let me tell you one more thing. Diablo-sama is an ancient demon."

"Just as I thought. Since he was able to defeat you, he's probably of the ancient species. Or worse, he could even be a prehistoric demon, which are exceptionally rare."

It wouldn't be strange for the demon to exhibit power exceeding that of a demon lord, especially if it were *named*.

"No, he was far stronger than the demons of those levels—"

"He claimed to be a demon peer," Sare murmured.

"That's—!"

That's absurd! Gadra nearly shouted.

There was a limit on evolutions for demons. That was the absolute rule, and as far as Gadra knew, there was only one demon who had defied this law. The archdemon who evolved further and became a demon peer. That demon was the strongest and most terrible of demon lords—the "Lord of Darkness" Guy Crimson.

"Gadra-sama, my master, Diablo-sama, has no need to discuss how long he has lived... You know what that means, right?"

Razen asked, but his voice was drowned out by Gadra's thoughts swirling in his head. *I can't believe this. No, I don't want to believe this.*

"...Is he a primordial?" Gadra murmured with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Razen answered with ruthless certainty. "Yes."

I see. Gadra tried to piece together the truth while calming his mind.

If that was really the case, then it was only natural for Razen to serve him. It also wouldn't take much to believe that a primordial evolved into a demon peer if it had received a body. Taking their story at face value, it would call for drastic revisions to the Empire's great expedition plan. Considering how Blanc haunted the Empire, it went without saying how troublesome the primordials were.

—No, wait a minute. When a primordial receives a body, a tragedy is bound to follow. So why haven't I heard anything till now? This thought struck him as he began to regain his composure. Wait. Whether Diablo is primordial or not is beside the point. Taking his triumph over Razen to be true, it would follow that he's, at the very least, a demon peer...

But what he overheard from the conversation between Youm and the others chilled him to the bone.

"Diablo-dono is Boss's butler. Some time ago, I rushed over to celebrate the maiden journey of the train, and there, I heard that he had scouted some acquaintances to work for him, since he'd grown tired of doing the chores on his own."

"Oh, if you mean *that* woman, then I'm sure I've seen her. I ran into her at the Council meeting because Boss had appointed her as his military attaché. The one with pure white hair and beautiful crimson eyes. She was drop dead gorgeous."

Gadra slumped back helplessly in his chair. *I-is this a joke?! That description matches that of Blanc one-to-one...* That bombshell put it over the line, proving the story authentic, as well as a terrible nightmare for Gadra.

He glanced at Razen, who returned a confident nod.

"Is this true?"

"I would not lie to you, Master."

Suddenly it struck him. Gadra realized that they were telling the truth and earnestly trying to steer him away from sailing towards his own demise by starting this war.

"Is it really that dangerous?"

The answer was a silent nod from all who were there.

Seeing that, Gadra paled as he remembered the trio who had gone to Tempest.

Oh, I dearly hope the boys haven't screwed this up already!



The capital of Tempest, Rimuru, was bustling with life. It was a thriving city that could very well be called a metropolis. Even from the perspective of Shinji's crew, who were all otherworlders themselves, they found it to be highly developed and devoid of medieval drawbacks.

Aside from the Empire's capital of Nasca, its surrounding cities were filled with the stench of animals. Here, however, there was nothing of the sort, much to their surprise.

"I thought we were going to be welcomed by an empty plot of land aside from a gate, or are we at the wrong place?"

"I doubt it. Either they can change this place however they want, or the spies we sent were hallucinating."

"...If so, then we can't let our guard down."

They shared a quick look and braced themselves.

Kagali had dropped them off here through the elemental magic 'Warp Portal,' since she had visited Tempest before. Although she didn't stay long and swiftly went back to the Empire, there was nothing to worry about since they had already arranged a return trip. Once they were finished, they were to meet up with Gadra, who would bring them back home using magic.

Until then, they were ordered not to pull any reckless stunts and investigate every nook and cranny. The three of them were no fools. It went without saying that they were going to do just as they were ordered.

"Lady Kagali is really hot."

"Hey hey, Shinji, your girlfriend will dump you if you keep talking like that, you know."

"Girlfriend? I don't have one. If I did, my life would have been way better..."

"Eh?"

"...Don't bother, Mark. He's just too slow on the uptake."

Mark and Xin both shrugged as Shinji bemoaned his loss.

They carried on with their banter while passing through the entry check at the city's gate.

Thanks to the Freedom Association IDs which Yuuki had prepared for them, they were allowed to enter the country more smoothly than they had expected, requiring only a brief explanation about their purpose for entering.

After that, they secured a room at an inn and went sightseeing, under the pretext of collecting information.

The three of them were astonished by what they saw. As otherworlders, the three of them possessed considerable power that afforded them several privileges in this world. But they were limited in their ability, unable to act as freely as Demon Lord Rimuru, even if they wanted to.

Yuuki went to great lengths to make improvements in the food situation and living conditions, which also spread throughout the vast Empire, but even those mammoth efforts paled in comparison to the strides this country had made. Shinji, who was quite familiar with the situation, was less surprised and more amazed by it.

Takoyaki, okonomiyaki, and yakisoba were just the beginning. There were also a wide variety of pastries to be had, such as crepes and cakes. A handful of extremely pricey treats also lined the shelves, leading one to wonder where the ingredients even came from.

From food stalls and coffee shops to fine dining restaurants. The lineup exuded a passion for food and the tastes from the original world. Residents of this world, who might have been confused at first, appeared to have gotten accustomed to the wide variety of cuisines.

Shinji, for one, cried tears of joy when he laid eyes on a curry rice restaurant.

Plumbing and toilets were set up perfectly. The inns also couldn't have been more comfortable.

There was also a public bath, which had become a popular pastime.

"I think I'll stay here. Hey, can we, like, *not* return to the Empire?" Mark asked.

"Hey!"

"No, sorry I was...just kidding, just kidding. Don't take it the wrong way, Shinji."

"I'm not mad, I'm just wondering if I could seriously consider it."

"...I want to live here as well."

The three of them looked at each other and sighed.

Long had they lived under the impression that the Empire was the forerunner in civilization and modern comforts in the whole world. But now, after seeing this country, they had become disillusioned.

The town was lively, and the food was tasty. Not only did it feel comfortable to live here, but there was also no shortage of entertainment and a rich culture, providing plenty of opportunities to enjoy themselves.

These pleasures were all based on the ones from their previous worlds, and in contrast to the harsh lives they had led till now, these guys were overcome with nostalgia.

The Empire also had cultural centers and various forms of entertainment to speak of, but those were made for the nobility and they weren't free like in this city, meaning they were prohibitively expensive for a commoner. Compared to that, this city was...

"No, no, no, we absolutely can't."

"Yeah. Yuuki-san won't be cool with it and Master Gadra is, frankly, too scary to deal with. Besides, the war is on the horizon..."

"...The firing squad is all that awaits defectors."

Yes. The war would soon break out. This city would obviously be a target, there was no way it could escape undamaged. The trio was well aware how powerful the military of the Empire was and believed that this country wouldn't stand a chance against it.

With heavy hearts they swallowed their doubts and, true to their mission, set out to challenge the labyrinth.

.....

.....

...

"So, Hero Masayuki finally managed to break through the 50th floor, but I must say, this is too easy."

"Haha, that makes sense. After all, Yuuki-san said that Masayuki wasn't particularly strong."

"...But his Skill shouldn't be underestimated."

"I mean, that's probably why he was able to conquer it. He slowly but surely challenged it, taking him more than half a year to break through."

They tittle-tattled as they passed through the 40th floor.

Initially, they were constantly on guard inside the Dungeon, but now their tension had eased. They gathered information in advance to avoid taking risks but now Shinji and crew felt that the Dungeon was heavily based on game mechanics.

Xin seemed to have had no connection with games, but Shinji and Mark were avid gamers. Shinji, in particular, was an RPG enthusiast, who loved adventure titles and had managed to enjoy them in between his studies at the university.

In light of this knowledge, they could best describe this Dungeon as nothing but a plaything, its challengers certainly being the targets of someone's devious schemes. Nevertheless, this was all familiar to those in the know.

Xin Liuxing was good at detecting traps, and with Shinji's assistance, he managed to pick them all out. As long as the traps were taken care of, the strength of the monsters wasn't much of a threat.

"I guess the challengers had a hard time conquering it due to their lack of knowledge."

"That's right. I did mock this as an obstacle course, but that's exactly what this is. If you can decipher the malicious intentions of the creator, you can just sneak past that stuff."

"...And it doesn't even kill you."

While they were collecting information, they had heard about the Resurrection Bracelet. You could get one for free like a one-time deal from the reception desk. With the bracelet equipped, you would revive back at the entrance upon dying in the labyrinth, so they were told. That immediately had them intrigued. It was somewhat hard to digest, like they had stumbled upon a comedy show inside this serious world.

The problem was that they didn't know how deep this dungeon was. Even though they wanted to conquer it in one go, the rations they brought were limited. The trio were at a loss about how much food they had to pack for the exploration, and an unexpected solution to this problem came from the reception desk.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," the receptionist assured them, then explained at great length: "When you see the stairs, you will find an entrance to the inn, where you can stay for a fee. So you guys don't have to rack your brains over rations. Rimuru-sama said 'only snacks up to 300 yen'¹⁰. I have no idea what that means, but it must be important. Oh yeah, there are merchants waiting in the inn, so they can buy the stuff you don't need, you know?"

Shinji repressed his urge to shout, "Hurry it up, we don't need to hear about the snacks!" The last thing he needed was getting charged with insolence for shouting profanity.

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

Now back to the present. It had been a week since they started their conquest of the labyrinth.

Shinji and the other two were examining their loot while resting in the labyrinth's inn.

"By the way," Mark began, apparently in a good mood, "we've earned a lot in these few days, haven't we? They claimed that this place would be spartan, but it's quite comfortable. Despite that, the accommodation fee is cheap, and we've saved a lot of money by selling unnecessary equipment, right?"

Xin looked up showing a bit of interest.

Shinji responded by taking gold coins out of their purse. They stared longingly at the golden sheen. This wasn't just the money from treasure chests, monsters, and selling loot. They also received dozens of gold coins and even a stellar gold coin as rewards. This was a huge prize.

"I suppose. We've earned quite the pretty penny. From what I've heard, the challengers on the frontline haven't managed to make it past the 50th floor. Only Masayuki's party has managed to conquer it, so that will make us the second group to do so."

Masayuki's group was evidently stuck on the 60th floor. And the other challengers, they guessed, were being held up by the Boss Monster of the 40th floor. Thanks to this, Shinji's crew was in the spotlight as this month's MVPs.

"Yeah, that tempest serpent, right? It was certainly strong, but it was no match for us."

The tempest serpent was ranked A-minus, so even high-level adventurers struggled against it. Its breath attack, covering a wide-area, was devastating in small rooms. The challengers had no place to escape, leaving them no choice but to face the enemy head on. If the snake managed to wrap itself around you though, its tough scales meant you were a definite goner.

¹⁰ It's a popular phrase in Japan. Schools limit the cost of snacks kids may buy or bring on a school trip.

This monster was supposed to be a tricky opponent, but Shinji's crew beat it without breaking much of a sweat. They weren't interested in how strong the monsters were, but what they got after defeating them.

"I wonder what's up with the hole in this weapon. It's listed for a crazy price..."

The ridiculous number threw them for a loop, enough to make them drop the idea of selling it. Weapons with holes began to appear in loot starting around the 40th floor. No one had ever seen anything like it in the Empire, so naturally the three of them had no idea how much they were worth. They could've sold them for a fortune, but they remained on the fence about whether they should.

"What's the deal with this hole? Even my appraisal magic tells me nothing, maybe we should hold onto them until Master comes."

"These kinds of weapons didn't appear before the 40th floor."

"...Yeah. They dropped from the boss room or powerful monsters around the 50th floor."

"Yeah, you're right. However, these actually seem to be in circulation in town, albeit quite rare. They say that they're an exceptional find in treasure chests on the 30th floor and below."

"I guess so, since its build-quality is impeccable. But that alone can't be the reason they're *this* expensive though, right?"

"...Maybe there's a secret behind it."

"Seems like it. When I asked the merchants, they just gave me this smile and didn't tell me anything."

"Hey, it sure is weird. Let's keep them until the old man gets here. But more importantly, this is the deal. I mean, look at this!" Mark shouted, taking out Minos's Bardiche, the gozu's battle ax, and presented it to them.

It glimmered with a bewitching silver glow. A high-class masterpiece made of mithril. It was a unique-grade weapon, obtained from the treasure chest protected by the guardian of the 50th floor.

"It's a Unique weapon, you know? Even in the Empire it's impossible to get a unique-grade, right?"

Mark was so enthralled by it that he was practically rubbing his cheek against the bardiche.

It was undeniably a powerful weapon.

If you became an Imperial Guardian of the Empire, you would be lent legendary-grade weapons. While soldiers of lower ranks were given equipment that had good quality and strength, they lacked any magical properties. It was understandable why Mark would be so excited given how even the senior officers would struggle to get their hands on unique-grade equipment.

"I guess so. Yuuki-san told us that the Empire's weapons are mass produced. We rarely see them, but it seems that all the legendary-grade weapons have the same shape."

"...Is that even possible?" asked Xin, wondering if legendary-grade weapons could really be mass produced. Logically, at least, that shouldn't be possible.

"Shinji, isn't that an outlandish assumption?" Mark scoffed. "You think they can be mass produced just because they have the same shape?"

He didn't like the idea, since it meant that his newly-acquired unique-grade weapon wasn't worth nearly that much.

"Of course, doing it with normal means would be impossible. Master Gadra himself noted that even the mass-production of magisteel is too difficult. But it's *not* impossible if you can maintain a special environment."

"...A special environment?"

"Yeah." Shinji continued, "An environment so densely packed with magicules, it'd kill a man just by standing in it. Someone at rank B wouldn't make it long either, and even someone ranked A probably wouldn't make it out without getting sick. If a piece of armor were kept in a place with such an environment for a long period of time—maybe a hundred to a thousand years—it would then be ready to evolve. After that, if a capable owner were recognized by the armor, it would start its own evolution from there."

"Surely such conditions don't exist?"

"...Yeah, I think it's impossible as well."

"Right? But Yuuki-san and Master Gadra said otherwise," Shinji insisted.

"—So, even if it was possible, what's your point?" Mark shot back.

"Well, look. I was just wondering if this bardiche was produced in such a way."

"No way..."

"You don't think so, huh? But listen, there's also a hole in this bardiche. You wouldn't see this on your run-of-the-mill bardiche, right?"

"True. I wonder what this is..."

"...It's a beautiful weapon, nonetheless. Although it has an eerie shape."

It wasn't as though Shinji really wanted to complain. He wasn't jealous seeing how happy Mark was, either. After all, neither Shinji nor Xin could handle weapons as large as this bardiche.

"It's just that, you know," Shinji fumbled for the right words, "if a country can casually give away weapons of this caliber, it's quite likely that this country is also more dangerous than we imagined..."

Mark and Xin fell silent. In fact, the two of them felt the same way. Mark was worried that the receptionist would take away his bardiche shortly after he got it. The rules stated that all items obtained in the labyrinth belonged to the challengers. Despite this, he figured a country would normally confiscate such a weapon, especially since it was this powerful.

If that happened, Mark and the others would have no choice but to comply. As long as they were dependent on the country, they were forced to follow its directives and decisions. That was a rule common to every country. They were spies first and foremost, so stirring any kind of trouble would come to bite them twice as hard.

But what ended up happening was a complete 180 from what they expected. They were met with cheers and applause from the staff, who even handed them extra prize money.

By now they'd seen enough to believe that Tempest was unlike any other country.

"The weapons are one thing," Shinji muttered, "but the whole country really is bizarre, isn't it?"

"It's quite unexpected," Mark echoed. "I think we'd make more money *and* have more fun if we took conquering the labyrinth more seriously. I mean, we've nothing to lose, right? If you're weak, you'll barely make ends meet, but if you're strong, like we are—"

"Mark, stop. You remember what turncoats get, right?"

"...A death sentence."

"—Yeah, I know that," Mark replied, exasperated. "But for what it's worth, life here seems more enjoyable."

That was one thing they could all agree on.

However, reality was harsh. Mark's words were tempting, but this wasn't the time nor place to be daydreaming.

"If the war starts, this country will probably suffer a lot."

"—Yeah. If this country wins, we could happily defect, but if we desert the Empire now, none of the countries will accept us."

"...We can't afford living without a country."

They sighed and abandoned their naive thoughts.

Changing gears, they started contemplating their strategy for the following day's conquest.

"Tomorrow," Shinji started, "we will head to the 51st floor. The area from that point onward seems to be called 'The Paradise of the Dead.' Mark's Minos's Bardiche is made of holy-attribute mithril, so we can expect it to be highly effective against dead spirits and undead beings."

"Exactly. Also, this is kind of weird, but this really *is* like a game...the boss protecting the key to the next stage," Mark pointed out.

"...And the monsters are also getting stronger and stronger after each floor," Xin thought aloud.

Shinji was already on the same page. He was the resident RPG specialist, so it went without saying that he had already picked up on it. But it was so creepy that he didn't want to think about it.

Too many things came to his mind. The boss monsters, one on every 10th floor, were becoming stronger the lower they went. First, it was the B-ranked black spider, and then it was a B-plus-ranked evil centipede. And on the 30th floor, the B-plus-ranked crazed ogre king showed up with multiple subordinates. The fact that those monsters knew how to coordinate made it impossible to beat them with strength alone.

There was the previously mentioned A-minus ranked tempest serpent on the 40th floor, and the monster that appeared on the 50th floor was the majin named Gozer, a gyuki¹¹ that could talk like a human. Something of that caliber was so rare, you wouldn't find one in a hundred years. It was a Hazard-class—or, if you

¹¹ ox-demon

preferred to use the rank classification Yuuki had created, an A-ranked monster. An opponent that dangerous was typically a majin serving a demon lord.

Still, the trio had made quick work of it, though not without substantial effort. Despite this, they could've taken it on solo, if they really wanted to. But it was worth remembering that they couldn't die in the labyrinth, so aggressive and reckless strategies paid off.

Mark began with, "Seriously, since a monster as strong as that was protecting Floor 50, the ones following it will be even tougher nuts to crack."

"...It might be our last fight," Xin nodded with a thoughtful expression.

Things had gone smoothly for now, but from this point on they would face a rough ride—that they all agreed on.

"I guess our tactics centered on Mark will stay the same as before. Now that we have special weapons, let's push it as far as we can."

"...Yeah."

"I don't suppose you'll find monsters much stronger than that. In fact, I'd say the 60th floor is the final one, but if it isn't, don't freak out," reassured Mark.

"Don't worry, that's not happening." Shinji denied it, but really, he had heard unpleasant rumors. He didn't want to be the one to rain on their parade though. As rumor had it, the Dungeon sprawled underground for a total of a hundred floors. *That's ridiculous*—he couldn't help but think this way. Despite his concerns about the next boss, he knew there was no use fretting.

The trio believed they would win in the end, since death wasn't a factor for them. However, it was going to be a long, arduous battle ahead.

"Well, if worse comes to worst, we'll still come out alive. So, let's stay sharp and go hard," Shinji announced with vigor.

They were all on board; their sights were set on the final floor. They wanted to confirm whether it held research facilities or not. The three men went over their plans once more and then got a good night's rest.

Three days later...

After conquering the poison swamps and corrosive lands, the trio finally found the stairs on the 59th floor, leading to the 60th floor where the boss monster's room was. It had taken them seven days to reach the 50th floor, but it took them three days to reach the 60th floor from there. The area was smaller than the previous floor, but the difficulty rose exponentially.

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

"...Mhm."

They had rested up the night before and were full of energy, ready to go.

"The one ahead is called a guardian, just like the one from Floor 50. There's no doubt that it'll be an intelligent monster."

"I know. It's likely that it's more troublesome than the death lord we fought yesterday."

"...Let's go all out from the start."

As long as they kept their cool, the boss would go down easily. They gave a final nod to each other, and then... They carefully placed their hands on the door and pushed it open with a single thrust.



Stepping back a bit in time...

I was in my room, working on building a surveillance system. Currently, intelligence agents dispatched by Souei and Moss were waiting at key locations in the Great Jura Forest. Not only that, they were stationed all along the coast from the Kingdom of Farmenas to the northern part of Ingracia, and even at the tops of the mountains.

Despite this, I was still uneasy about our intelligence gathering. Latency was my biggest fear here.

Although the agents were stationed in pairs, there was a chance that both of them could be killed at the same time. If that happened, then the intel from that zone would be completely cut off.

The death of the agents was one thing, but the inherent delay caused by that could threaten the survival of a nation. In order to prevent such circumstances, I had strongly warned Souei to exercise extreme caution.

In the event that one of these agents were uncovered, while they might not get killed, it would still lead to confrontation and combat. That would naturally mean a delay in the transmission of intel. And that was what I was trying to eliminate, along with making this network robust and secure.

In order to achieve this, I thought of using magic as a surveillance tool. There was this long-range observation magic that existed in the sorcery system, but it wasn't nearly as useful as I'd hoped. All it could do, at best, was confirm the shape of the object, which meant that the information it could provide was trivial. It could only monitor a particular place and required re-casting it to change to another place. It was terribly cumbersome magic, since switching locations took time, and if your target already left the area by the time you switched, it was a complete waste.

Plus, if the target had put up a magic barrier, your magic would bounce off of it. This made it impossible to monitor powerful beings, and I concluded that it would be useless in an actual battle.

But then I had a bright idea. The physical magic 'Megiddo' was a spell that converged sunlight into high-intensity beams using lenses formed by collecting water droplets in the air. I thought that the same theory could be applied to create a surveillance spell.

For instance, suspending water drops in various locations to project a live image feed of those places. If that information could be transcribed, then it would allow us to monitor locations from far away. And if that wasn't possible, then I would use the lenses I made on high-altitudes to magnify the feed and project it onto a monitor.

Take telephoto lenses, images, and a mechanism to transcribe information. To put it simply, I would create magical surveillance satellites by combining these three.

Although it seemed difficult to construct each concept with magic at first, Raphael-san answered that it was possible using 'physical magic,' 'spirit magic,' and 'Spatial Domination.'

Now all I had to do was to send detailed requests to Raphael-san. Just like that, my improved magic concept had been created.

Once this surveillance system was in place, it would be easier to safely gather reliable information. The potential amount of information that would be obtained was enormous, and no matter how the enemies moved, it'd be a piece of cake to find out what they were up to.

You might be thinking I was just playing around during these hectic days, but this was super important.

He who controls the information controls the world, and thus, wars as well.

During the Battle of Tsushima during the Russo-Japanese War, the Imperial Japanese Navy destroyed the Russian Baltic Fleet under the command of Togo Heihachiro, the Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet.

It was said that the most important issue faced by the Japanese Navy in this battle was whether or not they could actually encounter the enemy fleets. Predicting the place you would capture or intercept the opponent was crucial. If their predictions were off, this battle would not have occurred, and as a result, Japan would've been defeated.

And this was applicable to our current situation as well. If our forces were deployed in various locations, there would be a high possibility that we, who were disadvantaged in terms of numbers, would lose. The deciding factor for victory would be whether or not we could read the movements of the Empire and make them concentrate their strength at the right spot.

On the other hand, if the Empire dispersed its forces, it would be possible to defeat them individually after devising a more detailed strategy. This magic was essential for us to execute our strategy, and above all, for us to obtain certain victory.

—While I'd just spent my time talking it up, I had, in fact, already finished the prototype stage of the project.

I also made sure to ask Raphael-san to make it nice and user-friendly.

What? I couldn't have done this myself?

Don't be stupid. Raphael-san was my Skill, so if *it* was working hard, *I* was working hard. Thinking about it that way, I might have been working too much lately. *I should take a short break to unwind.*

For the first time in what felt like ages, I enjoyed the black tea that Shuna brewed. As I was relaxing, I was musing over the uses of the completed surveillance magic when suddenly—

"Rimuru-sama, I have something urgent to report!"

I received a message from Beretta through the 'Telepathy Net.'

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

My jaw dropped as soon as I heard the report.

A second group had conquered the 50th floor of the Dungeon.

By the way, the first team was, needless to say, Masayuki's party. They were taking a break right now due to this pre-war situation, but they had already reached the 59th floor.

Thanks to Masayuki and his team, the Dungeon was booming. More and more challengers were arriving every day, and we were raking in the dough.

Of course, the challengers also got something out of this; over the past year, the average skill level had grown considerably. There were already a number of groups that had conquered the 30th floor, and they developed strategies that took advantage of the resurrection mechanic, namely the Zombie Attack and the Sacrifice-and-Abandon plan.

Upon passing the 30th floor, the cheap death traps and monsters that fought in groups were becoming quite the nuisance for challengers. In spite of their wicked strategies, they were struggling.

As always, the strong challengers persevered. Fighters with simplistic attack habits were initially left in the dust, but as time went on, they honed their skills and obtained better equipment. Eventually, they could hold their own, too. The ability to adapt was a frightening thing, as some people became experienced enough to avoid even the most vicious traps by intuition alone.

Like that, the groups fighting on the frontlines recently began approaching the boss monster on the 40th floor, where they all ran into a roadblock.

Floor 40's boss monster was a tempest serpent, ranked A-minus. It was that black snake I encountered way back when, which took pride in its breath attacks that were devastating against groups. Many people's weapons were corroded by it and they would often come crying to our stores. We would give them a hand by lending some of our Tempest trademarked equipment and they would eventually become regular customers. Our store policy "You break it, you buy it" was another way to make good money—all thanks to the tempest serpent!

The serpent roughed up the challengers and stripped them of their hard-earned gear. It was such a dependable guardian who netted us a wonderful stream of income...what a pity it got defeated.

Also, they had even beaten the guardian of the 50th floor.

Masayuki's group was kinda cheating when they did it, so this time around, we had a party that meant serious business. They also claimed the cash reward, but the hype it generated was a worthwhile tradeoff.

New heroes were emerging on the daily within the labyrinth, and it was flourishing like never before.

Intelligent majins were responsible for guarding the 50th floor. In this case, I had ordered the gyuki Gozer and the baki¹² Mezer to take turns on duty, guarding this floor. These two definitely were nothing to scoff at, so it would be really surprising if someone beat them.

After all, these two challenged each other in their free time, and devised fighting tactics of their own ingenuity. They weren't the same berserk meatheads they once were, which probably had to do with their new strategic approach to battle. They had buried the hatchet and grown to be good friends.

I remembered that I had set up a pretty sweet reward for clearing Floor 50. The treasure chest was guaranteed to drop gear only on the first clear—not just any kind of gear, but unique-grade gear from the Minos series. It was named after the Minotaur¹³, the Lord of the Labyrinth. The gear itself was insanely good and bound to be a prized piece in any collection.

If the chest had a weapon, you'd be looking at either the gozu's battle ax, Minos's Bardiche, or the mezu's spear, Minos's Trident. There was no shield; the rest would be various pieces of armor.

I hadn't anticipated that people would reach this point so early, so I'd only stocked up on maybe a dozen sets. Be that as it may, they were all top notch in quality. Indeed, they were masterpieces created by Kurobee's best students using their finest techniques.

One of the pieces getting snatched up was an issue, but the dominant performance of these challengers was more concerning.

To begin with, Gozer and Mezer had become stronger as a result of receiving their names. If those two could be defeated, I wanted to recruit whoever they were for my country. And if those candidates turned down our invitation, they could become dangerous enemies down the line. That was something I liked to avoid, so I had already planned to put those kinds of people on a watch list.

To that end, I requested for there to be an emergency call whenever Gozer or Mezer were defeated.

That brought us to the reason why Beretta called me.

.....

.....

...

"So, how's the situation?"

"Yes sir. There were three people who broke through, and all of them are Unique Skill-holders."

I wondered if they might be acquaintances, but my guess was quickly proven wrong. It only took three to defeat Gozer and they all possessed Unique Skills... Moreover, they weren't even active Dungeon challengers, but rather newbies that recently made an appearance.

¹² horse-demon, see volume 8.

¹³ Greek: Minos's Bull. In Greek mythology, Minos was a king of Crete, and the Minotaur was his wife's son, who she gave birth to after being cursed to fall in love with a bull.

I wouldn't have questioned it during peacetimes, but given the current situation on the eve of war, there was a strong possibility that they were spies who had taken the bait.

It was necessary to investigate this thoroughly. Thus, I stopped the plan to test the surveillance magic and headed to the Control Room of the labyrinth.

*

I walked in and saw Ramiris and Veldora. It seemed like Dino and Vesta were taking a break today. Never mind Dino, Vesta had been looking tired these days, so I wanted him to get some rest.

Ramiris and Veldora were always full of energy. The concept of fatigue likely didn't apply to them; they had that unlimited "child energy." As long as they were doing something they were interested in, they could keep going all day.

"Ah! Commander, you're here!" Ramiris exclaimed. "The situation remains unchanged for now!"

I didn't know what was going on to begin with. She was probably just saying whatever fit the mood.

I then turned my eyes towards the video shown on the huge screen. It displayed three youngsters. It appeared as though they were conquering one floor after another at break-neck speed, and their fighting style was quite distinctive.

One man moved his arms through the air as if he were throwing something, and it apparently had some significant power behind it. Was this like a compressed air bullet? It sure wasn't possible with mere "human strength." He was a tall man of stout build, with brown hair. He had a chiseled face and stood out among them wearing his jeans and tank top. Yep, jeans and a tank top. That alone convinced me we had an otherworlder on our hands.

Let me take a look at the other two.

There was a short and skinny man clad in a black robe and another was a young man wearing a white coat over chain mail.

White coat. Yeah, a white coat. The conventional type you'd see in labs and hospitals. However, in *this* world it wasn't exactly "conventional." That guy's face looked distinctly East Asian, and undoubtedly Japanese.

Apart from the black-robed man, I thought the tank top guy and lab coat guy were both otherworlders.

Anyway, looking at the huge screen, I could see that they were still fighting. This time they were up against a big group—six death wolves had joined the fray and were assaulting the trio. The death wolves quickly closed the distance at a speed that ordinary humans couldn't react to. They were obviously smart enough to realize that they had to get in close if they wanted to stand a chance. Beyond the 50th floor, even the riff raff had moderately high intelligence.

By the way, a single death wolf was ranked B-plus, so if six of them were in a pack, things could get ugly fast. Moreover, since it was a dead spirit, it had the

characteristic of being immune to physical attacks, unless they were from a holy weapon or a magic weapon.

Because their bodies were constructed of magicules, they could regenerate them immediately, even if they were splattered to bits. These were some wicked monsters that wouldn't go down without you taking the right steps to counter them.

One mistake and they'd eat you alive, but...

"Don't underestimate me, you damn mutts! Hiyaaa!" roared the brown-haired guy who had previously been throwing air.

This time, he was charging with the terrifying bardiche held high, and brought it down in a wide arc. With a deafening thud, three death wolves turned into light particles and disappeared.

Oh, that's it! No wonder the terrifying ax looked familiar—it was Minos's Bardiche.

When it came to unique-grade weapons, they, needless to say, had magical powers. In other words, it was a kind of magic weapon, and even the dead spirits could be damaged. The weapon's magical power alone was enough to wound a monster.

More to the point, Minos's Bardiche was forged out of a very special alloy. As I recall, it was made from mithril, which was a custom alloy combining silver with magisteel. It was a holy-type weapon, which inflicted extra damage to dead spirits and the undead.

"Aah," I muttered, "with Minos's Bardiche, the death wolves are dead meat."

"Yeah, that weapon was the one dropped by Gozer," Veldora pointed out. "This guy here seems to be a pretty sharp fighter, swinging that ax like he's practiced for years with it."

As we stood there watching their fight, they filled me in on what happened until today.

I had a sudden craving for potato chips right about now.

By the sound of things, the brown-haired guy had been the one taking out all of the monsters. And from what I saw, I could definitely believe it. That guy was a beast.

But then, what happened to all the traps?

Regarding that, the black-robed guy discovered them immediately and informed his friends of their positions. Floor 51 was where the most insidious, meanest traps started coming into play, which could kill you on the spot. As I watched, the black-robed guy pointed at the exact places where the traps were hidden.

That was his Unique Skill. His role was vital for conquering the labyrinth.

The lab coat guy himself had only engaged once so far; it was in their fight against Gozer.

Veldora's explanation didn't make sense, so I asked Raphael-san to read the past records from the Dungeon. Whatever had happened, it must've been strange indeed:

He took out a syringe from his inside pocket and injected his friends with two shots. Immediately afterwards, Gozer's movements became sluggish.

Did he give them some kind of state changing stuff?

«Answer. It is poison. According to the analysis result, the attack that individual Gozer received contained a neurotoxin. The room was filled with poisonous gas, inhibiting movements of individuals who were not resistant to it. Currently, there is no such effect in place.»

Aah, poisonous gas. He could supposedly mix it up on the spot to suit their opponent.

The lame Gozer was a great target for the brown-haired dude. But it was the lab coat guy who delivered the final blow. He took out a shiny silver scalpel from his pouch and slit Gozer's jugular vein with expert precision.

This guy was the leader of the three. Not because he hung back most of the time, but because he was playing the role of their commander. And he was also skilled; it seemed that the spearheading, brown-haired man could focus on his attacks since he knew that the lab coat guy could defend himself if push came to shove.

They appeared to be a good, well balanced party.

Just then, I heard a knock on my door.

The door opened quietly and Shuna entered. She brought the papers which had the registration information of these three people.

“This is the registration form of those three collected at the time of their entry to Tempest.” With a bow, Shuna handed me the papers.

Shinjee: twenty-three years old, magician.

Mark: twenty-six years old, warrior.

Xin: seventeen years old, hunter.

Their names and occupation were briefly recorded on this piece of paper. Their hometown was a little country within the Empire. It said that they had come to this country to challenge the Dungeon, about which they had heard a lot of rumors from the merchants.

Well, that was clearly a load of bullshit.

Raphael-san showed me the results of the trio's analysis. And just like Beretta had said, they all possessed Unique Skills. Those three had formed a party and came here together. So, it was simply absurd to take anything written on this paper at face value.

The jobs that they had written here were also very fishy.

Being a magician was a high-class career that entailed mastery over two or more types of magic. In Shinjee's case in particular, he had apparently learned both spirit magic and elemental magic. The guy did have noteworthy talent.

The same applied to warriors, who must master weaponry and hand-to-hand combat skills. In this case, proficiency in at least one basic martial art and weapon class was to be expected.

There were several weapon categories to choose from, ranging from sword fighting, archery, and in some cases, throwing arts, which included knife throwing and stone throwing. You just had to pick the one that suited you best. The essence of the art of weaponry was the path towards mastering that weapon of choice.

In the case of Mark, he was evidently good at hand-to-hand combat, throwing, and fighting with a spear—a jack-of-all-trades.

Lastly, hunters were said to be the cream of the crop among those who dispatched monsters. You had to master the type of archery that specialized in using the traditional bow and ‘Formhide,’ an Art that was very difficult to handle. Furthermore, you had to master the ‘Danger Detection’ Skill, and thus talent alone was not enough to get a job as a hunter. It was the most reliable occupation among the members of subjugation guilds.

In this world, hardly anyone had the abilities to discover traps and monsters, which were skills essential for exploration. As such, people who could be hunters were very few, to the point that they were only born from tribes that specialized in hunting. So that made the career harder to achieve.

Those three with rather rare jobs had arrived as a party. They were practically begging me to suspect them.

“Those three must be spies who took the bait,” I proposed.

“Yes. However, would they really blow their cover this blatantly?” Diablo commented, showing up out of nowhere.

He had been consulting with me on the development of my magic and was looking forward to experimenting with the new surveillance system, but was distraught about the current interruption. He looked like he was about to take out his resentment on the three people on the screen, but I guess he figured out the right call.

“Yeah,” I said, “that’s what I was wondering, too. I thought it might be a diversion, but the town’s security is pretty calm.”

This party was indeed highly suspicious, but their registration information was, quite frankly, too honest. But it may just be a red herring.

“Rimuru, you’re overthinking it,” Veldora interrupted. “Didn’t you say honesty is the best policy?”

Ramiris jumped in next. “That’s right! Putting that aside, it’s more important to figure out how to deal with these people!”

Oh, that’s good, you guys. Always happy-go-lucky. I envied Veldora and Ramiris for not having a care in the world. Ah, whatever. No matter what the truth was, there was no doubt that we needed to be careful.

About that black-haired man wearing a lab coat, Shinjee...*that’s obviously a fake name. It has to be Shinji.*

The brown-haired Mark. Not only was he throwing air bullets, he seemed to be able to throw anything that he grabbed, be it a monster corpse or a fallen stone. I nearly spat out my tea when I saw him throwing a living monster and smashing two skeleton warriors at the same time.

He really was a warrior. He used the Minos's Bardiche skillfully and steamrolled dead spirits one after another.

The black-robed guy, Xin, definitely had an eye for detecting traps. At first, I thought that he had the Skill 'Danger Detection,' but seeing him avoid all the dangerous places in advance, it made me think that it was thanks to his Unique Skill.

Essentially, beyond the 50th floor, traps were more threatening than the monsters.

Undead monsters did not need to breathe, so we adjusted the air composition of this floor inside the Dungeon in an unnoticeable way. I had also prepared an oxygen-free room and such, so that even an unintentional step into the room would lead to immediate asphyxiation.

Besides this, there were poisonous waters, acid swamps, corrosive gas rooms, and so on.

A number of really nasty traps awaited the challengers, damaging not only their bodies but also their equipment. These traps, insidious like the character of their creators, were there to hinder the conquest of the challengers on the 50th floor and below. Yet, the traps were completely useless if the challengers could figure all of them out.

In addition, Xin had an excellent sense of direction, and it was easy for him to take the shortest paths without being fooled by the rotating floors. Obviously, the twists and turns of the labyrinth did little to slow him down.

Whenever they were seriously injured, Shinjee, the young man in a lab coat, would treat them. He could also break down poison, so I guess we couldn't expect much from these traps.

Despite there only being three of them, it was as though they were specialized for conquering a dungeon.

And so, three days passed.

Veldora, Ramiris, and I were happily observing the progress Shinjee and his party were making. No, we weren't thinking of them as a reference for the next time we would conquer it, okay? I mean, look at them; I was merely admiring their fights.

Diablo was reading in the corner of the room, while Shion was taking lessons from Shuna on how to make desserts. Shuna poured the three of us another cup of tea. Today, we were having black tea with a pleasant apple scent to it.

"By the way, Rimuru, you said that those three were people who took the bait. What did you mean by that?" Veldora suddenly asked.

Mmm, what was that... Oh, the conversation from three days ago. I didn't want to turn a deaf ear, but this was Veldora we were talking about.

"Don't worry about that."

"Don't give me the cold shoulder, tell me."

These kinds of things normally went in one ear and out the other with him, but today, he was being remarkably persistent. Ah, fine then.

"Okay, I'll tell you. Actually..."

I explained the situation to Veldora.

"Taking the bait" was both literal and figurative.

We had introduced disaster drills. The idea behind it was to do the impossible and isolate the entire city within the Dungeon. Ramiris's Intrinsic Skill 'Labyrinth Creation' really was amazing. I knew that the floors could be swapped, but even the city aboveground could be swapped with one of the floors.

Once separated, it would be anchored there for twenty-four hours, but you didn't need to worry about water or air. In fact, even the sun was visible. It seemed that there wouldn't be much mental stress for the residents.

Of course, it needed a lot of power, and that's where Veldora-san came into the picture.

That was why I had been planning to isolate the town when the war came.

We had practiced it a few times, and unexpectedly, it turned out to be excellent bait for spies. Since the gate, which was the entrance to the labyrinth, would be the only thing left above the ground, it was bound to raise a few eyebrows. Investigations would surely be carried out—this was the conclusion we reached in a meeting with Benimaru and others.

"I see. Thanks to Mentor, I've also gotten a power-up! I'm glad to be of help."

"Kukuku, I see. Thanks to me, huh," Veldora grinned, giving me those puppy eyes he does when fishing for compliments. It was a pain in the ass, but I had to hand it to him, we couldn't have done it without him.

"Well, you really helped, Veldora-san."

"Gaaa-hahaha! Ain't that right! You all heard it! So, could you give me the cake?"

Of course I can't! That was the piece I had saved for later.

"Then, have mine."

Ooh, thanks Diablo!

"Sorry about that," I apologized.

"No, no, it's the least I can do for you, Rimuru-sama," Diablo assured me.

How reliable. I may as well indulge in his kindness.

I glanced at the screen as I enjoyed my cake. The challengers were trying to take on the 60th floor.

"Knowing they are spies, wouldn't it be better if we captured them?"

"No, I want to see how strong they are—how far they can go. Giving them the prize money does sting, but it's pretty exciting and I don't see any problems with it."

At worst, there was always the option of capturing them and confiscating the money. I was going to let them think I generously paid them, while taking full advantage of them.

"You're amazing as always, Rimuru!"

"That's dirty! But really smart!"

Although Veldora and Ramiris complimented me, for some reason, it didn't make me happy.

Shuna rolled her eyes at us.

"But it seems we failed. Who would've thought that Minos's Bardiche would appear on the first drop. It's a holy weapon, so undead creatures will have to watch out."

"We were getting a little carried away with the first-time guaranteed drop thing..."

The guardian of the 60th floor was Adalmann.

I decided to give him the title "Immortal King" for him to welcome the challengers like he did when he was still a wight king...

Adalmann's powers shined when he led an army. On his own, he was weaker than Gozer and Mezer, so I had a feeling that this time would be another disappointment. Moreover, since Adalmann was a wight, he was extremely weak against holy and light elements.

As long as Mark was using Minos's Bardiche, it seemed like Adalmann's chances of winning were fleetingly low. Although I had given him a lot of advice, this floor's main gimmick was the traps.

Since I was not expecting much of the boss's strength, I had decided that it would be okay to give the challengers some weapons he was weak against. I did kinda screw Adalmann over. Sadly, even he couldn't stop these three, right? Well, it might've been my fault, but I hope you'll forgive me.

At that point, I curbed my expectations and instead looked forward to their battle against the guardians of Floor 70.



"Immortal King" Adalmann curled his fleshless lips when he noticed the presence of intruders in his domain. His jaws clenched, teeth grinding against each other—you could hear a slight creaking sound. It was hard to tell, but apparently, he had a broad grin on his skull.

"You seem happy, Adalmann-sama."

The voice addressing him belonged to the man who had been his trusted friend for many centuries, a former paladin named Albert. He had been at Adalmann's side the longest, even after the day they fell into a trap and died.

When Adalmann joined the lowest ranks of Rimuru's subordinates, Albert devolved into a skeleton swordsman, a low-class monster. He was reduced to such a weak existence that he was lucky not to have disappeared.

Naturally, he became unable to speak. And yet, the Albert of today was speaking fluently. How? The reason was very simple. Right now, Albert wasn't a skeleton swordsman; he wasn't a death knight, which was a few evolutionary stages above. He was a death paladin, an even higher existence.

He remained a dead spirit and had no physical body. However, he appeared no different than when he was alive. The blue will-o'-wisps floating around him and his deathly pale complexion were the only indication that he was no longer among the living.

Adalmann had no lingering attachments to the body he had in his previous life; rather, he loved the bony body he had right now. Albert, on the other hand, didn't share the same opinion, so he used his newfound magic power—being far stronger than any death knight—to construct a body by manipulating magicules. He still had a lingering pride and an emotional attachment to his human appearance of the past. Therefore, he currently had the appearance of a fresh-faced young man—although calling a dead spirit "fresh-faced" was rather strange in itself.

He was decked out with terrifying equipment, and just from a single glimpse, one could understand that Albert was no ordinary individual.



"Indeed, I am in high spirits. Albert, the guests have arrived."

Hearing these words, Albert, too, nodded happily.

"I see, they've finally come."

A handful of words were enough for them to understand each other; these two truly were on the same wavelength.

"Yes. The time has finally come to be useful to him," Adalmann cheered. "After all, it was Rimuru-sama who let us live peacefully. Now that we have been given this much power, you know that we can't afford to make the same mistakes as last time."

"I am well aware of that, of course."

"Fufufu, I suppose it was an unnecessary warning. Perhaps the excitement has made me a bit talkative."

The two looked at each other and laughed. And there was one more creature with them.

"Graaaaaah!!"

A brutal and vicious roar reverberated through the city of the dead.

"I see, you're looking forward to it, too. Very well. You should use that power to your heart's content today. We shall give a testimony of loyalty to God!!"

Quietly, and then profoundly, their eagerness filled the entire area.

Adalmann had once completely lost his faith. But now, the demon lord Rimuru was the subject of his renewed faith—he had become Adalmann's new god.

A few months after his painful defeat...

In order to be useful to Rimuru, Adalmann devoted all of his time into regaining his strength as a wight king as quickly as possible. Thus, he rapidly possessed power which surpassed his own when he was in his prime. That was the degree of Adalmann's devotion.

Meanwhile, Rimuru found faithfulness to this degree rather overbearing. On the contrary, he was thinking, "Sorry guys, it doesn't look like you'll win this one," and was already placing his expectations on the next guardian. But since Adalmann and Albert were blissfully unaware of this, they remained full of energy and enthusiasm.

Especially this time—no, *always* from this point forward—losing was absolutely not allowed; they must continually offer up victories. In high spirits, Adalmann and his companions began to take careful measures against the foolish intruders who would arrive shortly.



The ferocious battle ended as soon as it began.

...Is what I wanted to say, but it all ended so quickly that it left me speechless. I had even gotten out a set of playing cards just in case I got bored, but I didn't get the chance to use them.

It ended with Adalmann steamrolling the invaders. It was a stunningly vivid victory. It wasn't that the opponents were weak—they weren't sick or hurt, either. In fact, they looked to be in great physical condition and were well motivated. But Adalmann and his troops outperformed them in all respects.

The challengers this time were quite strong. When I finished analyzing their Skills, I thought that they were stronger than Adalmann. They were all above rank A and had their own Unique Skills.

Shinjee had a Unique Skill called 'Healer,' which was a very unusual Skill that allowed him to manipulate viruses. When fighting against a living creature, he seemed to be able to destroy them from the inside. He was also evidently capable of manipulating the composition of the air to disseminate microscopic attack agents called viral poison.

Honestly, it was a ridiculously powerful ability. Wouldn't that make him invincible against living creatures? Since it was impossible to see the viral poison with the naked eye, you wouldn't be able to beat Shinjee, if you had nothing to rely on other than your eyesight.

Of course, those microbes could be used for healing, too. Given how it was superior to medical nanomachines, it was an extremely versatile and handy Skill.

Next was Mark and his Unique Skill 'Thrower.' It evidently allowed him to throw anything he could grab, and given how he was able to toss even monsters, it looked like the Skill also applied to anything he could lift.

If combined with gravity manipulation magic, it could potentially be more troublesome than your average kinetic weapon. It would be really effective if used against an army rather than individuals.

Finally, regarding Xin's Skill, it was an assortment of convenient powers. Unique Skill 'Observer' contained 'Instinctual Avoidance,' 'Danger Detection,' 'Trap Detection,' 'Monster Detection,' and 'Presence Detection.' Apparently, he could even spot Shinjee's viral poison. When combined with his battle prowess, he was unparalleled in escaping danger. He was fast and didn't fall into any traps, which made him a natural enemy of the labyrinth.

That was the gist of things. I planned to use those yummy-looking Skills as a reference.

While those three were brilliant on their own, their perfect compatibility with each other made them even stronger as a team. I thought it'd be understandable if they were able to defeat Adalmann.

On the other hand... Adalmann had gotten way stronger than ever before, and just within the past few months. I mean, you wouldn't see much of an improvement in the battle prowess from monsters lacking self-consciousness. Though maybe you would, if they survived for several decades, but it was not something that would change after a few years.

But in the case of Adalmann and Albert—

"Uhm, what's going on? Why are those two so strong right now?!"

And what's with that dragon?

Adalmann, Albert, and an evil dragon that I'd never seen before were all standing in the boss room. It was nearly ten meters long and exuded a noxious miasma. *Where the heck did they dig that thing up from...* I wondered what else had happened while I was away from town on my business trip.

"Hehehe, you must've been surprised! Actually, I kept it a secret, but you gave them equipment, right? They looked overjoyed and were training really hard. Oh, oh, and you remember how the magicule density in the labyrinth is so high? By absorbing those magicules, Adalmann and Albert regained their former power!" Ramiris proudly chirped like she was bragging about pulling off a successful prank.

What she said was true, however—when I examined him more closely, I saw that Adalmann had evolved from a wight to a wight king. He still came across as a bony guy dressed in regal clothes, so I didn't realize that his magic power had increased to such an outrageous level.

Meanwhile, Albert completely skipped over the death knight evolution and turned straight into a higher-level monster called a death paladin.

"Wight kings and death paladins have the same amount of magicules as archdemons..."

"Ga-hahaha! The little guys are trying their best to be useful to us in their own little way!"

They'd supposedly evolved rather easily, but they became much stronger than I'd expected.

"Well then, what is that dragon?"

"What! You didn't know? That's Adalmann's pet."

His pet...? Hmm. Now that you mention it...I feel like Adalmann did say something about wanting to keep a pet. I never would've expected such a fiendish dragon.

The dragon was a death dragon, the pinnacle of dead monsters. Since Shuna and the others were familiar with it, they thought I knew about it as well. This was partially my fault. It made me realize once again that ReCoCo (report, communicate, and consult) truly was important.

So, moving onto the main point, the events of the battle.

There wasn't much to say. Adalmann sat still on his throne while the death dragon laid calmly to his left. Albert went ahead on his own and defeated everyone just like that.

Mark didn't even get any time to display the true abilities of his Minos's Bardiche. Albert blocked him with a weapon of equal class—the unique-grade Cursed Sword—and flawlessly cut him down.

Xin, witnessing this for himself, became dumbfounded, lowering his defenses for a split-second. Albert didn't let an opportunity like that go to waste and attacked Xin with lightning speed, turning into a blur. Xin was defeated just as easily as Mark.

"Huh?!" Shinjee couldn't help but scream in shock and rushed to shoot Albert with the holy magic 'Holy Cannon.' Holy Knights were good at this kind of magic, but barely anyone else could use it. He didn't mention his proficiency with it when he registered, so this might've been one of his trump cards.

This spell was suited for rapid-fire, so he managed to land a direct hit on Albert. Since it looked avoidable to me, I thought Albert must've been careless—but my worries had been misplaced. The only reason Albert didn't move was because he didn't need to.

"No way!" Shinjee cried out as Albert's sword sliced through him.

The battle ended there.

Hold on, Albert is undead, so shouldn't he be weak to the holy element?

To the people who thought the same way, I'm one of you. See, you aren't wrong, so why was Albert completely fine? The answer lay with Adalmann's trump card, Extra Skill 'Holy-Demonic Reversal.'

«Report. 'Holy-Demonic Reversal' is a secret technique created by the individual Adalmann. With the effects of this Skill, attributes of holy and demonic elements can be exchanged.»

With that Skill, Albert had his attribute changed from demonic element to holy element. It didn't affect his equipment in the slightest, and the fact that Albert was undead did not change, either. This meant there was still no life force for his equipment to suck up. Swapping his element seemed to be all fine and dandy.

When targeting allies, Adalmann didn't have to worry about them resisting his Skill.

I thought "holy undead" was a joke, but Adalmann's 'Holy-Demonic Reversal' proved otherwise.

Since Adalmann and his team were dead spirits, they were resistant to all types of attribute attacks. Physical attacks, too, were almost useless against them. Now, they had overcome their biggest weakness—the holy element. Let's just say that this situation was beyond what an ordinary challenger could handle.

Adalmann's team had won without having to use the magic I had taught them. That was how easy Shinjee and his friends were defeated and turned into particles of light.



"My God, did you watch us? We offer our victory to thee!!" Adalmann shouted at the top of his lungs like a true fanatic.

Wasn't Adalmann and his gang a little *too* strong to guard the 60th floor? I *did* tell Adalmann to challenge a party with a party, didn't I? Well, he definitely obeyed my orders and fought opponents with equal numbers.

But he was still cheating, right? Why, you ask? Because, if three Special A—Calamity-class—beings appeared at the same time, they could easily obliterate a

small country. If this was happening under my nose, then there must've been more things they were hiding from me.

I'll save Ramiris's interrogation for when things settle down. Today, I'll show my appreciation for Adalmann and his crew.

"You've done a great job, Adalmann! This is something that needs to be said in person, so come to the command room."

"Oh, oooh! I thank you for those words, they bring me boundless joy! I shall forthwith come to your side!"

As usual, he was excessively formal. Well, this was simply your quintessential Adalmann.

"It appears Albert has regained his voice. Can you bring him here as well?"

"Understood. Then, what about my death dragon?"

"I'm afraid you need to leave it there."

"Yes sir!"

The death dragon looked rather depressed, but I had to harden my heart and reject the request. It was something like ten meters long, which was way too large to even fit in this room, okay? Aside from Veldora's private hall on the 100th floor, the command room wasn't that big. I felt bad for the dragon, but my hands were effectively tied.

I asked Shion to make black tea for Adalmann and Albert. However, she spun around and responded with a serious face, "Can skeletons drink?"

"..."

Right, she had a point. Although Albert seemed to have regained flesh, Adalmann was still the same old skeleton. Well, maybe they could at least enjoy the smell?

"It's more about setting the mood, you know?"

"Oh, really? Understood!"

I waited for Adalmann and Albert's arrival as we were having this bizarre conversation.

"I sincerely apologize for keeping you waiting, Rimuru-sama!"

"I am eternally grateful to be able to have an audience with you."

Adalmann and Albert both kneeled down in front of me.

Looking at these two up close instead of on the big screen made me doubt whether these really were the same individuals—they had grown too strong.

"Hmm, that was a splendid job. Albert, was it? You handled that sword masterfully. And Adalmann, your performance as a guardian was very impressive. Keep up the good work!"

"Mm-hmm, we're counting on you!"

Veldora and Ramiris started encouraging them before I could even say a single word. When it came to these situations, you had to be the first one to speak, or otherwise you'd be hard-pressed to come up with something to add. *Oh well, just gotta play it safe.*

"Man, ain't that the truth. I haven't seen you guys in a while, so I was really surprised at how much you've grown."

It was more of an evolution than growth.

"*Those three were pretty strong, so I thought it might be a tough fight for you guys*"—is what I actually wanted to say, but there were times when you had to bite your tongue, and this was one of them.

" "Yes sir!!" "

Adalmann and Albert were overcome with emotion.

To wash away this little sense of guilt, I told them to take a seat.

"This...this is truly a pleasant aroma. If anyone else served me tea, I might have taken it as an insult—"

Ah, she had a point after all, huh? I guess it would be a cruel joke to people who were unable to drink.

—However, with Rimuru-sama's invitation, this aroma alone is enough to soothe my mind and relieve my weary bones."

That was good to hear, but Shion was the one who brewed it...

"Delicious. A sweet and lovely scent, like nectar. I, Albert, am extremely grateful to be blessed with this moment of bliss."

You guys are really overreacting...

It appeared that Albert's body was structured using magicules. It was a temporary incarnation only made possible inside the labyrinth.

"Adalmann, why don't you incarnate like Albert?"

"...Eh?"

"No, I just thought it would be nice for you to enjoy the tea that way."

"Th-that may be true, but in my case, I am placing greater importance on the mood, I would say..."

I see. I didn't understand it, but he must've had his reasons. *Welp, who am I to tell him how to enjoy his tea.*

"In that case, I won't force you."

On that note, I changed the topic.

"By the way," I began, "you're brilliant with that Extra Skill 'Holy-Demonic Reversal.' Merely being able to develop such a Skill tells me how hard you've been working."

"Thank you very much! This wouldn't have been possible without Berettadono's help. And..." Adalmann started to go off on another tangent.

I subtly changed the discussion and now uncovered a stunning tale in which even Luminas allegedly played a role.

"Luminas-sama said it was an 'apology' and taught me one of her secret techniques: 'Reversal of Day and Night.' This was then remodeled by Berettadono's Unique Skill 'Double-Crosser,' and as a result, I mastered this great Skill."

This was the whole story. The "apology," as Luminas called it, was for overlooking the rampage of the Seven Luminaries.

Why did Granbell plan to eliminate the talented Adalmann? I had my own theory about it—other than Granbell, the members of the Seven Luminaries had

desperately tried to remove any threats that challenged their positions, so they ultimately decided to eliminate Adalmann. On the contrary, Granbell thought that Adalmann would only be useful to him if he could overcome such a trap.

Adalmann and his entourage fought against the zombie dragon, ending that battle in a draw. Perhaps that wasn't the result Granbell was looking for. He felt that if Adalmann couldn't even beat an enemy of that caliber, then it would be impossible for him to be a guardian of humanity—this is what I believed had occurred. Perhaps this conclusion was based on what I saw in the aloof Granbell's final moments.

It would be tactless for me to voice my theory though.

While hoping that one day Adalmann would realize it himself, I changed the subject yet again.

"That's brilliant. I'll have to give Luminas my regards later, but first things first, Adalmann!"

"Sir!"

"As of now, you can beat the current guardian of the 70th floor, right?"

"What do you mean by that?"

I gave a detailed explanation to the confused Adalmann.

.....

.....

...

Right now, Floors 61 through 70 were the golem zone. They were filled with mechanical, tireless soldiers. Some of the special Area Bosses were even outfitted with prototype firearms. This zone had many types of evil traps, including land mines. Nevertheless, they weren't strong enough to kill, which heavily implied that this whole setup was for the healers to be able to use the zone as a training ground.

Also, the Boss Monster was a remodeled Elemental Colossus. Vesta had finally completed his brainchild with the help of Kaijin. They had succeeded in miniaturizing it and reducing its weight while maintaining the high defense offered by magisteel. Its mobility was greatly improved too, and careful consideration was given to completely protect the cockpit.

Even though it wasn't autonomous, it was designed with room for a pilot to control it from the inside. It also had a very handy remote-control feature that let you operate it "telepathically."

Around this time, Beretta should've been controlling it remotely. And since nobody was technically inside, that meant it was immune to attacks from viral poison. Even Minos's Bardiche wouldn't have made a dent in its magisteel body since it was covered in laminar armor. Plus, it featured 'Magic Interference' thanks to Charybdis's scales.

It was a wholeheartedly invincible iron guardian. That was the Demon Colossus in a nutshell, the updated version of the Elemental Colossus.

Shinjee's team couldn't conquer the 70th floor—I was sure of it.

.....

.....

...

However, after watching how Adalmann's team fought, I changed my mind.

"Veldora, who do you think is stronger: Adalmann, or the Demon Colossus?"

"Hm. Adalmann, without a doubt."

"Exactly. It's official, Adalmann. You've been promoted to guardian of the 70th floor."

I'm not making a mistake...am I? If Veldora thinks so too, then then this must be the right call.

«Answer. The difference in combat power between the individuals 'Adalmann' and 'Demon Colossus' is...»

Ah, hmm.

This was more about the mood, so I really didn't need all the minute details...

"Oh, oooh!! I, Adalmann, shall spare no effort to live up to your expectations, Rimuru-sama!"

"I, Albert, humbly pledge myself to my lord, Adalmann."

The two of them declared while kneeling down in front of me.

I look away for a bit and these guys get crazy strong, huh?

The Demon Colossus wasn't actually weak, but its presence as a boss honestly was. And above all, we couldn't afford to let it get destroyed again. Unless it was operated with a soul properly enclosed inside, it would remain out of the scope of Ramiris's power. It'd be a hassle to try to find out whether or not it would resurrect if it were destroyed.

It would be a different story if it had a sense of self. Or if someone actually piloted it? No, rather than that, it might no longer be considered just an item if someone possessed it...

Unfortunately, we currently didn't have any plans for that. So, there weren't any problems promoting Adalmann's team.

"Great! Then, as of today, exchange Floors 51 through 60 with Floors 61 through 70!"

"Understood! Leave it to me!"

That was all it took to swap entire sections of the labyrinth.

*

After congratulating both Adalmann and Albert, I decided to have their floors switched. Now that business had ended, I was about to tell them to leave when suddenly—

"This seems like a good time to interrupt; there is something I wish to report," Diablo, who had been quiet all this time, announced.

"What is it?"

"My servant Razen has sent me a message via 'Magic Communication,' saying that he has urgent matters to discuss with you. An old master of his has arrived and is requesting an audience, it seems. This man goes by the name of Gadra."

Hmm, I don't recognize him.

«Report. There is a high chance of this person being the one that is credited as the author of several grimoires.»

He sounded like a pretty famous guy. I'd heard that Razen was also quite the brilliant and revered archmage, but if this was his teacher, then he was probably even more brilliant.

This is interesting; I think it'll be okay to see him.

"Isn't that a trap? We're on the eve of war with the Empire, so a meeting at this time is nothing short of dubious."

"Exactly! There is no need for you to meet with such a suspicious person!"

Shion's vigilance was maxed out, beyond mine, even.

Although, I did sort of understand where she was coming from. Given the current situation and time, and also how her group was supposed to be my bodyguards, it was her job to protect me from unnecessary danger.

I wasn't a particularly cautious person, so I figured it'd be better to listen to my subordinates in this regard.

"Rightfully so," Diablo agreed. "You do not need to heed the opinions of a man like Razen. Naturally, that extends to me, as well."

He sounded so genuine, but most likely he just sought to avoid any hassles.

If my two secretaries were against it, then I'd refuse the offer. That's what I was about to say, until I noticed Adalmann fidgeting out of the corner of my eye.

Poor Adalmann, I totally got how he was feeling. It was like when you were about to leave a meeting with your boss and a visitor suddenly came in, or the phone rang. Disturbing your boss was a no-go, so you just had to sit there helplessly, watching the time tick by. All you wished for was to go home—this happened way too often at the office.

Huh, it was just me? Whatever, it doesn't matter anyway.

"Adalmann, sorry I got sidetracked. I've said everything I had to say, you can leave now."

"Ah, no! You don't need to worry about us, the thing is..."

"Hm?"

"Actually, um... I..."

"Uh-huh."

"About this person called Gadra whom you were talking about..."

"Yes..."

"He might be a friend whom I once knew."

"What?"

I caught myself staring at Adalmann unintentionally; he was getting anxious and fidgety. *No, I don't think you're a traitor...* He was shaking so bad that I wanted to tell him that.

I told Diablo to put the reply on hold and asked Adalmann for more details.

It turned out that Gadra and Adalmann were friends more than a thousand years ago. Adalmann presumed he had died already, but since Gadra was an archmage, he said it wasn't outside the realm of possibility for him to have extended his lifespan using the secret art he created.

After all, the person who used the mystic art ‘Reincarnation’ and saved Adalmann’s life was apparently the same Gadra. He also happened to know the name Razen and thought that he was one of Gadra’s oldest and greatest disciples.

After listening to a couple more tidbits, it appeared as though the person in question really was the Gadra whom Adalmann had once known.

“Diablo.”

“Understood. I will arrange a date and time and prepare for the meeting.”

As expected from the *useful* secretary—I need but only call him and he understands my intention.

The *hopeless* secretary didn’t have any objections, so I decided to have a meeting with Gadra.



For the first time, Shinji and his gang experienced “resurrection” after getting killed on the 60th floor.

When they returned, they were greeted with all kinds of reactions from the many spectators, ranging from boos over their loss to words of consolation.

Battles in the labyrinth were broadcasted exclusively, and the trio’s fights garnered a lot of popularity. Of course, they could have refused to let their battles get broadcasted, since that was part of an opt-in agreement. For two reasons, however, Shinji decided to allow it.

Firstly, they would receive a cut of the profits earned by broadcasting their battles.

Secondly, he figured that if they became famous, it would guarantee their safety.

After all, they were in the heart of enemy territory, and getting assassinated was less likely if they were well known. Besides, they were told that only the boss battles would be aired, so they didn’t have to be mindful of it the entire time. They were sure to profit quite a bit from this, so Shinji had no reason to decline. The other two didn’t complain, either. Hence, they accepted the contract, and the outcome was this reaction by the people around them.

“That was unfortunate. Looks like you’ll have to train a bit more and try again.”

“No way, that was impossible. What the hell were those monstrosities? That swordsman was wicked fast, and the skeleton sitting on the throne—that was a legendary monster, right?”

“Probably a wight king. Even a high-ranking demon would be no match for it; it’s a living calamity that controls death itself.”

“That reminds me, was that dragon even alive? It didn’t look like decoration, but if it were to join the fray, then, to be honest, humans wouldn’t stand a chance of winning.”

A lot of questions were getting thrown around.

The trio just laughed in response and did their best to escape from the scene.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to place our hopes on the Hero.”

"With this, you guys have managed to reach the same record as Masayuki-sama. If you plan to win, you'll have to find a way to deal with that boss while Masayuki-sama is busy preparing for the war."

"Yeah. I was betting on you guys winning. You'll get 'em next time!"

The shouting followed them all the way as they headed back to the inn.

The three collapsed on their beds as soon as they reached their room.

"Hey, what should we do now?" Mark inquired.

"There's nothing we *can* do; just let me rest for a bit," replied Shinji, utterly exhausted.

They had enthusiastically challenged the boss, but the difficulty made the previous 59 floors look like a walk in the park. On the 60th floor, even the small fries had group coordination. A sentient monster called a death lord¹⁴ attacked them, accompanied by its own subordinates. Even after somehow overcoming these difficult enemies and eventually reaching the boss room, in the end, they met a grisly death.

"...Are we reporting this to Yuuki-san?"

Xin's question made Shinji sit up. He sighed as he sat on his bed.

Mark and Xin also sat up and the three of them faced one another.

"Report it or not, that thing is impossible. Who knew the secret area would be this intense?"

"Yeah, we were completely fine until the 59th floor. So, what the hell was that 60th floor? The death lord was roaming around with its own platoon of death knights. That's a slaughterhouse for any ordinary soldier!"

"Yeah."

"...That was bad. The power level of that floor's guardians shot up exponentially compared to the previous floors. Not just the knight that defeated us, but also that skeleton on the throne and the death dragon beside it... I think those three are the secret bosses..."

The trio started shooting the breeze eagerly. The excitement got the better of them as they chattered away without a worry in the world. The facades they'd kept up these few days melted away.

"Also, that skeletal boss, who sat on the throne the whole time, is a wight king. Anyone with advanced appraisal magic could've seen just what that skeleton really is. But its presence is completely different in person, compared to on a screen!"

"Right on. If you bumped into that guy without any preparation, it wouldn't end nicely."

"...To be honest," Xin concluded, "I don't want to challenge it again."

The wight king hadn't even joined the battle. He hadn't moved from his throne, as if to display the dignity of a king.

"The gozu monster, which seemed like a regular boss, was easily A rank. With that as a reference, the 60th floor is way too overpowered, isn't it?"

¹⁴ Kanji name: Death Knight Captain

"...That was just awful. Maybe everything up until the 50th floor was just intended to lower our guard."

"But now I'm sure of it. There *must* be something in the labyrinth if such strong monsters are protecting it," Shinji concluded without a shred of doubt in his voice.

"I guess so. I mean, that knight named Albert was brutally strong."

"Even its equipment was different from the others. I tried analyzing it while Mark was fighting, and shockingly, it turned out to be a unique-grade masterpiece."

"No wonder. And here I thought I could crush any opponent, no matter what they had, with my Minos's Bardiche."

"Come on, beating a boss with a weapon that you've picked up only works in games."

"Yeah, true, we kinda overestimated ourselves, huh."

"...Yeah."

The three looked at each other again and sighed heavily. After their energetic discussion, they had finally calmed down. They brewed tea for themselves and took a breather.

"Wanna give it another shot tomorrow?" Shinji asked tentatively.

"Are you serious?"

"...It's impossible. No matter how many times we try, we'll always fail."

"I thought so."

"That Hero is that Masayuki guy Yuuki-san told us about, right? I've heard that he's just a lucky teenager, but he's challenged the 60th floor, huh?" Mark remarked.

"No," Shinji answered, "it looks like he hasn't. I heard he's zipping along, without dying, not even once."

"And what about the others?"

"There's a rumor that the strongest ones are still challenging the 50th floor. However, they didn't sign the broadcasting contract so the highest record, of those broadcasted, would be Masayuki's conquest of the 50th floor. Other than that, it seems like there are several groups on the 40th floor."

Even if you agreed to the broadcasting contract, they wouldn't broadcast you on every floor. Only the floors that were a multiple of ten were equipped with cameras. Other than those, it seemed like news crews occasionally followed the challengers around for scoops during events and such.

Since they had challenged the 60th floor while on air, Shinji and his group had become the talk of the town. Apparently, they also became the focus of gambling, owing to the countless records they broke.

"You know," Shinji pondered, "I think it's likely Masayuki received some behind-the-scenes info. That being the existence of the secret bosses on the 60th floor."

"Then it's no wonder we lost. Two brokenly strong guys and a dragon to top it off; can you believe it? That labyrinth is horribly unbalanced."

"...It was reasonably balanced till the 50th floor, so those really must be the secret bosses. I'm sure the town is beyond that floor."

The three consoled themselves as they chatted and began planning their next steps.

"Now that we're in the limelight, we can't continue spying."

"That's not a problem. As I said earlier, we're safer this way."

"...We've also only been exploring the labyrinth."

"Then, why don't we wait for Gadra-sama to come? We can't keep challenging the Dungeon by ourselves, can we? Or should we do some training?" Mark wondered aloud.

"First," Shinji replied with a grim smile, "let's report to Yuuki-san that there's definitely something beyond that floor and that the guardians were abnormally strong."

"Next, let's tell him how huge the labyrinth really is. No matter what magic is used to make such large spaces, it extends so far down it can't possibly be man-made, right?" Mark added.

"...Also, don't forget to mention that the monsters on that floor were far and away the toughest ones yet," Xin reminded everyone.

Shinji nodded. "I know. Then, let's go sightseeing after contacting him."

Now that the matter was settled, it was time to act. The trio stepped out onto the busy streets of the night.



Shinji and his colleagues went to the outskirts of town and started reporting as instructed. They forwarded a brief message to Yuuki, and after about ten minutes, they were contacted by him through 'Magic Communication.'

<Hey, it's good to know you guys are doing fine.>

<We were okay up until yesterday. Today has just been awful.>

<Hahaha, seems like you guys have had it rough. So, what do you plan to do next?>

<It depends on Master Gadra. We can't conquer the 60th floor alone and there is no way to sneak into the labyrinth.>

<Just as I thought. Then, let me ask you one thing.>

<Yes?>

<How strong do you think the boss of the 60th floor was? What does your gut tell you?>

This was something that only the trio could understand. It meant how strong the opponent was when compared to the ranks of the Imperial Guardians.

Shinji thought hard to himself. He wasn't typically interested in the "rank battles" of the military. He didn't have any ambition of rising through the ranks, so he hadn't participated in any.

Yuuki had taken him under his wing, and Shinji was indebted to him in other various ways, and thus he became Yuuki's subordinate with the intention of repaying his kindness. Since he was reluctant to help criminal organizations, Shinji instead chose the path of the army. So when Yuuki became a corps commander,

he was quickly moved from his former department, the Armored Corps, to the Mixed Corps.

Some of the otherworlders had a similar mindset. They didn't show off their powers and tried to live a carefree life, avoiding serious responsibilities. The powers and abilities of these people were a mystery, so it wasn't really known whether the Imperial Guardians were actually *the* strongest. But at least on paper, they were the strongest force in the Empire. In a sense, it was natural to use the rankings as a guide.

<Let's see. Probably *at least* within the upper fifty. Anything lower is out of the question, I'd say.›

<And that's just for this knight, Albert, alone?›

<Yes. Ah, I'm not sure if this will help you get an idea for its power, but I had once joined an archdemon subjugation force as its military doctor. I only caught a glimpse of that demon, but the wight king that I saw today has about the same magicule count as that thing.›

<Could you be referring to Lakeshore Dyed Scarlet?›

<Ah, yes. That's right.›

<Understood. That's actually really helpful. Then, you three should take it easy until Old Master Gadra joins up with you.› Yuuki advised as he ended the call.

.....

.....

...

The Lakeshore Dyed Scarlet incident was one of the most hideous stains on the Empire's history.

A vassal state adjacent to a beautiful lake rebelled and called for its independence. At that time, the king was outmatched in military strength and—out of sheer desperation—ultimately triggered the ensuing tragedy.

It was a forbidden secret art called demon summoning. The king ordered the magicians to summon the strongest demon they could control, and the court's magic division complied. As a result, the little country was destroyed when an archdemon answered the summoning.

As a small country with a population of less than ten thousand, there was no way it could stand a chance against the Empire. Nevertheless, the king had a reason for declaring independence—as it would happen, an Imperial aristocrat wanted the princess of the country, the king's only daughter, as his concubine.

The Empire was exceedingly large and powerful, so the emperor didn't pay attention to every little thing that happened in the small, remote vassal states. Even though all of the land belonged to him, the regional management was split up among the nobility.

The treatment of the vassal states remained at the mercy of the nobility. It was a common sight in the Empire to see the margraves, who were in charge of the local regions, abusing the emperor's name for tyranny.

The demon demanded the king's daughter as the price for its summoning. The king adamantly refused, but the head court magician, whose mind shattered the moment he saw the demon and went insane, complied with the demon's request.

The demon possessed the princess's body with a sinister smile on its face. The king was furious, but his anger turned into terror as the demon, now in possession of a physical body, went on a rampage.

When word of this little country's ruin reached the Empire, they decided to subdue the demon. Had they acted any later, the world would've seen the birth of a second Guy Crimson.

The beautiful lake turned scarlet, stained with the blood of the small country's inhabitants. This abominable incident was known ever since as the most tragic event to tarnish the history of the Empire in the last few centuries.

The Lakeshore Dyed Scarlet incident was resolved by the Armored Corps, which had branches throughout the Empire.

That was how it was written in the official report.

However, reality was often different.

The main army was no match for the archdemon. Shinji, who was a medic in the subjugation force, had watched from afar as a battle between a small number of elite soldiers and the archdemon played out, ending with the defeat of said demon.

Something about the entire incident was fishy. It was true that the nobles had been tyrants, but Shinji questioned the truth of the matter surrounding the attack the demon had led against the country's citizens.

Besides, the Empire's initial response was abnormally fast. Information about the incident was transmitted to the mainland of the Empire, from which they decided to dispatch a subjugation force, then the subjugation unit was organized. With this much time, the demon's incarnation would have been completed. However, that didn't happen.

Shinji believed that the fact that the Empire was able to prevent the demon's incarnation at the very last minute proved that the Empire knew about the situation from the very beginning. But he didn't plan on telling anyone else about his conclusion. Witnessing the strength of those who fought the demon for himself, he realized that there were things in this world that you were better off not knowing.

It's likely those people were top-ranking Imperial Guardians...

Shinji firmly believed that he couldn't beat them no matter how hard he tried. He truly felt that he lived in a different world than them.

This was what made him lose interest in rank battles.

.....

.....

...

Shinji took a deep breath to release his tension as Mark and Xin called out to him.

"Finished?"

"...Good job."

"Yeah, the report is over with. Let's take it easy until Master Gadra arrives."

"Sure. Anyway, Shinji, you're actually a survivor of the Lakeshore Dyed Scarlet?"

"...I'm glad that you survived."

"Well, you know, all I did was play dead at that time and got away with it, but I think it was a fine play on my part, if I say so myself."

"No, no, just coming back alive is incredible. Less than thirty percent returned from that mission, huh?"

"Yeah. I don't want to join anything like that ever again. For one thing, I ended up being completely useless as a medic back there."

"...Eh?"

"I mean, everyone who got hit died immediately so I didn't even have a chance to do anything. That's why my priority was to just get the heck out of there."

"That's awful. Are archdemons *that* dangerous?"

"For the demon that I saw, *dangerous* doesn't even begin to describe it. Actually, I felt like our eyes met but I think it let me go. And those crimson eyes...I nearly wet myself just thinking about them..." Shinji explained, laughing at their surprise.

"However, if that skeleton is on the same level as the terrible archdemon, then we obviously can't beat it."

"...Are they really at the same level?"

"Judging by their magicule amount, at least. They say the longer a demon lives, the stronger it becomes. The one I saw must've been on the older side."

If not, then the higher ups of the Empire wouldn't have taken such measures, he was about to add, but stopped himself.

"Well," Shinji continued, "worrying about that won't solve anything. I heard they're working on a machine which can be used to measure the power of others, but it will probably be meaningless. That knight, Albert, was unbelievably strong for his magicule count. Besides, I want you two to remember the classes we got in school; your physical strength isn't the only thing that can win you a fight, is it?"

"I understand what you mean."

"...Yeah."

"That's what I mean. Among the demons, there are some with immeasurable strength. That's all you need to remember."

As Shinji recommended, the other two left the matter alone.



Changing gears, the trio rushed to the Freedom Association's office before it closed for the night. They wanted to sell the magic crystal and excess equipment to the Materials Department.

"Hey, hey, this is a magic crystal from the lower floors, eh? The quality is completely different."

"Oh, is that another slotted weapon? Were it made of pure magisteel, you'd never find anything like it in another country, y'know?"

The Association workers were happily discussing the trio's findings, pleased to handle all the materials from the lower floors.

You could make more profits if you carefully selected the buyers. However, since the trio's purpose was to infiltrate and investigate the labyrinth, they didn't want to spread their name or make more acquaintances than were really necessary.

Besides, the sales they made in the Association were superb. Their investigation had hit a dead end, but the profits they made were quite good. They had earned a lot of money within the past few days.

Military personnel received an annual salary, the payment being in advance. So if you were promoted, the difference would be paid the following year. Even those who didn't have money would be paid in advance on the day they joined the army. This was paid as part of the salary, after calculating the number of days remaining in the year.

Basically, you had nothing to lose in the army. Even if a soldier died on the battlefield, the advanced payment was to be considered as part of the compensation.

Common soldiers—privates—received only the basic pay of ten gold coins, which amounted to 1,000,000 yen per year. The army took care of their food, clothing, and shelter, so the poor considered the salary to be a small fortune. Various benefits, bonuses based on rank, as well as hazard pay could also be supplemented.

Mark and Xin had the rank of first lieutenant, while Shinji was a major¹⁵ with a military doctor qualification. They didn't have the authority to command others, but their positions came with certain privileges.

In the Empire, otherworlders were given preferential treatment. At the very least, they were treated as second lieutenants, but Shinji was given better treatment than the others. That was why the trio's salary was much higher than ordinary soldiers.

The bonus given to a first lieutenant was 36 gold coins. The bonus given to a major was 44 gold coins. Four gold coins were added to the bonus amount for each rank you climbed. The annual salary of Mark and Xin totaled to about 50 gold coins and Shinji's was a little less than 70.

Even though soldiers earned more than commoners, it wasn't enough for them to live a luxurious life. They would be rich in the countryside, but the cost of living in the capital was high. However, you would face this world's harsh realities if you left the army to live independently.

Being able to live a stable life was attractive in itself.

But today, they had learned something.

The three of them were debating whether they should quit the army and live together in the Labyrinth City. They earned more than 300 gold coins in their latest

¹⁵ A major is two ranks higher, between them is captain.

sale with the Freedom Association alone. This short-term mission had earned them way more than what all three of them combined could make in a year.

On top of that, they could never have hoped to possess their own unique-grade equipment unless it was provided by the Empire. All in all, the mission was greatly rewarding.

All of them had realized this truth but hesitated to say it aloud. They walked without saying a word before stopping to eat at one of the high-class restaurants of the capital city Rimuru.

They hadn't experienced luxury in a long time.

"...Are you sure this is a good idea? Selling equipment on our own like that?" Xin, who was a little timid, asked nervously.

"It's totally fine," Shinji assured him, unperturbed. "It's not like we sold everything, and we have already set aside some samples."

"And no matter what, we can't bring everything back with us," Mark added. "So, if we keep the good quality ones, then there won't be any reason for them to complain."

All of the goods looted during a military action belonged to the army, except when soldiers were permitted to plunder. In this case, they couldn't complain if everything were taken away from them.

However, Shinji and his crew were tasked with the mission to investigate the Dungeon while posing as adventurers. So, it would only seem natural for them to play the part; you could think of it as a perk of this kind of job.

Besides, Yuuki wouldn't ask them to hand over any of the looted goods. There was no doubt that the trio could keep everything except what they had to submit as part of their mission.

"But, you know, if they're going to take away all the money we earned, we'll seriously consider immigrating here, right?" Shinji suggested, and they both readily agreed.

One gold coin equaled 100,000 yen. This held true in the Empire as well. The gold coins made in the Dwarven Kingdom were in circulation far and wide, and even the Empire recognized them as legal tender. Since the coins they had earned were the same, they could still use them back home.

"I seriously think we should do that."

"...Yeah. I was joking earlier, but if we try our best, we are pretty sure to have a better life here."

Shinji was half serious about that, but Mark and Xin were way more interested than he thought.

It was true that the Empire was the hub of cutting-edge technology and fostered a prosperous culture—the capital was especially advanced. The food was tasty, and the living standards were high. As long as they had the money, they could live as happily as they did in their previous world.

However, the trio were active soldiers in the army, so it wasn't an understatement to say that death was waiting for them around every corner. In that respect, the Dungeon was a blessing for them. After all, death would never catch them there. They were skeptical at first, but after experiencing it for

themselves and getting resurrected, their doubts were instantly erased. If they didn't have to worry about dying, then they could earn as much money as possible and live every day to its fullest. It was quite reasonable for Shinji and the others to think this was the better choice.

But even if you had enough money, it would be useless if there wasn't any entertainment to spend it on. This, too, was possible in Rimuru, which had more than its fair share of entertainment centers.

They had a place called the Colosseum, which was open to the public on days when there were no events taking place in it. On such days, the citizens were free to hang out and play there. Sports like football, baseball, and various others were popular and commonly played in Tempest, so those who challenged the labyrinth also had a great time. There were hot springs and opera houses as well. Plays were also staged, which—as they found out during their investigations—were packed every day.

The trio found that the food was just as good—if not better—as the Empire's. The Japanese flavor that Shinji missed dearly, plenty of sweets, and a wide variety of liquors. Even the dishes that didn't exist in this world had been recreated here. As someone from Earth, Shinji's heart was truly enamored of this city.

Frankly, they were obliged only to Yuuki, and it seemed like Yuuki himself didn't want to be hostile to Demon Lord Rimuru. So even if Shinji and his friends were to move to this country, they wouldn't really be considered traitors.

"Despite desertion in the face of the enemy ensuring us a death sentence, and the fact that we are currently on the eve of war, it's not like we are currently at war."

"I was thinking the exact same thing, Shinji. We can still resign from the army voluntarily, right?"

"...I think it depends on Yuuki-san."

Had war broken out, it would have been desertion, but fortunately, the situation was still peaceful. Depending on how you interpreted things, it wasn't *impossible* to retire and leave the army.

"The problem is the war," muttered Mark.

This was the exact reason why they couldn't come to any concrete decision. There was no doubt a war was about to start, and this land would be directly subjected to its ravages. If it weren't for that, they would have already chosen to immigrate here.

"Which side do you think will win?"

"...Rather, if we were ordered to attack this city, what would we do?"

The three exchanged looks with one another.

The food, which they found so tasty before, suddenly lost all its flavor. There were two reasons why they couldn't do such a thing. They had only stayed in the city for a short period of time, but it had already grown on them. The thought that this city would vanish disheartened them. There was another reason, too...

Considering the strength of the boss in that labyrinth, it wasn't hard for them to believe that the powerful people in this country had incredible abilities.

"Normally, I'd think it's only natural for the guardians who protect important facilities to be strong, wouldn't it? But is this country's army *really* weaker than the guardians of the Empire? That borders on wishful thinking," Shinji reasoned.

"That's what I think as well. Demon Lord Rimuru himself must be on another level," Mark murmured in agreement. "A long time ago, that evil dragon Veldora annihilated an entire city, and that story doesn't seem to be a joke. I think even that wight king is capable of the same."

Shinji nodded. In all honesty, the monsters in this country would be capable of causing similar calamities.

"It's just my estimation, but it seems like archdemons are capable of using nuclear magic, and I think that is comparable to the tactical nuclear weapons on Earth."

"I think so, too. Our common sense dictates that 'war is about numbers,' but fighting that boss using quantity seems futile."

"—I don't think we can win unless we have dozens of warriors who are at our level."

They all had worry in their eyes as they glanced at each other once again.

It was immediately after this that they received the 'Magic Communication' from Gadra.



An old man prostrated himself before me. Behind him were the three challengers, who I had been watching on the big screen yesterday, also prostrating.

The old man was called Gadra. He was the one who had requested an audience with me through Razen and Diablo. He wasn't wearing anything flashy, just a somewhat high-tier magical robe. His eyes were sharp and didn't match his old body.

Just as I'd thought, Shinjee was actually Shinji. His real name was apparently Shinji Tanimura. It appeared that the other two had registered themselves using their real names. These three seemed to be this archmage Gadra's subordinates. The trio worked for Yuuki, but this time, they were under Gadra's care as assistants in this investigation.

That was what they'd told me so far...

Gadra assumed this pose right after he had finished talking and the others followed suit, but if they were to keep this up any longer, the talks would go nowhere.

"Uh, well...I figured as much. Anyway, we really can't have a comfortable discussion like this, so why don't we go somewhere else?"

"Raise your heads," Shion ordered them after I spoke.

For some reason, she said it rather pompously. This was why I found formalities annoying. I always felt like I messed up the procedure, and the truth was that I really didn't want to do this.

"Y-yes ma'am!!"

Given Gadra's exaggerated reply, I already knew that the upcoming discussions would be a hassle.

The meeting place was the reception room, the cheaper one. If I had to pick, I'd prefer this one since I could comfortably relax there. The opulent one had high-class furnishings, and I just couldn't stop worrying about it getting nicks and scratches. If someone spilled tea, the expensive carpet would be ruined.

Live within your means—as a lower middle-class citizen, I was more comfortable with the furniture I was used to. Shinji and the others appeared to be of the same mind; their faces weren't quite as gloomy.

"Coffee or tea—which do you prefer?" I asked them without beating about the bush.

"T-then...coffee," answered Shinji.

"S-Shinji!!"

Gadra's expression changed to anger as he shouted, but I calmed him down.

"Gadra-san, how about you?"

"M-me? Uh, t-then, I'll have the same thing as Shinji."

Huh? Maybe coffee didn't exist in the Empire? I felt like it did, but it might not be in their market. When I turned to Mark and Xin, they started nodding wordlessly. Guess they wanted the same thing, too.

"Shuna, four Americans¹⁶!"

"Americans?!" Shinji sputtered.

"Ah, you want something weak then? Maybe a blend? How about our national pride, a Tempest?"

"N-no no, I didn't mean it like that, um..."

"Mhmm."

"Y-Your Majesty Rimuru, are you perhaps an otherworlder?" Shinji inquired.

"Yeah, what about it?"

Eh, why is he asking this now? Wouldn't that be part of basic information collection?

As I dwelled on the thought, I examined the four of them a little closer and noticed that only Gadra had an "I screwed up" expression. He was probably already aware but had forgotten to tell them. Whatever, it didn't really matter.

"All right, let's hear the details."

Shuna gave them the coffee she had prepared; there was also milk and sugar on the table. I listened to what Gadra had to say while Shinji and his friends looked really impressed with the coffee set. Shinji took a sip of his coffee and murmured, "This is delicious!", which earned him a sharp glare from Gadra. I was kind enough to ignore it.

"Actually, I am a reincarnated person."

¹⁶ American coffee is coffee made with light roasted coffee beans. It is also called American but is different from Americano. In Japanese English, "American" has been expanded to mean "less concentrated."

Old Master Gadra casually dropped a sudden bombshell. The trio was just as shocked as I was and turned to face him.

Master Gadra had wanted to become a great sorcerer for as long as he could remember, so he reincarnated himself countless times. Each time he was reincarnated, he studied all the treasured books he could get his hands on in various places; hence, he had accumulated a vast wealth of knowledge. It was during this time, when he was researching magic in secret, that he met Adalmann and became fast friends.

"As I said before, I have nothing but hatred for the Western Holy Church. They killed my friend Adalmann. For centuries, I have been planning to pit the Empire against them."

Following his small rant, Gadra continued his story. When he learned that Adalmann had fallen into a trap and was killed, he vowed to take revenge. With this resolve, he went to the Empire with nothing but his name and labored to slowly gain their trust.

He seemed to have fought Veldora as well; his past was more extreme than I'd imagined.

"To be honest, I am glad that I had completed my reincarnation ritual in advance. I wished to see it with my own eyes—the natural-born apex of 'monsters'¹⁷..."

Only four True Dragons existed in this world and they were the strongest race in existence, standing above all other monsters.

Gadra said that from his actual battle experience, he didn't think that the Imperial Army could ever beat Veldora. He pointed this out right in front of the dragon himself, so that guy was now repeatedly glancing at me with a delighted expression.

Good grief, stop it already. Sure, he's amazing, but I don't feel the need to praise him for it.

"No, they could have achieved a tactical victory, but those imbeciles wanted to control Veldora-sama. I advised them over and over again to give up since it was impossible and futile."

Gadra was only interested in taking his revenge against Luminism in the West, so he didn't want to expend any men on something which was evidently in vain. He desperately tried to make them understand the reality of the situation, but the corps commanders, all of them blinded by pride, refused to listen.

And yet... From his story so far, Gadra seemed to be a man of integrity, but simultaneously responsible for the Empire's growing imperial ambitions.

I asked him to cut to the chase and elaborate on recent developments in the Empire.

"So you're saying that it's mostly your fault that the Empire is trying to start a war?"

"Well, that's one part of it, I guess..."

¹⁷ The word used here is anything related to magicules, the basis for monsters and magic.

No, no, no, you're trying to be evasive. Regardless of how you looked at it, the fault lies with this old man.

Realizing that I was in a bad mood, Gadra rushed to make excuses.

"It's not like that! The Empire has always been a hegemonic power, and if we don't set a direction, the ravages of war will spread throughout the land. That's why I had them look westward. Well, it fits with my purpose, too. I thought it would be convenient."

How could it be convenient?! We're getting dragged into this for no reason at all!

"I was also against invading the Great Jura Forest, considering Veldora-sama lives in it, and I didn't want them to make the same mistake as before. I proposed that it would be better to focus on the Dwarven Kingdom, but there are too many stubborn people who would rather solve everything by force..."

Gadra began ranting about something again, but my attention was focused on a different point entirely.

"Wait a minute. So the Empire really *is* planning to attack the Dwarven Kingdom?!"

I hadn't really expected this possibility to be true—did we now have to consider the potential of them passing through the Dwarven Kingdom?

"I see you are aware of that. However, it's not like we're attacking them. My proposal was to form an alliance with King Gazel and have them turn a blind eye towards any action taken by our army. I hold a grudge only against the Western Holy Church..."

Gadra was already informed that Adalmann was safe and was promised a meeting with him right after this one. As a result, he realized how fruitless all of his efforts had been and turned his back on the war.

It seemed that he was close to the emperor, but not close enough to put a stop to the whole military campaign. Thus, he planned to advocate against the war in the upcoming conference. It was a bit too convenient to think that Gadra's help could avert the war, but if it did, then I would definitely stop complaining. In any case, we wanted to get as much information as we could out of him.

Benimaru and others were on standby in the adjacent room, listening to our conversation while holding a strategy meeting. My job was to keep Gadra happy and talking.

"And King Gazel refused, didn't he?"

"Well, that was a given. And then, a plan to assassinate him was proposed, but I was against it. 'If we're going to do it, then we should face them head on'—is what I told them!"

That's not a scenario you should be proud of. Old Gadra was way more militant than I thought.

Even though I was getting more astounded by the minute, I still kept him talking. He told us a lot of useful information—from the breakdown of the Imperial Army to the mindset of the upper echelon. He even revealed the shocking news that Yuuki was planning a coup. I had pretty much wrung him dry at this point.

Finally, Gadra began speaking his mind in an honest and light-hearted way.

"I don't have any obligations to the Empire. The army corps that I raised was disbanded, and my men were taken away. These three are my disciples, so I borrowed them. Although it's hard to say that he is well, if Adalmann is doing all right, then I will not have any regrets leaving the Empire behind."

He said it himself that deep in his heart, he was a self-centered person with no sense of loyalty whatsoever.

This old man really was something. I had to keep it a secret, but I couldn't help but feel some respect for him.

"That's why, from now on, if Your Majesty could grant me the honor of even the lowest office among your followers, I will work my fingers to the bone!"

The guts he had to ask *me* to be *my* subordinate even though he had just stated that he had no loyalty. Yet, I didn't dislike this sort of person. However, Benimaru and the others were listening to this conversation in the room next door. I had a feeling that Gadra's attitude might anger them, so calming them down might be a bit difficult.

So after that...

I decided to hire Old Gadra on a temporary basis, treating him as a guest. Since he expressed his desire to be my subordinate, I intended to work him as hard as possible. I didn't expect loyalty, but I did expect him to spare no effort.

For the time being, I brought him to meet Adalmann and also gave him permission to teleport to the 70th floor.

His knowledge would be honestly beneficial, so making him Ramiris's assistant might've been a good idea. Prior to that, however, I planned to have him do a small task in the Empire.

Shinji and his team decided to stay and immigrate to Tempest. After taking some time off, they were going to decide about their line of work for the future.

It was the trio's request following Gadra's persistent pleas to take him in, so I had no reason to decline. Besides, it was clear to them that they would be permanently exiled if they betrayed me. They clearly didn't want that to happen, and so they pledged their allegiance.

Nonetheless, the trio still held some respect for Yuuki and didn't want to go against him. I didn't think there would be any problems in that regard.

"We have a complicated relationship with Yuuki's side. It's like we are in somewhat of a ceasefire right now. To be honest, I want to get back at him for pissing me off so many times, but somehow, I can't bring myself to hate him."

He may be like that, but despite it all, he was one of Shizu-san's students. When I remembered Shizu-san, who had happily talked to me about Yuuki, I couldn't help but feel forgiving. I think I was being a bit naive, but it was also out of goodwill since we shared the same homeland. There wouldn't be a next time, but for now, let's put our differences and grudges on hold.

On the other hand, whether or not I could trust him was a different matter. If I had trusted that bastard, I would have ended up getting killed several times over.

"It would do all of you good to not trust Yuuki too much," I warned them.

Gadra nodded for some reason; it seemed like he had something to say about this. I have an inkling that Yuuki and Gadra knew each other and had a cooperative relationship, so it was a good decision to bring Gadra into the fold, since he would serve as a good link to Yuuki.

I believed that I could trust Gadra due to the simple fact that he doesn't blindly follow Yuuki.

Later on, I let Gadra meet Adalmann. They spent the rest of the time reminiscing about the old days, and it was clear that they missed each other.

Adalmann agreed to take Gadra in, so I left him in his care for the time being.

But before that...

After obtaining all the information I could from old Gadra, I ordered him to return to the Empire to carry out my plan. The first order of business was to promote an anti-war stance.

"So, are you okay with that?"

"Leave it to me. I'm used to acting behind the scenes."

Well, yeah, I could've guessed as much. Though, normally it would be impossible for just one individual to stop something that the nation had decided to do. It wasn't as though I didn't believe in Gadra, but it'd be smarter to come up with a plan B, too.

"What I want the most is to stop the war," I admitted, "but from what you've told me, that is looking very difficult. The Empire is a hegemonic power, right? If so, it will stop at nothing once it has been set in motion."

"But..."

"That's why I want to lure them into the labyrinth, when that happens."

"What do you mean by that?"

If the battle took place inside the labyrinth, it wouldn't really matter how much damage was done—that was what I explained to Gadra.

"Oh, I understand now. Your Majesty wants to weaken the military power of the Empire and reduce their will to fight."

"Yup. Yuuki will most likely take advantage of this situation and stir up a mess in their homeland, the Empire won't possibly be able to continue fighting after that."

I wasn't sure if it would go as smoothly as I had just described, but it was true that there wouldn't be any damage if the battle took place inside the labyrinth.

Once I made this clear to Gadra, I gave him three Resurrection Bracelets and made-in-labyrinth equipment. We planned to use these as bait to entice people to enter the labyrinth. In military terms, getting attacked from the rear was truly nasty. It was hard to imagine them ignoring the labyrinth and marching towards the West, but if they had any incentive to seek out the treasures of the labyrinth...

"Ohh, I see! That is brilliant, Your Majesty. I'm familiar with a certain greedy commander, so Your Majesty's plan will certainly come to fruition," Gadra confidently replied.

If possible, stop the war—if not, then lure them into the labyrinth. Everything depended on Gadra's skills.

Asylum for the four of them was granted at my discretion. And just like that, I had made some unexpected friends and brought an end to this small ruckus.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

**Chapter
4**

**The Empire
Strikes First**

Chapter 4

The Empire Strikes First

There lurked a man of many mysteries within the Empire. This man was Tatsuya Kondou, an otherworlder, and he knew every secret among its inner workings. He, indeed, was the darkness of the Imperial capital. His short black hair, with bangs gently flowing into his eyes, softened his otherwise tensive demeanor.

At first glance, he looked like a fine young man, someone in his early twenties. Beneath it all, however, his heart was cold. The eyes on his emotionless face glowed with a sharp light, as if piercing his enemies and seeing through all.

That was to be expected. Tatsuya Kondou, or First Lieutenant Kondou, didn't look his age.

.....

.....

...

Here in the Imperial capital, otherworlders weren't so rare. This was because the Empire had a policy of protecting otherworlders and gathered them in its capital from all over the world. This policy was what saved Tatsuya and so many others. This world had magic, and that was the reason why he had been saved.

Over 70 years ago...

Tatsuya put his life on the line for his country as he engaged in a suicide attack against the enemy's naval strike fleet. He wasn't one to argue the merits of that operation. Reflecting back on the situation, he had believed that it was the only way forward.

When he thought about his comrades who valiantly sacrificed their lives, he wished he could find meaning in what they did. This was the reason why Tatsuya would go on to always remember them. In order to let his comrades live within him—to never forget his memories of them—he stayed as a first lieutenant, which was his rank at that time.

He was racing towards his death as it came time for him to launch his suicide attack, but when he was engulfed in the blinding light and heat of the explosion, he somehow found himself in another world. He lived despite staring death straight in the eye.

The emperor himself was the one who saved him.

Fortune had smiled upon him that day.

Tatsuya appeared in a garden that only the emperor and a few close associates could enter. And as it happened, the emperor was relaxing there.

"Interesting. This must be a twist of fate."

Those were the last words Tatsuya heard before his consciousness faded.

When he awoke, he realized that his body was devoid of any blemishes or scratches from before. Tatsuya's luck had saved his life. So, in order to return the

favor, he pledged the life he had once wasted to the emperor. The power he awakened from crossing worlds and facing death—Tatsuya dedicated it all to him. And to this day, that was the only thing he lived for. He never stepped into the spotlight. He didn't grow old; in fact, he still looked exactly the same as the day he'd arrived. He resided in the darkness of the Empire—in other words, the Intelligence Headquarters, which lurked in the shadows of the Imperial capital.

The specter that fed on information.

The man who lurked in the shadow of the Empire.

The man who was accompanied by fiends.

A man of many names—that was First Lieutenant Kondou. He was the head of the Imperial Intelligence Agency. None of the corps commanders dared to make light of his existence, as they had never actually seen who he really was.

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

Gadra had sent Shinji and his team to conquer the Dungeon, and of course, the Imperial Intelligence Agency was well informed of this information.

First Lieutenant Kondou was a taciturn man. "Ah, thank you," had been his brief remark and nothing more. The informants, accustomed to this, bowed and promptly left. The first lieutenant was not the kind of man to express his thoughts to other people.

The report contained detailed information about Yuuki's subordinates. There were more than a thousand otherworlders gathered from every part of the world. Less than 10 percent of them did not awaken a Unique Skill. Those people were leading a peaceful life in the Empire's capital. More than 10 percent had awakened a Unique Skill designed for combat. Over a hundred otherworlders chose to join the army corps that matched their individual characteristics. The rest of them were offered places of employment according to their specialties, where their work greatly varied.

This time, the subject was about the combat-type otherworlders. Yuuki Kagurazaka was the man who created the Freedom Association in the Western Nations. Until a year ago, he made full use of his power as the grandmaster to protect the otherworlders as best he could.

That was what Yuuki self-reported; yet, according to investigations, it was a lie. He buttered up the Rosso family and exploited their power. In the West, forbidden summonings of otherworlders were conducted. And from the investigation, there was a massive number of summoners who performed them. Otherwise, it was inconceivable that such a large number of people specialized in combat would appear. Moreover, it was possible to ensure the obedience of these summoned otherworlders through a curse. As such, summoning was the best way to prepare subordinates who would never betray their master.

Those otherworlders were scattered across each corps.

The alarming implications dawned on First Lieutenant Kondou. That insight was right on the mark; his mental acuity was terrifying, one might say. And as a matter

of fact, his fears were justified. The results were evident in this report. Based on Yuuki's words, deeds, and actions since moving to the Empire, it was determined that there was a huge probability of him staging a coup d'état. Furthermore, the people that Yuuki sent in had all been identified.

Thanks to his achievements, the Empire granted Yuuki asylum. Despite that, he didn't appear to cherish the Empire's kindness since he was making efforts to expand his influence as he pleased. He dispatched the people that became his followers to each of the army corps. And to top it all off, some of them were recruited by the glorious Imperial Knights.

The other corps weren't that much of a concern, but harboring traitors among the Imperial Guardians, charged with protecting His Imperial Majesty, was beyond the pale. To First Lieutenant Kondou, this kind of situation wasn't one to be overlooked.

How dangerous, Yuuki Kagurazaka—it seems like I must eliminate you.

First Lieutenant Kondou made up his mind, but now wasn't the time; he had to wait a while longer before making his move.

Intel revealed that the archmage Master Gadra was connected to Yuuki. This information had been corroborated, but it remained unclear just how deep their relationship went. Needless to say, Master Gadra was an important figure to the Empire. Although it seemed unlikely for him to commit treason, Kondou knew that the reason why Master Gadra and the Empire had a cooperative relationship solely came down to his goals aligning with the principles of the Empire. Taking that at face value, it was conceivable that a conflict of interest might arise down the line.

In that case, that old man will also pose a significant threat. If so...

Yuuki and Gadra.

The former had the build of a young boy, yet his conduct indicated a far greater wealth of experience. Like with Kondou, it was dangerous to judge him by appearance alone.

The latter was an old man in appearance. In truth, he was a mysterious person who had been walking the earth for over a millennium. Challenging such a man required more than a half-hearted attempt.

This was the motivation behind why he gathered information. Evidence had been piling up, but it was still not enough. He couldn't make any open moves just yet.

Each and every otherworlder under Yuuki's care would be scrutinized with a fine-tooth comb. And then, they would be examined to see if any of them were dominated by the curse.

Nevertheless, if Yuuki or Gadra showed any unnatural signs, then...

"When that time comes, don't expect a public trial," First Lieutenant Kondou, the man who worked in the shadow of the Empire, had anything but mercy in store for traitors. "Dance for the Empire. Your lives are already in the palm of my hand."

In the darkness of the Imperial capital, his eyes shone with a cold light as First Lieutenant Kondou muttered quietly to himself.



A one-eyed man sat in a posh chair in an office with a luxurious desk. He was a skinny man in his forties and wore an eyepatch over his left eye. His name was Calgurio, and he was the commander of the Armored Corps, which took pride in being the most powerful force within the Empire.

On the desk in front of him lay several magic crystals. These magic crystals, which were a source of magical energy, were of high purity and quality. Thanks to the technique Yuuki introduced, magic crystals could be refined into magic stones. By purifying the magic crystal extracted from the core of a monster, one could produce a magic stone, which could store magical energy.

There were also natural magic stones dropped by monsters. That said, these could only be extracted from individuals who possessed an enormous magicle content, such as A-ranked monsters and higher. Such natural magic stones were of incomparably high quality and were commonly used as ornaments or magic catalysts, rather than as fuel. Without a regular supply of them available, they had no value as an energy source.

Calgurio reached for the magic crystal on his desk and picked it up. The closer he examined it, the more readily apparent its brilliant quality became to him. With a heavy heart, he placed the magic crystal back down, longing for that sensation he felt while holding it. Reaching out, he instead grabbed the accompanying report that was delivered to him alongside the crystal. It was a summary of the research institute's findings. With a magic crystal of this purity, a hundred Empire-made magic stones could be produced. It was so pure that it could even be converted into energy without further refinement. To collect samples this immaculate, one had to slay monsters of rank B or higher.

...That was what the report had concluded.

"Damn you, Gadra!" he erupted furiously. "Don't you dare think you can hide this cash cow from me!"

He had paid off the research staff so that they would let him know when something amiss had happened, which led to this astonishing report.

Gadra had brought in these magic crystals fairly recently. It was unknown where he got them, but judging from the number, it could be surmised that he found a colony of monsters. Regardless, they were all first-class in quality and further testing showed that they contained roughly equal amounts of energy.

It wasn't possible to harvest the same consistent quality from different kinds of monsters. The grade of the crystals would inevitably vary between them; consequently, it was necessary to refine and process them into magic stones.

On the contrary, the magic crystals before him were surprisingly uniform. This was a strong indication towards them stemming from a pack of monsters of the same race.

He doubted there was a possibility for them to domesticate whatever monsters produced these crystals, but thought that it would improve the energy situation of the Empire if they engaged in regular raids. However, it was apparently more complicated than that.

Calgurio's face twisted with burning desire.

If we aim to acquire a sustainable supply of energy, it will be paramount for us to secure the place that produces these magic crystals, the report concluded.

Rather than listing possible locations where such a habitat may be found, they had already secured a fix on the precise location. That place being the Dungeon, rumored to be in the domain of Demon Lord Rimuru.

"Recently, he's been so chummy with that runt, Yuuki, that he doesn't even pay me a visit anymore. I can't let you milk that golden cow all on your own *and* get away with it! That's unforgivable!"

This was the cause of Calgurio's foul mood.

As it would happen, that wasn't even the end of it. Calgurio heard an interesting story from the high-class nobles whom he was friends with. They came over in great numbers, and, with wicked smiles on their faces, they relayed the information to him. According to their report, Gadra ventured out to investigate the labyrinth and lost three of his disciples while there.

Had that been all there was to it, then there would've been little more to do than pay their condolences. Yet, what Gadra brought back with him was the problem. Apparently, he didn't only bring back the magic crystals, but some other loot, too.

The sword that Calgurio had displayed in his room was immaculate. It was made of high-quality, pure magisteel, and the forging technique spoke of a masterful craftsman. It was a magnificent sword, one that could rival those forged by the best craftsmen of the Dwarven Kingdom. No, if you considered the quality of the material, this one came out on top. The ones circulated within the Empire were a far cry from it.

The noblemen had brought with them swords of exquisite quality, which, after some consideration, Calgurio bought. One of the three swords was sent to his corps' technical team for examination. 'These are very rare items, and they may have some kind of mysterious effect, you know?' the nobleman proudly presented them to Calgurio in the most grandiose and overblown fashion, in a transparent effort to sell them. This was despite the fact that these goods were offered to them by Gadra himself. When Calgurio asked them what Gadra's demand was, they would feign indifference and reply with suspicious remarks like "Of course, we can't answer that, can we?"

In the end, he purchased each sword for 100 gold coins, or 300 gold coins in total; regardless, there remained something in the back of his mind that bothered him. The fact that he was offered three swords eventually gave him a hint, but...

Calgurio was born a low-class noble but was able to climb the ranks all the way up to corps commander through his innate talent. The Empire was a society based on absolute meritocracy. Thus, Calgurio held a higher position than a regular high-class noble, whose standing was predicated on their social status. Under normal circumstances, merely speaking to a noble of high rank was unthinkable. But even for such a personage, being courteous to Calgurio was essential.

I know they are looking down on me deep inside, but that doesn't matter. What's important is how I get the most use out of them.

High-class nobles would be careful never to act without regard for their own interests. There was no way they told him such information with honest intentions; it was too good to be true.

Leaking Gadra's words to Calgurio must have been carefully planned out by them. In other words, they were weighing their options between Yuuki and Calgurio.

"Those greedy nobles! Whatever, I've got to focus on Gadra now. How dare he tug on the nobles' purse strings to make them suggest that the Mixed Corps should conquer the labyrinth! He should have referred my army instead... Didn't expect him to still have a grudge against me for taking the Armored Corps from him..."

The Armored Corps was successfully modernized, thanks in part to Gadra's help. In spite of the corps' military force growing by ten to even a hundred times as a result, Gadra did not hold any authority to command it. Calgurio assumed that was the reason why he was jealous of him.

"Anyway, that can't be helped. It was a godsend that I was able to get information from those nobles. This will allow me to get ahead of them and snatch the authority to raid the labyrinth for *my* army."

Of course, greasing the palms of high-class nobles would cost him a pretty penny. And even if he were granted the authority, he would have to share a part of it with the nobles. But still, he didn't think it was a bad deal.

The magic crystals aren't the only thing the labyrinth has to offer. This sword is of excellent quality; it's rare-grade, but it might evolve to unique-grade in a hundred years—maybe even sooner than that, seeing as it's made of such fine magisteel. This alone should be enough of a reason to seize the labyrinth!

On this closing thought, Calgurio committed himself to winning over the nobles.

As Calgurio contemplated his future plans, there was a nagging question that kept bothering him.

What is this hole even for, anyway?

A high-class noble told him that it had a *mysterious effect*, but he probably just got that from Gadra. Despite Calgurio's trained eye, he found nothing out of the ordinary. But nevertheless, that hole in the sword was remarkably peculiar.

What did it mean? Calgurio couldn't come up with an answer.

Following that, he had sent it to his technical team. However, the analysis results were yet to be seen.

Well, unlike the West, the age of the sword has come to an end in the Empire, anyway.

So, no matter how valuable this sword might be, it would be of no significance to their modernized troops. Only highly skilled warriors could use this sword to its fullest. Indeed, that included Calgurio and his close associates.

On that note, he looked forward to the results of the appraisal.

A few days later...

Calgurio was astounded by the report that had come in.

"I will explain." It was the director of the technology department himself who presented their findings. Scientific analysis of the sword revealed various facts. Most notably, the hole wasn't merely decorative. It was an energy absorber and efficient medium for activating magic. In other words, it wasn't a sword but a magic trigger.

"Demon Lord Rimuru, was it? Looking at this intriguing thing he's come up with, that guy's not to be taken lightly."

"Indeed," the director remarked. "This sword—or more broadly, weapon—is designed to mimic a melee weapon, and intended to catch an opponent off guard by launching a surprise attack from the magic it possesses."

Right. The crux of this weapon was in defying common knowledge—allowing those without the ability to wield magic, to suddenly cast it.

"However," the director inquired, "is it true that he got that from the labyrinth?"

"About that, there is proof. I sent some of my own people, and Gadra seems to have told the truth."

Calgurio had also sent his men to the monster capital Rimuru to gather information about the labyrinth. Though investigating the inside of it became quite tricky around the 40th floor, they heard interesting stories from merchants and the like.

The slotted swords were discovered in the labyrinth. Although they fetched a high price, they were cheaper than unique-grade weapons.

"So, to what end are they going through all that trouble...?"

"Hmph!" Calgurio snorted. "Give it some thought, and it'll become plain as day. We wouldn't adopt a new weapon without conducting trial runs, now would we?"

The director of the technical department was smart, but he lacked tactical vision. With Calgurio's brief explanation, he finally realized the merit behind what they did.

"Oooh, I see," he exclaimed. "So, he's been passing these on to a bunch of adventures to investigate the effects, you think? That's certainly a reasonable approach. Upon inserting a magic stone into the slot, we found that the sword's rank rose by a notch. It turned into a high-powered magic sword, but it seemed to have other functions, as well. To figure that out, various experiments would be necessary, thereby requiring a huge amount of time."

"Yeah. He hands them out at random to let these individuals try them out. And once the experimental data has been produced, he'd surely want to aggregate all of it," Calgurio mused.

He understood Rimuru's intentions, to a certain extent. And experience had taught him that these kinds of experiments were time-consuming. At present, this sword was only in the experimental stage. However, it would be dangerous to let him perfect it.

Humans were a peculiar bunch; some of them could intuit the nature of things in the spur of the moment. This intuition tended to be sharpest among those that walked into the line of fire.

"That is clever," Calgurio muttered, "performing human experiments by putting them into a labyrinth without a chance of death."

"They say you need this 'bracelet' if you don't wish to die, but how that could be possible still remains a mystery after analyzing it. If the rumor is true, then military training should be a breeze," the director said, taking out a small, tightly sealed box, and presenting it to Calgurio. Inside the box, one of the treasures that Gadra brought, the Resurrection Bracelet, was stored.

"Of course," Calgurio pondered, "it is questionable information. However, if my army could seize that labyrinth..."

If this rumor turned out to be true, it meant a huge achievement.

"Oooh, you are indeed an ambitious man, Calgurio-sama. Will you go so far as to wage war against a demon lord?"

"Of course I will. Pointlessly picking a fight with him would be a poor idea, but as things stand, the Great Jura Forest is en route to our invasion. Not to mention, that labyrinth is something we cannot ignore. Someone has to do it."

"Fufufu, you're using smooth words to smooth the way, I see."

Calgurio and the director of the technology department laughed together.

"We can secure a stable supply of magic crystals and an efficient proving ground. And if things go smoothly, the enemy's new weapons will be ours, too."

"Then, the Armored Corps must conquer it under your command, Calgurio-sama, before the other divisions get the chance."

"That goes without saying. I suggest you look forward to it," Calgurio assured him with a gentle smile.

"However," the director chuckled, "it seems the old man has become senile."

"Couldn't agree more. He was so dazzled by the magic crystals that he failed to recognize the more important things—the labyrinth, its treasures, as well as the ability of the swords."

"It's the downside of solely relying on magic," Calgurio added in agreement. "Weapons that change rank such as this are unheard of."

Gadra was an outstanding man, but the winds of change were blowing, heralding the end of the age of magic. This new wind—science—blew in and integrated with magic, setting the stage for a new era.

That's why I am the best person to lead the Armored Corps. That old man as well, I would respect him if he just remained quiet. But if he allied with Yuuki then there's no need to go easy on him.

Calgurio began to formulate a strategy in his mind. Antagonizing several demon lords would be an ill-fated approach, however, concentrating solely on Demon Lord Rimuru would be a cinch. Along with that, the Storm Dragon was their designated target—the Empire had sought its subjugation for the longest time. Calgurio intended to subdue the Storm Dragon with his newly developed weapons.

To that end, a little sacrifice would be well worth the cost... And yet, Gadra's stubborn refusal on the matter had driven a wedge between the two of them—one so great, that it ultimately caused them to part ways.

Hmph! If we can subjugate that evil dragon, then even a slime demon lord will be no match for us. Now, I will show everyone that we are the strongest army in the Empire!

The time has come—Calgurio was filled with excitement. He would bring Gadra down a peg or two and cement an unshakeable position in the Empire. To do just that, he needed a crowning achievement under his belt. Therefore, it was paramount for the Armored Corps to subjugate the evil dragon and conquer the labyrinth. And for that to happen...

"At the next Imperial conference, I will propose a march," Calgurio declared.

"Oh, finally..."

"Mmh," Calgurio nodded in agreement.

We should not give that demon lord time to prepare. That reason should suffice to silence the opposition. Oh Gadra, I won't let you steal a march from under my nose. And that brat, are you on cloud nine now that you have Gadra on your side? I'm going to show you your place.

Calgurio mocked his idiotic colleague—the fool who had the chance to grasp critical information, but let it slip without even realizing it.

After all, he is but a foolish upstart, Calgurio firmly believed.

He was incessantly brooding, even while scorning his colleague.

How can I reap the greatest benefit? Lost in thought, Calgurio compiled the contents of his proposal to the emperor.

Calgurio's hand would awaken the Empire once more.



The Imperial conference was about to start. This time, the situation was unusual, given that the military officers present were rather tense, to say nothing of the civil servants. Perhaps sensing this atmosphere, people unrelated to the meeting didn't dare approach the conference hall.

This meeting was on a different level. Everyone sensed it.

The attendees lowered their heads as the entrance of the emperor was announced. The silhouette of a person could be made out behind a bamboo blind. That person was the unifying emperor, Rudra Nam UI Nasca. He stood at the pinnacle of the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire—the strongest military power in the world. His figure was hidden on the other side of the bamboo blind, as were his true intentions, which were never revealed to anyone. A supreme existence, which none except close associates had ever seen, intimidated the people in the conference with his mere presence emanating from behind the blind. Peerless and absolute. Only a tiny handful of people could express their opinion to the emperor.

There were nearly 200 people assembled in the conference room. The Three Commanders—the commanders of each of the military corps—and their adjutants. Neatly lined up, were the elites of the Imperial Guardians. And lastly, the cabinet ministers, who administered the government of the country, as well as the Great House of Peers, which was the Eastern Empire's backbone.

Eminent figures gathered and lowered their heads.

Only the rustle of clothes echoed through the quiet hall—until even that sound disappeared.

On cue, the prime minister motioned to the ceremonial officer.

"His Imperial Majesty the Emperor has arrived!"

In response, everyone greeted him in unison. It was their chorus of shouts that broke through the silence. Thus began the Imperial conference, which would go down in history as weighing the benefits of their great expedition.

.....

.....

...

The Imperial conference opened solemnly. Opinions were split on the great expedition. Regarding the war, the first faction wished for it to be fast and decisive, while the other advocated for a more cautious approach.

First of all, under what pretext would we start this war?

What a stupid question.

We will invade because it is what the emperor wishes, simple as that.

Is that possible?

Those were the dividing lines this conference was stirring over. Between those who advocated caution and those who insisted frontal invasion. And the civil servants who were adamant about first launching diplomatic negotiations that included recommendations of surrender and the pressure of threats.

If the emperor willed the coming of war, there would be no room for dispute. However, an imperial order had not yet been given, and so the assembly proceeded according to each person's intentions.

Starting the war was just a matter of time. So the problem wasn't *when*, it was *how*.

The demon lords who ruled distant lands were also a hindrance, but as long as their territory wasn't violated, they wouldn't take action. The hurdle to overcome was Veldora, the Storm Dragon. Therefore, the focus of discussion ended up on the Great Jura Forest.

One person voiced opposition to the war. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, I am against this." It was the archmage of the Empire—Master Gadra. He had openly and fearlessly offered his opinion to the emperor.

"What a cowardly thing to say! You're still going on about that, Gadra-dono?" laughed one of the Three Commanders—the commander of the Armored Corps, Calgurio.

This happened every time. The two represented the cautious faction and the belligerent faction.

"The West would easily crumble if we struck them. However, the evil dragon Veldora dwells within the Great Jura forest. It was only two years ago that its revival was made certain, so of course we must be cautious!" one of the sympathetic voices agreed. It was also joined by scoffs calling Gadra soft.

In the 300 years that had passed since the Veldora disaster, the memory of its terror had faded. Now, the belligerent opinions were becoming the majority, squeezing Gadra's side between a rock and a hard place.

Taking up on this, Calgurio spoke feverishly. "Master, there's something to be learned from your cautious attitude. Nonetheless, as I have assured you many times, the countermeasures against Veldora are flawless. With our new weapons, we can subdue that evil dragon!"

"You're ridiculous! Stop living in an illusion, Calgurio-dono. As long as the possibility of it failing cannot be denied, we must, naturally, exercise caution. Not to mention, a new demon lord has risen to power in that forest! Although it is known that the demon lords do not cooperate with one another, it is still unwise to deliberately antagonize one. That evil dragon was revived and seems to have joined hands with the newcomer, Demon Lord Rimuru. Dealing with a demon lord through mutual inviolability is the tried-and-true approach!"

One possible route would lead through the Valley of Death, which was connected to the former territory of Clayman, as it allowed for large armies to pass through. They did not, however, wish to venture into Demon Lord Milim's domain, which lay beyond it, thus discarding that option. Marching across fertile ground would be significantly faster, but that said, incurring the wrath of Demon Lord Milim was too great of a price to pay. Likewise, passing through the Great Jura Forest would allow them to reach the West. But now Veldora, the Storm Dragon, had returned and was allied with Demon Lord Rimuru.

"There is no reason to make more enemies," Gadra insisted, receiving nods from several civil servants. On the other side, Calgurio gave a scornful laugh and posed the question: "Well then Gadra-dono, are you saying that we should give up on pursuing the Empire's dearest wish?"

Taking the route through the Great Jura Forest off the table would cripple their options in terms of dispatching a large army towards the West. Calgurio's concern was picked up by the army circle on those grounds.

"Calgurio-dono is right. Master, even demon lords pose no threat in the face of the great Imperial army!"

"You're being insolent before His Imperial Majesty! Gadra-dono, do you intend to defy the emperor's will?!"

"Nay!" Gadra shouted and refuted the objection. "Come to think of it, rather than fighting a demon lord, it would be wiser to get the cooperation of the Dwarf King. There won't be any casualties, and it will be easier to conquer the West!"

However, there was someone who laughed at Gadra's assertion.

"You are being ridiculous, Gadra-dono. The Dwarf King is a master swordsman and a man of great honor. His predecessors were champions as well, and he is

exceptionally skilled. His companions are also famous champions. They would be tougher opponents than the newcomer demon lord. As much as I'd like to test their abilities in a match, that's not our main concern. What I'm saying is that instead of fighting against champions, the optics of subjugating a demon lord are far preferable in the public eye!"

This interjection came from none other than one of the Three Commanders. He was the commander of the Magic Beast Corps, Beast King Gladium. As he merely rose from his seat, the air was heavy with an overwhelming sense of intimidation. Rightly so, for the dignity of a king.

Gladium also ruled over the magical beasts by force. He was one of the best warriors in the Empire and a highly skilled military commander, holding the rank of general. It was said that he was the second strongest man in the Empire. Gladium was not, in fact, a Single Digit but a Double Digit, but his strength led him to become a corps commander early in his career. Owing to his privilege of being freed from participating in the ranked duels, he took pride in claiming to be the strongest. That was why Gladium didn't have any conflicting emotions towards the Marshal, who was considered to be stronger than him.

It was rumored that he descended from the Beastmen clan, but the authenticity of that rumor was uncertain. Gadra didn't get along with him as he was the type of person who acted not on logic but on instinct.

"Ah, Gladium-dono, that comparison is wrong," Gadra replied. "What I'm saying is that we should make King Gazel our ally!"

"You fool," Gladium shot back. "If you mean to absorb the Dwarven Kingdom at the same time, I understand what you are saying. After all, crushing every fool in defiance of imperial rule would be enough. However! What is your plan? You think of your nonsense as a reason to hold back our forces that are fully ready to march!"

"What kind of drivel is that! You already know that the Dwarven Kingdom is a natural fortress, right? Taking it by force would be—"

"Silence!" Beast King Gladium roared. "Complaining in the presence of His Imperial Majesty—no wonder why you were dismissed from being a corps commander!"

That was, indeed, the truth. Until about 30 years ago, the Magic Corps commanded by Gadra were part of the Empire's three great armies. Now, however, the best and brightest from the corps had been transferred to the technology department and elsewhere.

That was because the so-called magic relied on talent. To begin with, you could not control magic without possessing magical power. No amount of effort could replace it, thereby softly limiting their numbers. Although it was useful in combat, weapons had been developed to replace magic.

One was a small magic weapon—the spell gun. Using magic stones as the energy source, the magic circle engraved into the gun barrel would activate. It was a weapon by which anyone could use magic. While it fell short in being limited to only a single kind of magic, its effectiveness spoke for itself.

For close combat, there was the Imperial magic saber. It worked on the same principle as the spell gun and was one of the small magic weapons with weapon-strengthening magic applied. It was because of this item that the technical team realized the purpose of the slotted weapons from the labyrinth. They all reached the same conclusion—in other words, they had to be right.

Now that magic could be manipulated in spite of the absence of talent, the Magic Corps had become obsolete. It was a sorrowful event for Gadra as it marked the end of the magic era.

"Ha-ha-ha, Master," another person sneered at Gadra. "You've grown old. Your knowledge of magic is a treasure to the Empire. While I owe you my gratitude for your help in developing new kinds of magic weapons for my Armored Corps, as Gladium said, your remark just now was lamentable. It feels like you are scared," Calgurio smirked contemptuously.

Stifled laughs escaping from the House of Peers and the army circle could be heard.

"Do all of you even understand? That evil dragon ruling over the storm is the most powerful species in this world."

"It is you who does not understand, Old Master. The Imperial army of today is different from before. We have learned the knowledge of many otherworlders and gained a technological system—science—different from our own. Thanks to this new technology, the Empire's military strength has increased tenfold over the previous generation. An old-fashioned mage like yourself can't keep up in modern warfare. A quiet retirement in the grace of His Imperial Majesty is all that you should hope for now."

"H-how dare you!?" Gadra cried out with indignation, but in reality, he was just faking it. To begin with, Gadra had already surrendered to Demon Lord Rimuru. He tried his best to advocate against the path of war. That said, the ultimate outcome did not concern him.

These guys are really pathetic. Science indeed produced wonderful knowledge, but even the Sorcerer's Dynasty Sarion had their own secret knowledge: magic science. On top of that, His Majesty Rimuru also used to be an otherworlder. I don't know how far this military strength, which guarantees the supremacy of the Empire, could go...

Now that he knew about Tempest—about Rimuru—Gadra doubted the victory of the Empire. It wasn't that he wished misfortune to befall his former associates, and on top of that, he also felt indebted towards His Imperial Majesty. So, he was trying his best to deter them from war, but if he failed... Well, he would cross that bridge when he got there.

From what he could tell, Yuuki seemed to be gearing up towards staging a coup d'état and planned to capture the emperor, assassinate him, even. Considering his goal was to rule the world, a powerful leader was nothing but a hindrance. In the old days, Gadra would have left him to his own devices. But now that the very reason for war had disappeared, Gadra could no longer tolerate Yuuki's ways, which threatened to plunge the world into chaos.

Well, I don't know what will happen after this, but any further advice would be meaningless. In that case, the next step is to carry out His Majesty Rimuru's order—drawing the attention of the Imperial army to the dungeon.

Gadra quietly steeled his resolve. Then he turned his eyes to Yuuki, who still remained silent.



Calgurio took Gadra's silence as an admission of defeat. Gadra's Magic Corps had been disbanded, followed by internal restructuring of the military. The subsequent treatment of Gadra was nothing more than an honorary position, serving as the technical advisor to the Armored Corps. Having said that, his heroic might was well known, and he probably even retained more influence than Calgurio.

It was also Gadra's own decision to recommend that boy Yuuki to be a corps commander. What a pain.

Calgurio was not amused. Archmage Gadra—that champion had now become old. Still, Calgurio held his grand achievements in high regard and didn't think he should be disrespected...

Hah, in the end, he is a person of the past. Now, he's just an orthodox old man causing trouble, huh?

With the passing of time, the war effort steadily increased. And those who couldn't keep up with that progress were left in the dust—unmistakably, that's where Gadra now belonged as well.

The Empire entered a new era. The new three great army corps were unlike anything seen before.

.....

.....

...

First, the Armored Corps commanded by Calgurio. It was the largest military force in the Empire and represented a fusion of otherworld science, technology, and magic. The total number of troops that could be mobilized exceeded 2 million. However, that is including the standing forces in various parts of the Empire, meaning the number of troops who could immediately take military action was, in effect, about 1 million. But even so, it was still an abnormally large army, unthinkable one hundred years ago.

Next, the Magic Beast Corps commanded by Gladium. DNA analysis, an otherworld technology, had made it possible to nurture and raise magic beasts. The training of these monsters lay at the core of this corps. Nurturing magic beasts had been impossible with the conventional knowledge of the past. They realized the potential and committed to further efforts to tame them. By doing so, the tenacious magic beasts became beast knights.

The champions of the Empire spurred the magic beasts in battle. The new generation of champions analyzed the blood of the champions who had been active

since ancient times and made their power their own. They were born strong. By awakening the power in their blood, the Magic Beast Corps became a legion consisting of only champions.

It was said that a fleeting 1 in 100,000 had the talent to join this corps, making it the smallest with only 30,000 soldiers. Nevertheless, their beast knights were magic beasts ranked A-minus and above, and their strength as a human-monster union was impossible to gauge. Despite numbering only 30,000 members, they were the most powerful elite force the Empire had to offer.

Last but not least, the Mixed Corps commanded by Yuuki. This division was a hodgepodge, but had a lot of potential. It was a den of misfits, singled out due to their inability to cooperate in groups—at least, that was how the public perceived them. But on a closer look, that was hardly accurate. The reason why the corps members could not coordinate well with others was because of the fact that each and every one of them possessed extraordinary abilities. So outstanding were their abilities, in fact, that managing those guys was difficult. Many of its members were otherworlders whose potential was completely unknown. Due to various experiments that were being carried out inside the corps, there were also individuals who awoke powers beyond belief that could not be reproduced—they became magic beasts, boasting strength beyond A rank. While troublesome to control, they were outstanding warriors. Among them were also human weapons that obtained their power from unknown sources, and as such, many products of experiments were gathered under that banner.

In the past, they were simply being managed and kept in line, but now with Yuuki as their leader, the corps suddenly emerged as an extraordinarily powerful trump card within the army.

The total number of soldiers was around 200,000, half of which were officers and non-combatant staff, leaving around 100,000 troops that made up the actual combat force. Within it was also a hand-picked platoon of elite members that worshipped Yuuki. These individuals became the pillars of the Mixed Corps.

.....

.....

...

These were the three new grand army corps of the Empire. Together, they were a force to be reckoned with. As soon as the emperor issued the edict, 1,130,000 troops would start military operations.

At present, the Imperial Intelligence Bureau estimated the total military strength of the Western Nations to be less than 1 million. Looking at it in terms of soldiers who could potentially be mobilized, the Western Nations were looking at an underwhelming 400,000—if they were lucky. On top of that, since it was deemed unlikely that efforts to cooperate among the Western Nations would succeed, they concluded that it was unrealistic to expect comprehensive military action from the West.

Against those 400,000 disorderly soldiers, the number of Imperial elites exceeded 1 million. You could say that it was an exceedingly overwhelming military

force, the core of which was the Armored Corps of Calgurio. This time, he intended to handpick the best military force to do the job. The breakdown of the 1 million soldiers to be mobilized within his corps was as follows:

- Augmented Legion: the main force.

These were soldiers who had adopted the otherworldly technology and underwent magical modifications. Their individual combat capability was at least C-plus-ranked, and the elite among them even reached rank A. There were 700,000 of them, an unrivaled division.

- Magic Tank Division: a decisive weapon in battle.

It possessed 2,000 magic tanks, a new weapon they had put into practical use. The magic tank, which was operated by five people, was an unprecedented war machine that revolutionized the understanding of battle. The main armament of the tanks, named magic gun, had an initial velocity of 2,000 meters per second. It had a 50-round capacity and could fire five rounds per minute. Its power was tremendous, being able to unleash destruction equivalent to tactical-class super-high explosive magic. Incidentally, although this was fired based on magic principles, the shell itself was a simple lump of iron. It was a formidable kinetic projectile that could easily penetrate through both anti-magic barriers and anti-archer defenses.

Such tremendous power, formerly exclusive to wizards—rare elites—could now be wielded by the hands of ordinary soldiers. Beyond that, when it came to the difficulty of defending against them, the implications were endless. The number of troops, including the maintenance team, was 200,000, and the more tanks they had, the stronger they were.

- Air Assault Division: the highly classified weapon.

They had 400 airships and were the pride of the Empire, the fruit of the otherworldly knowledge. Each craft could carry a maximum of 400 passengers. Of them, 50 were vital maintenance crew required to operate the ship, while the remaining crew would be engaged in defensive magic or gunning. It was equipped with a large number of magically enhanced guns, making it an excellent warship for both offense and defense.

It was also useful as a means of transportation. In this day and age, it could be said that there was “no concept of air supremacy.” Since anti-aircraft precautions didn’t yet exist, it was possible to transport a large number of troops while the enemy was off guard. With the use of airships, it became easy to spring a pincer move on an enemy, attacking them from both sides.

This, too, was an invention that revolutionized tactical theory. The division numbered 100,000 troops, most of which belonged to the former Magic Corps.

With such military might, Calgurio felt that they were unbeatable. For example, the strength of an average knight in this world, depending on the size of the country, was at most C rank. They had to be armed to the teeth, covered in armor, and trained rigorously—all that only to have a slim shot at reaching B rank.

The Armored Corps, on the other hand, performed magical modifications on its members if they so desired. For those who were found to be highly compatible through medical examination, they would have to undergo semi-compulsory augmentation procedures. As a result, they had succeeded in raising the army corps' combat capabilities exponentially. The same applied to the various soldiers scattered across the Empire. Thus, it gave Calgurio ample reason to believe that the solid foundation of the Empire could never be shaken.

In addition, he planned to spare no reserve for this great expedition, gathering all magic tanks and airships they could muster. In both quality and quantity, these soldiers would overwhelm even an alliance of all other nations. On top of that, they had a number of new weapons they were going to unveil.

Calgurio held a sincere conviction that the Armored Corps was the only way they could demonstrate the might of the Empire to the world. *With an army of this might, be it Veldora or a demon lord, there is nothing to fear! My army alone can conquer the world!* With such confidence in heart, Calgurio observed Gadra. That was when he noticed: Gadra had fixed his eyes on Yuuki for a while now, and then Yuuki spoke up out of the blue.

"I also agree that ol' Gadra is being too prudent. From my perspective, you are overly cautious of the Storm Dragon. As Commander Calgurio said, we can take care of him with the current Imperial army, don't you think?"

It was the first time Yuuki spoke at this Imperial conference. The fact that his opinion was in line with his own made Calgurio wary. *This brat, are you volunteering to conquer the labyrinth? You think I wouldn't notice? You're so naive! It is of utmost importance to be well-informed if you ever want to assume the important role of a commander!* Even while having this thought, Calgurio smiled graciously towards Yuuki.

There was one exception, namely Gladium, but that was only because of his extraordinary strength propelling him to where he was. Calgurio had always regarded Yuuki as an adversary, insisting that it was still too early for him to be a corps commander.

Concealing his inner feelings, Calgurio began spinning his rhetoric. "Amazing, Yuuki-dono. Indeed, an up-and-coming young man such as yourself has exceptional vigor."

"Well, I still have a long way to go. More importantly, in my opinion, even if we are going to war, we still need to investigate, don't we? To get out of the Great Jura Forest, we need to pass through the dominion of Demon Lord Rimuru. And by the way, I heard an interesting story about how this capital of the demon lord can escape, buildings and all, into the labyrinth."

"Oh, a labyrinth?" Calgurio wondered, feigning ignorance.

"Yeah," Yuuki said, pleased to elaborate. "To be precise, a dungeon. I don't know what the reason is, but allegedly the capital city could vanish from the face of the earth, leaving nothing but a very large gate above ground."

Humph, how foolish. I suppose you're going to offer to investigate the labyrinth and then steal the authorization to conquer it, but...that would be mighty presumptuous.

Calgurio chuckled to himself.

"Huh, are you sure that information is correct?" someone asked, followed by several others.

"If what you said is true, then we can't ignore the dungeon. They might attack from the rear after the army passes through."

"You're right. If the West isn't stupid, they've probably fortified a defensive line. If our supply chain were to be cut off by the demon lord's army, our troops would be in a bind."

"Then, passing the Great Jura Forest will be dangerous."

Those who heard Yuuki's remarks began to express their opinions freely. Yuuki also looked cheerful, probably because it was just what he wished.

"There's no doubt about the credibility of the information," Yuuki affirmed, having waited for the right moment. "After all, ol' Gadra went to the labyrinth himself and looked into the matter for us! It was because Old Master Gadra saw Demon Lord Rimuru with his own eyes that he deemed him to be a threat. Also, he caught wind of a rumor during his stay. It has been claimed that the labyrinth spans up to 100 floors underground, and that the guardian of the 100th floor is none other than the Storm Dragon Veldora himself. It was a baseless rumor. However, the investigation was interrupted due to casualties in the 60th underground level. It is said that even the Hero Masayuki had not yet conquered that level, so it seems that said level is equivalent to A-plus in terms of difficulty. Regardless of which route we'll take to attack the West, investigation is essential," he concluded, setting aside his usual aloof attitude and assuming a serious tone.

"The casualties are..."

"That's regrettable to hear. I understand your sentiment, Yuuki-dono."

"Conducting an investigation should be trivial. Why don't we leave this to the Mixed Corps?"

Hearing the nobles chime in like that began to make Calgurio's blood boil. *Tsk, bribed imbeciles! Yuuki you shrewd bastard. You should've become a politician, not a corps commander.*

Even those who were not paid off seemed to agree with Yuuki's sincere attitude. This provoked Calgurio, making him raise his voice.

"Please wait!" he shouted, as he rose from his seat.

Then, he bowed once to the emperor beyond the bamboo blind.

"Your Imperial Majesty! Master Gadra and Yuuki-dono appear to be deathly afraid of Veldora, but I am not. Needless to say, that applies to the West as a whole! It is my desire to give Your Imperial Majesty peace of mind, so by all means, order my humble self to dominate! Then I, Calgurio, will risk my life to deliver!"

Calgurio's speech to the emperor shocked everyone in the room. Speaking directly to the emperor was a woefully imperious thing to attempt.

"What the! How dare you do such an outrageous thing?!"

"You know that's unforgivable, Calgurio-dono!"

"Calgurio, are you stealing a march from me? Your Imperial Majesty, my Magic Beast Corps is also ready to go into battle at any time. By all means, order *us* to go into battle as well!"

At this point, even Gladium presented his corps.

As if in panic, Yuuki followed up: "Then, please entrust the investigation to the Mixed Corps!"

As Yuuki stood up, the Three Commanders bowed together.

Now that it had come to this, only the emperor could suppress the situation.

...No. There was *one* other person.

She stood up on the other side of the bamboo blind and laughed charmingly—the supreme commander of the Imperial army, the Marshal.

"Be quiet, you foolish ones. You are in the presence of Rudra-sama."

To address the emperor by his name was a reckless action that no ordinary person would ever be allowed to commit. And here the one who calmly did just that was the one person who was awarded the rank of *marshal*.



In the Empire, the word "marshal" was synonymous with the strongest. Only a handful of her associates knew who she really was. Her name remained unknown to the public, and it was said that she always stayed by the Emperor's side to protect him.

At the word of someone carrying that lofty rank, the room fell silent once more. As they prostrated themselves all at once, a voice rang out from above.

"What is it with Veldora? He interrupted our last great expedition, but did it shake the Empire?"

" " "No ma'am!" " "

"Of course, for this Empire carries the blessing of His Great Majesty."

" " "Yes ma'am!" " "

An atmosphere, which while not overpowering, was something no one could defy, dominated the room.

"Yuuki, was it?" the Marshal asked. "You've been in the Empire less than a year, but your achievements are impressive. However, you are cowardly. Too cowardly. Do you know why the Empire has not made a move since Veldora's resurrection?"

"It's because we were not ready—" Yuuki, confused why this was brought up out of the blue, tentatively gave her a safe answer.

The Marshal, however, laughed scornfully. "Wrong. It's because of the foolish ones who are trapped by their fear of the past, giving all sorts of reasons just to escape. Isn't that right, Gadra?"

"Ye-yes ma'am!"

Deep down, everyone knew that was true. And even Gadra couldn't deny it. It was true that he did not discuss whether or not they could win against the Storm Dragon and carried on being adamant about avoidance. He had no room to object.

But what's the matter with her? Why is she so impatient now?

Gadra was one of the few people that knew the Marshal's true face. That's why he felt that the Marshal, who had always remained aloof, was somewhat impatient. But he could not question that here. Without knowing why, a vague sense of unease had crept up on him.

The Marshal continued pressing questions. "Don't you think it is highly unlikely that negotiating with Dwarf King Gazel would go smoothly? I don't think you do not understand that, so why are you insisting? Or were you more stupid than I thought? Perhaps, don't tell me you are trying to impede the Empire's supremacy?"

Her cold voice sent a chill down Gadra's spine. *Has she caught on to me? It's...incredible*, Gadra thought. He had served the Empire for a long time, even once as an adviser to the emperor himself. Despite that, Gadra cowered in front of the Marshal. *Come to think of it... I don't even know her name...* Gadra was trusted and most certainly invaluable—but that might have been nothing more than his own delusion. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. And for the first time, he started to doubt what the Empire, or rather, who the emperor, really was.

Ignoring Gadra, the Marshal turned her attention to Calgurio. "So, Calgurio. You think you can win, don't you?"

"Yes ma'am! That is most assured, Your Excellency!"

"Right. Then tell me your plan."

"Tha-that's..."

Calgurio's bravado was overwhelmed by the Marshal's dominance. It dawned on him that planning an attack through sheer numbers was too childish of a proposal. More importantly though, he had devised a plan against the Storm Dragon. It was something he had carefully laid out over the years. He wasn't afraid of Veldora. *At the end of the day, he's still a dragon, right?*

Indeed, the dragons that nested in the Canaat Mountains were all strong monsters. The lesser dragons that inhabited the foot of the mountains would be easy to handle, but those that had grown into fair dragons would have a strength of A rank or higher. And if they turned into archdragons with elemental attributes, they would become dangerous threats to a small country.

In the case of the Empire, however, it was possible to defeat them by simply dispatching a battalion of about five hundred troops from the Augmented Legion. These soldiers had subjugated dragons several times in military exercises, and as long as they made no mistakes, they could handle the encounter without serious damage. That was testament to the greatness of the Empire. It was within their power as a nation to support tens of thousands of soldiers. Not even a horde of dragons could jeopardize the Empire's military.

Calgurio perceived Veldora as another type of dragon. Thus, he arrived at the conclusion: *What is there to fear from a single dragon?*

The strength of a monster was determined by the amount of magicules it possessed, and that held true no matter how powerful it was. Dragons were strong because they had enormous magicule reserves in proportion to their mass. High defenses and breath attacks that could exterminate large areas—they possessed such powerful abilities thanks to their overwhelming magicule capacity.

Taking that to be the case, there was no need to fight them head-on.

Calgurio and his men had a secret plan. The magic canceler—a new top-secret technology they were developing. Using magic to weaken a dragon wasn't a sure-fire success. Depending on the dragon, such an attempt could be nullified by its 'Magic Interference.' But all of that became moot with the introduction of this new technology. The radiation emitted from a magic canceler directly affected the substance called magicules. It could not manipulate the magicules in a directed manner, but instead made these particles' behavior erratic. In other words, it had the effect of making magicules go haywire.

When used against a mage, it would inhibit the ability to chant, and by extension, the ability to cast magic. When used against a monster, it would disrupt the magicules that made up its body, restraining the ability to act. In short, it weakened their bodies. A successful attack would render a monster totally disabled. This would be especially effective against a dense mass of magicules like Veldora. Calgurio had built his confidence upon this belief.

The second ace up their sleeve was the magic tank. Its magic gun packed a serious punch, able to fell a huge magic beast with a single shot. Experiments performed on dragons they captured showed that even those ranked A could be killed in one hit.

Next up are their treasured airships. The secret weapons described as the culmination of magical technology. Able to reach top speeds exceeding Mach 1, they were impossible to outrun for any flesh and blood creature.

Calgurio devised a strategy against Veldora as follows:

Fast-moving soldiers would lure out Veldora and pin him down by activating the magic cancelers placed in the forest. As a follow-up, the airships would then focus the rays of their magic cancelers on Veldora to immobilize him completely. And then, for the finishing blow: volley fire from the magic guns mounted on 2,000 magic tanks. With this, surely, even that ancient, evil dragon would meet its demise.

*Let's say it **did** survive... No matter how strong these True Dragons are, there is no way it could make it out unscathed.*

Gathering intelligence was key to increasing your odds during a battle. With all of the dragons they had buried came a wealth of information. Calgurio had absolute confidence in their chances of victory.

However, when he was going to explain it to the Marshal, he became reserved in his speech.

"T—that's why we will deploy the tank division and then lure the evil dragon there..."

Since he believed that the sheer amount of resources at his disposal guaranteed their victory, he held off on finalizing the details of their strategy until they arrived on site.

Even if the roads were unusable, their tanks had no issues cutting straight through the forest. Apparently, there was also a road leading up to the Dwarven Kingdom, one they had heard was wide enough to accommodate a tank with ease. He also estimated that deploying the tanks wouldn't pose any hurdles, but answering to the Marshal with vague statements was unacceptable.

I was so focused on strengthening our military power that I neglected to investigate the location. That's where I messed up, huh... Calgurio had to face the bitter reality.

"How incompetent. It appears you have gravely misunderstood: what are you going to do after destroying Veldora?"

"Huh?" Calgurio blurted unconsciously, unable to process the question.

The Marshal stared at Calgurio coldly.

"Why do you presume that the Empire did nothing even though Veldora was sealed all this time?"

"T-that's because our preparations weren't..."

"Wrong, you foolish one. It was because we are waiting for that child, Veldora, to be revived to properly settle it with him once and for all. And then make His Imperial Majesty's might known far and wide. To that end, what were you planning to do once we had destroyed Veldora? Only by defeating and controlling him will the Empire's victory be sealed!"

Her words resounded in the quiet conference hall.

Everyone was overcome by a feeling that gripped their hearts, an emotion that was neither fear nor awe.

Gadra shuddered as well.

This is crazy, is she serious about that? Didn't I make it clear that 'Mental Control' isn't going to work? Yet... And yet, there was something strangely persuasive about the Marshal's words. There was something about them that made him doubt the impossibility of it all.

Upon feeling it, an inexplicable fear washed over Gadra.

Right, now that I think about it, it sure is strange... Who is the Marshal? I have met her, and yet I never found it suspicious that I do not know her name...

A fact that Gadra was strangely reluctant to accept now loomed over him. It was his suspicion that maybe the Marshal was an exceptionally skilled user of 'Mental Control,' surpassing even himself, the archmage of the Empire.

It was no longer a mere doubt, as his certainty grew by the minute.

Gadra opened his eyes and gazed intently at the bamboo blind. A delicate silhouette appeared to be visible—a shape beyond the most eldritch of horrors imaginable to Gadra. Caught up in the illusion—that one of the 'True Dragons' had manifested in human form—he hurriedly brushed aside the idea.



Everyone swallowed nervously, the tension in the conference hall was palpable.

"Well then, I'd like to propose a plan." The voice of a young boy echoed in the silent hall.

It was Yuuki. His courage for speaking out in that moment was commendable.

"Do tell."

A voice, as gentle as it was cold, permitted Yuuki to speak.

Yuuki bowed while burying his inner thoughts.

"I believe that now isn't the time for quarrels, and each corps should set aside their differences. Please allow me to speak openly." Following this preamble, Yuuki began to propose his strategy with a solemn look.

Commencing the invasion, the Armored Corps would enter the territory of the Great Jura Forest from the east. Demon Lord Rimuru's troops were currently gathering near the intersection between the Great Jura Forest and the Great Ameld River. According to reports, they had fortified an inn town there as their base of operations and were on high alert.

The marching route of the Imperial army passed between the Canaat Mountains and the Great Jura Forest. There was no road in the eastern part of the Great Jura Forest, rendering that route far too slow.

If they advanced to the main entrance of the Dwarven Kingdom and then headed south along the Great Ameld River, they would reach this inn town. That was where the real battle would begin—were it not for one problem.

"Wait a minute, Yuuki-dono. If we don't cross the forest, we will run the risk of provoking Dwargon!" Calgurio interjected, bringing up a fair point. "I heard that King Gazel and Demon Lord Rimuru are on good terms, and the two countries are allies. If we followed your plan, then don't you think we would be recklessly wedging ourselves in between two fronts!"

Instead of advancing along the Great Ameld River, he proposed they should march through the forest, out of the desire to avoid confrontation with the Dwarven Kingdom. Once the battle began, the dwarven troops would be deployed as reinforcements. In order to prepare for that eventuality, he deemed it unacceptable to leave the supply lines at risk of getting cut off. The troops would be trapped between the mountains and the river. If they were forced into a two-front war, they would lose their advantage in numbers. Even with the aid of airships, they wouldn't be able to make use of them to resupply if they couldn't set up a camp.

Calgurio couldn't let Yuuki's proposal go unchallenged. But Yuuki grinned as if he had expected this.

"Don't worry, Calgurio-dono. We aren't aiming for the inn town, but the Dwarven Kingdom. If we cannot negotiate with King Gazel, then we can't call his nation a friendly one, wouldn't you agree? Hostile kingdoms have no need to exist, isn't that right?"

"What?!" Calgurio was at a loss for words after hearing Yuuki's speech.

Following that, the conference hall exploded into chaos.

"Are you proposing we attack the Armed Nation of Dwargon?! While yes, we could win, we cannot fathom the scale of destruction involved!"

"If we do that, we won't have enough remaining strength to attack the West."

"As we all know, that nation is protected by a natural fortress."

A multitude of ideas were thrown around the hall, and the resulting cacophony only widened the grin on Yuuki's face.

"You're right. That nation *is* like a fortress. Because it specializes in defense, it is said to be impregnable. But you see, we have tanks, don't we? Dwargon's specialized magic defense is what earned them their prominence. If we were to get rid of that, we could cut through them like a hot knife through butter."

"Hmm..."

Calgurio thought he had a point. Supposing they attacked the Dwarven Kingdom:

The target would be Eastern or Central. If they wanted to catch their enemy off guard, they shouldn't aim for Eastern, which was adjacent to the Empire, but rather attack the front line—Central—through the Great Jura Forest.

If they feigned an attack on Demon Lord Rimuru's inn town, only to swing around and lay siege to Central with the tank unit... That would allow them the opportunity to eliminate the inn town while preventing reinforcements from the Dwarven Kingdom.

"I see, that plan may be more interesting than I thought."

"Right? If the Dwarven Kingdom were met with a crisis, then Demon Lord Rimuru would have no choice *but* to act. If we take the initiative and prepare the battlefield in a way that allows us to intercept them, then—"

"It means our army will be guaranteed the upper hand."

That's a good plan, Calgurio nodded.

"I presume that only a vanguard force is stationed in the inn town," Yuuki said. "But either way, they will have the edge as long as we fight in Jura's forests, which will come at a great cost to our side. However, if we launch a full assault on the Dwarven Kingdom first, its natural fortress will provide *us* with defense, instead."

His words were laced with deception. If it came down to firing their magic guns, the initial salvo would destroy Central. Even if the enemies escaped into an underground cave system such as a labyrinth, the urban areas near the entrance would be turned to rubble.

Although, in due time, the Empire would take the city and rebuild it, the timeframe would extend beyond the length of the war. This meant that it couldn't be used to their advantage as Yuuki had described. Calgurio realized this, but he decided to play along with Yuuki's proposition.

"While I don't think that is going to work out smoothly, there's something I need to ask. At the very least, it is more exhilarating to set a trap and wait for the mouse, killing it in one go, than to chase it in the dense forest. After that, we could take aim at the capital of Tempest with impunity."

"Before that, I still have something to say about my plan. As everyone knows, my Mixed Corps is better at individual combat than group battles. And I think that's why we are better suited to carry out the investigation of the labyrinth. As I

mentioned earlier, there is a rumor that Veldora is guarding the 100th floor. In order to confirm this, too, we require an investigation, correct?"

And there we go—Calgurio smiled internally.

He didn't expect Yuuki to abandon his goal, so he could see this coming a mile away.

"That's unnecessary. If you ignore the inn town and head for the capital of that monster country, you will be caught in the crossfire from both sides. It would be better, then, to send my army westward and head towards the Dungeon on an unpaved road. In the first place, I'd have to see it with my own eyes to believe that a city can disappear. Tactically speaking, it would be correct to assume that the main force of Demon Lord Rimuru is on the ready."

As Calgurio protested, he caught a fleeting look of frustration on Yuuki's face.

Kukuku, you're still green behind the ears. Don't flatter yourself by thinking everything will go your way, kid! Calgurio was filled with delight.

And then:

"Finally, you're acting like a decent military council," the Marshal said. "Well then, you seem confident, Calgurio, so I'm going to leave the matter concerning Demon Lord Rimuru to you."

On her command, the invasion of the Great Jura Forest by the Armored Corps became final.

The Marshal continued speaking. "This alone is not enough. If we are to attack Dwargon, we'd better put pressure on them from Eastern. I'll leave that up to the Mixed Corps. Together with the task of defending our capital, you, the commander of the corps, will be responsible for its formation."

"...Understood."

Yuuki was about to argue but caught himself. Judging from the tone of the Marshal, her decision was non-negotiable.

Instead, the remaining corps commander, Gladium, spoke up.

"P-please wait! Does this mean my Magic Beast Corps will not participate in this war?! I Promise that my corps will be useful, so please consider—" he called out to the other side of the bamboo blind with a ghastly look on his face. If he and his corps were ordered to stay, the Magic Beast Corps, smallest of the three, would be given no chance to show off. The other corps commanders were about to rob him of an important task, right under his nose, making him miss his chance at glory during the war.

I can never accept that, Gladium was desperate.

"Don't panic, foolish one. I have already planned for your time in the limelight."

"Really?! S-so, what is my role going to be?"

"You are to lead the entire Magic Beast Corps to the north."

When Gladium finally registered the answer from the Marshal, he was astonished by the absurdity of it. Demon Lord Rimuru and King Gazel would concentrate on defending their nations. They then had the opportunity to blindsight the Western Nations, who were fixated elsewhere, by launching a simultaneous

invasion. And before the Western States Council could react, they'd need to construct a beachhead.

"To the north?! Are you saying we cross the Canaat Mountains?"

Gladium was shaken as he pieced together what was implied in her statement. He understood the reason. Not just two fronts, it would be a simultaneous three-front strategy; nevertheless, the Empire had enough military power to pull it off.

However, the tactical, not strategic, aspect of this operation posed numerous challenges. The idea of trekking through the Canaat Mountains with tens of thousands of soldiers bordered on insanity.

Gladium was hesitant to point this out, but then he heard the Marshal laugh.

"That's right, Gladium. Attack the royal capital of Ingracia by sea. The Kingdom of Farmenas, which is in the process of reconstruction, can be destroyed at any time once we take Dwargon."

"W-what? The sea? B-but I don't think our nation has naval battleships capable of large-scale transportation..."

"We have them. Right, Calgurio?"

Having been called upon by name, Calgurio knew it was futile to lie. Hearing the Marshal call him without an honorific, he got a bad feeling in his gut, enough to dissuade him from commenting on it.

The Marshal was *that* intimidating.

"As the Marshal said. The latest weapon developed by my army is called an 'Airship.' With the support of the Air Assault Division, which uses this state-of-the-art weapon, transporting the Magic Beast Corps is feasible."

Calgurio's remark caused a ruckus in the conference hall.

That meant there was a way to invade the Western Nations without going through the Great Jura Forest. Of course, they were excited.

"However," Calgurio continued, turning to Gladium, "as they are a necessary trump card to fight the Storm Dragon, we can only provide assistance in the form of transportation. Would that be all right?"

Calgurio would keep 100 of the airships and load up as much firepower as they could carry. The remaining 300 airships were already sufficient to transport well over 100,000 troops, each of them sporting a maximum capacity of 400 people. Excluding the staff operating the ship, they could still carry 350 troops.

The Magic Beast Corps numbered 30,000 warriors and 30,000 beast knights, adding up to 60,000 plus the support force to help them fight at their full potential. And not to forget, their supplies. A total of 300 airships would be enough to transport everything.

The airships themselves could not be expected to take part in the battle, but if it were just about transporting the Magic Beast Corps, they could handle it with ease.

Calgurio promptly drew a line that was absolutely non-negotiable and thrust it at Gladium.

Gladium, well aware of this, groaned to himself. It was an honor for the soldiers to fight against the demon lord Rimuru and Veldora the Storm Dragon. It would

be a shame to miss out on the opportunity, but the strategy that the Marshal proposed was equally appealing.

It was an unprecedented blitzkrieg operation that would fundamentally challenge the understanding of war. The sluggish Western Nations would crumble before Gladium's Magic Beast Corps. This strategy made sense, all but guaranteeing their success.

More importantly, there were champions called the Holy Knight Order in the West. They were a group that specialized in individual combat and were rumored to be the strongest even in group battles. It was said that the Imperial Guards, their partners, were also outstanding. Not to mention the presence of Hinata Sakaguchi in the Holy Empire of Lubelius. She was virtually the strongest knight and served as the head of the Imperial Guards as well as the commander of the Holy Knight Order. Her reputation was heralded across the lands, reaching even the Empire. However, there was a rumor abound that she had recently tied with Demon Lord Rimuru.

If that were the case, the so-called strongest knight would be no match for Gladium, now that her spirit was lost. He would tear apart Hinata's champions and trample the holy capital.

Gladium felt the beast blood flowing through his veins start to simmer.

"That's great!" Beast King Gladium roared. "If you can transport us to the battlefield in one piece, let's go with that plan!"

His agreement further jacked up the excitement in the grand conference hall.

"We will win! We will definitely win!"

"Victory belongs to us, the Empire!"

"Long live the emperor!"

And so on, and so forth, many of them were already beginning to revel in the idea of victory.

As if responding to their fervor, Calgurio made Gladium a promise: "Going by sea, you can give the dragons a wide berth. Rest easy and leave it to me."

This was one of the plans that Calgurio had in mind from the beginning.

Considering the flight range of dragons, the over-sea route was well outside the purview of the 'Dragon Roost.' Plus, since travel by air also let them wholly avoid the sea monsters, which were more than a little pesky, he figured that this was one of the safest routes to reach the West.

It would be, however, impossible to coordinate with the tank units, thus he thought it was too early to propose the plan. That was why the preliminary investigation was perfect.

So, despite the odd circumstances leading to the adoption of his plan, Calgurio was pleased with the way things had turned out.

Interesting. We will transport the Magic Beast Corps with the airships and then focus on support and supplies afterwards. That's how I'll let it all play out, and then, I could reap all of the glory. If a large force emerges in the North, it will take the allied forces of the West by surprise. When that happens, they'll deteriorate into a pathetic rabble. Unable to muster any reinforcements for Demon Lord Rimuru, they will descend into utter chaos.

The Western Nations, who had fixated both eyes on the Great Jura Forest, would be blindsided by such a turn of events. If that happened, nothing could bring down Calgurio's offensive. He was sure of it.

Concentrating on the Dungeon and the Storm Dragon—Calgurio calculated that doing so would net greater military gains.

"Is there anything you do not understand?" the Marshal asked.

"—No ma'am. I will, in consultation with Gladium-dono, draw up a strategy that will accomplish our task."

"Aye. Once you drop us off, we will show our enemies just how pitiful they are!"

"Well then," Yuuki added, "I shall have to make a show of force against the Dwarven Kingdom."

"Once the war engulfs Central, there will be no further movement in Eastern," the Marshal said. "However—"

"Do you mean to imply that we can rule out retaliations from bloodthirsty dwarves? I already know."

Yuuki never lost his spunk, even as he cut off the Marshal.

Everyone else in the room, including the other corps commanders, stared at Yuuki in disbelief.

Is he dense or plain stupid?—his attitude begged the question, but Yuuki shrugged off the glances he was getting.

"Very well," the Marshal picked up. "Now then, begin preparations at once!"

" " "Yes ma'am!" " "

The order had been given. Without the emperor, Rudra, saying even a word, the stage was set for the Empire's simultaneous three-front invasion.

On that day, the Imperial edict to start the war was issued in the name of the emperor. Spirits were running high in the Empire. At long last, after centuries of slumber, the behemoth was raring to show its claws once more.



Yuuki let out a sigh of relief as the Imperial conference ended.

In the previous meetings, the Marshal never spoke. But this time, she was actively interfering. As a result, Yuuki was forced to tweak his plan a bit...

It's no big deal. My army will be deployed near the Imperial capital as planned. Most of the Armored Corps, which is the most influential and distracting, would invade the Great Jura Forest. I wouldn't have guessed that even the Magic Beast Corps, with Vega in their midst, would move to the front lines, but I guess the Mixed Corps is all I need for the coup d'état.

The original plan was to build Vega up as the driving figure behind the coup, which also would've made him the fall guy if his plan was foiled. Of course, Yuuki's troops would support him behind the scenes. Rather, Vega was a diversion, and Yuuki intended to take charge of the actual work.

He had no choice but to scrap the plan, but in the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter much. Because Calgurio, the idiot that he was, had played right into Yuuki's hands.

Calgurio was more of a strategist than a fighter. He was strong enough to hold his own, but ultimately, he was a man who was particular about strategy and certain victory, avoiding any risk. And yet, when weighing a loss against the potential payoff, greed would get the better of him.

In short, all he needed was a compelling reason. Tempest was rich, and their groundbreaking technology was rife for the taking. And then, if you told him they were hidden in the Dungeon... Telling him directly would raise suspicion, of course, so it was better for Yuuki to make him think he was after it himself. Using the information and samples Gadra had brought back, Yuuki was able to make Calgurio dance to his tune.

Still, though...

"You look so grim, what's on your mind?"

Yuuki asked the person sitting across from him, Gadra.

"Hmm, it's about the Marshal..."

"The Marshal?"

"Hm. I was wondering why she might've been so impatient."

"Impatient?" Yuuki blurted. "I didn't get that feeling from her."

Yuuki couldn't fathom why *that* was keeping Gadra preoccupied. To him, it was neither here nor there, but something about it was plainly bothering Gadra.

"Ah," Yuuki murmured, "I also thought about it during today's meeting, but she was quite the monster. To tell you the truth, it would be difficult to say whether I could win against her or not, unless I found out personally."

Yuuki could gauge the strength of most of his opponents without having to fight them. Now that he had awakened to his Ultimate Skill, he could even see through his opponents' hidden abilities. So, for him to encounter an opponent who he couldn't analyze—it was self-evident that she was one dangerous individual.

"Marshal-dono is always appointed right after the succession of His Imperial Majesty Rudra. She has always protected His Imperial Majesty, like she did for the previous generation, and the ones before that. But still, as far as I know, there is no record of the Marshal being involved in military affairs. So why..." Gadra contemplated.

The Marshal becoming a problem was something Yuuki hadn't accounted for, either. But it wasn't entirely unexpected. After all, the strongest demon lord, Guy Crimson, seemed to have a bone to pick with the Empire. It didn't take someone as smart as Yuuki to figure out that something was going on.

Why did Guy Crimson, the embodiment of power, let the Empire do as they pleased? Yuuki wondered if the reason behind the prideful demon lord's reluctance to make a move...was because of someone even he was wary of. And if he were told that this person was the Marshal, well, he would be inclined to believe it.

At any rate, if the war spirals out of control and engulfs the world in chaos, what follows would be extraordinary. Then, a monster lurking in the shadows might reveal itself!

Yuuki smirked as he played out the upcoming events in his head, barely containing his enjoyment.

Gadra sighed as he watched Yuuki indulging in his fantasies, but alas, there was nothing for him to do about it. Changing gears, he decided to talk with Yuuki about their future plans.

"So, Yuuki, things are on the up and up on my end. Now that my cause for vengeance against the West has disappeared, I would have preferred to avoid war, nonetheless."

"What do you think that self-centered attitude will achieve? You've been encouraging war for years."

"Well, I can't deny that."

Gadra was, by and large, a selfish man who never cared about what others told him. As long as he and his beloved friends were safe, nothing else mattered to him. Indeed, he was a great mage, but he was no god. He did not pride himself on being all-powerful and had a clear understanding of his own limits. That was exactly why he desperately insisted on avoiding war, viewing it as his final service to the Empire.

Demon lords were said to be the enemy of mankind. They were absolute beings, and thus it was wise to abide by mutual inviolability in principle.

He made contact with the late demon lord Clayman to avoid making an enemy out of him. Through this connection, he was able to establish a friendly relationship with Yuuki.

All of this for a single objective: defeating the West—defeating Luminism.

The reason for letting the demon lords rule over a rich territory was to make sure they would not have—or not let them have—territorial ambitions for other nations, so Gadra's policy was not wrong. All this became meaningless, and that was why he wanted to do the opposite and prevent the Empire from descending down the wrong path.

Not to mention, Gadra saw Demon Lord Rimuru in a new light. He was a kind and genial soul, and Gadra believed coexistence with him to be the wise choice. After all, even his friend, Adalmann, was leading a fulfilling life, despite the drastic change in appearance compared to his previous one.

Even more surprising was the strength of his country. Even Adalmann, who appeared likely to be on even footing with Gadra, carried the mission to guard the 60th floor of the Dungeon. While he was promoted to the guardian of Floor 70, it meant that there was still someone higher up the ladder. And of course, there were his other real executives.

To oppose such a country is the height of folly. Gadra was certain about it. And by extension, he was convinced the Empire would suffer a crushing defeat.

He didn't know what Shinji and crew thought of Rimuru, but he felt something unfathomable about him. For this reason, he had pulled out all the stops to speak out against the war.

He was let down in the end; nevertheless, he had upheld his end of the bargain with Rimuru. Because he succeeded in directing the eyes of the Imperial army on the Dungeon, all he needed to think about was his future course of action.

"What happens to those who don't listen to me is no longer my concern. I will request for one last meeting with His Imperial Majesty, and then I'll be on my way to the monster country."

"What a remarkably imposing declaration. It's treason, then."

"Nothing of the sort. I just strive to live on my own terms. Yuuki, this doesn't mean that I'm cutting ties with you. Whenever you need it, you can count on me."

Gadra, despite his selfish side, had another, which showed compassion and kindness to the people he was close with. He seemed to like Yuuki, as his promise showed.

"Ah-haha, I'll look forward to that time!" Yuuki nodded with a bitter smile.

"Well, I am a newcomer to that country now. I'll be working to earn their trust from now on, so don't expect much leverage out of me, if you had that in mind."

"How mean! Keep those thoughts to yourself."

"What nonsense. The brash fellow you are ought to handle it. Ah right, those clowns are more befitting of 'brash,' but regrettably they aren't here to say hello. Did you send them off to do some nefarious deeds?"

"Sort of. I could tell you now, *buuut* Rimuru-san will catch wind of it if I do, so too bad."

"Ah-ha-ha! Yes, indeed, then I won't ask. If you happen to need me, I'll be there for you!"

"Thanks, I'll count on it," Yuuki replied with a grin. He had also taken a liking to Gadra. His honest way of life sparked a bit of admiration within him.

After a moment of laughter, the two shook hands.

"Well then, I'll be on my way. Yuuki, you can go ahead and stage your coup d'état or whatever with as much of a ruckus or fanfare as you want. However!"

"I get it. It's just that killing His Imperial Majesty is off the table, right?"

"Aye. Great that you understand. Then, farewell!"

And so Yuuki and Gadra parted ways.



Gadra's request for an audience with the emperor was granted.

I suppose I should warn the emperor—Gadra waited nervously as that though weighed on his mind. Despite the opportunity to state his plea, there was no telling if the emperor would heed his advice. But still, he wanted to offer his final service to the benefactor whom he had served.

"His Imperial Majesty is expecting you," a guide called out to him. Gadra walked along the hallway, following the veiled attendant.

From the polished corridor of the atrium, the sight of pink cherry blossoms slowly came into view. Eternal cherry blossoms. Their petals, on trees that were always in full bloom, were said to be a symbol of the prosperity of the Empire.

"It is as beautiful as ever. However, it was unpopular with Japanese people who came from another world."

"Is that so?"

"Hmm, was it "wabi-sabi"¹⁸ or "beauty in destruction?" Cherry blossoms are an ephemeral beauty, lasting only the moment they scatter in the wind. That's also a way to look at it. Isn't that right, Kondou-dono?"

"..."

A fierce man emerged from the shade of a sakura tree.

"I thought I'd hidden my presence well."

"You're right," Gadra answered, and took out his beloved cane, "I didn't notice you at all. It was just, what's the term, foreboding? Somehow, I guess, I had an ominous feeling for whatever reason."

The attendant slipped away unnoticed.

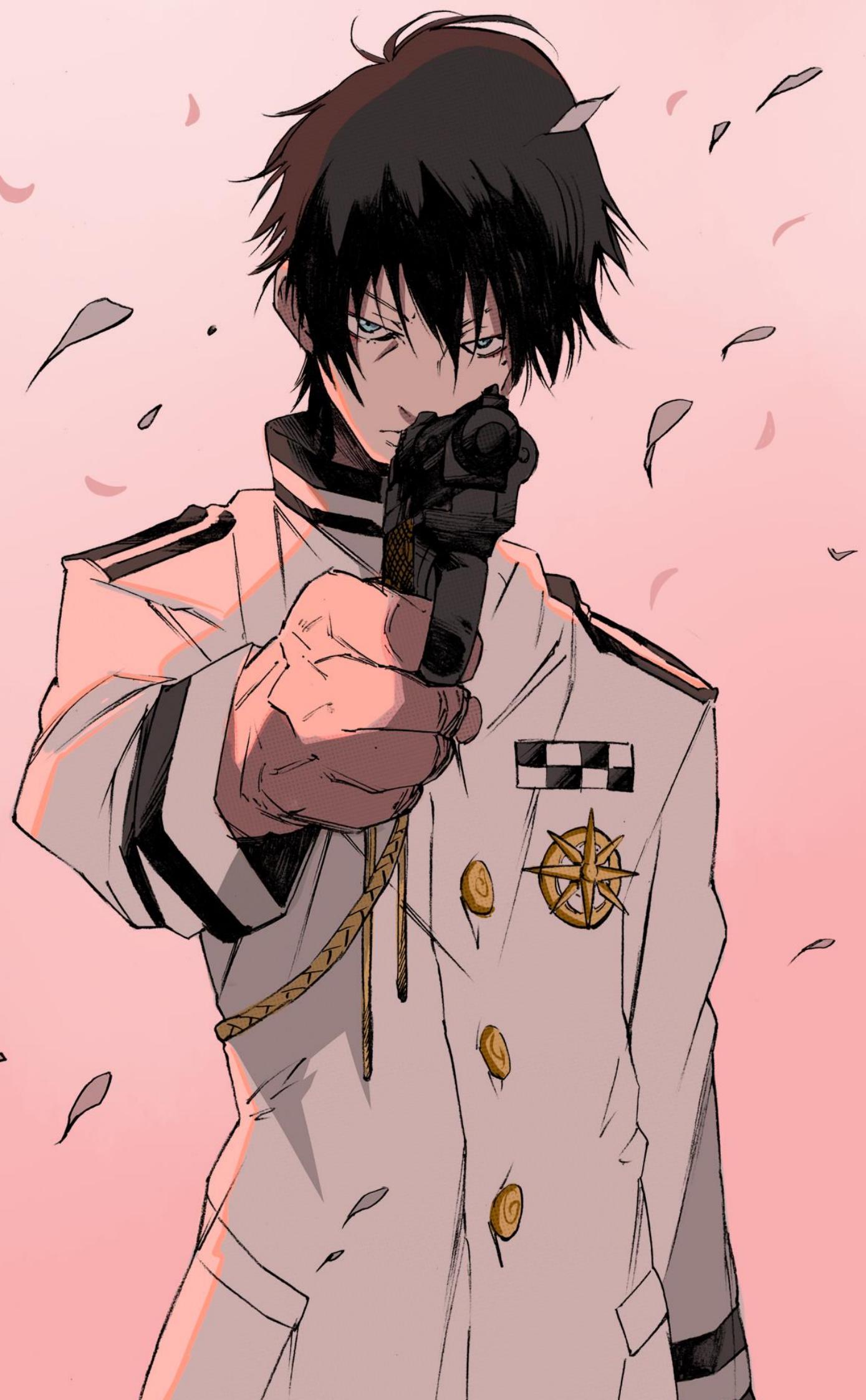
"I can't let you have an audience with the emperor."

"Why?" Gadra asked incredulously.

"I have no intention of giving you the reason, and it's meaningless for you to know it."

First Lieutenant Kondou responded and raised one arm, holding a glossy lump of black iron in his hand. It was a Nambu—the first Japanese semi-automatic handgun.

¹⁸ In traditional Japanese aesthetics, wabi-sabi is a world view centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection.



"You want to kill me?"

Gadra asked, eyes wide, glaring at him, but it did nothing to perturb First Lieutenant Kondou.

"Kondou...you bastard?!"

Just as he was about to raise his voice further, Gadra collapsed as a sharp pain tore through his chest.

He hadn't let his guard down. He was well-informed about guns and had kept a steady eye on Kondou's trigger finger, waiting for the sound of a gunshot, which never came.

And more importantly, as he lay there, his consciousness rapidly fading, he realized something. With his last bit of life, he noted that the pain in his chest came from his back, and it wasn't caused by a bullet—but the stab of a knife. Meaning this wasn't the work of Kondou, but someone else...

"Why did you interfere?"

"Because this man is dangerous. If we allowed this traitor to live, he would've hindered the next reign of His Imperial Majesty."

That someone's voice sounded familiar to Gadra, but it seemed entirely out of place. He had to wonder if his mind was playing tricks on him on the verge of death.

"But this man was still His Imperial Majesty's friend..."

Gadra's senses grew fainter by the moment as the voice of Kondou faded away.

At last, Gadra could feel death's cold embrace.

Is this poison? What a thorough job. All of this is punishment for betraying His Imperial Majesty Rudra, huh...

A moment longer, and he would let out his final breath. Lying among the undying petals dancing through the air, Gadra played his final gamble.

He invoked a spell he had prepared in advance... And lost consciousness on the spot.

ROUGH SKETCH

TATSUYA
KONDOU



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

**Chapter
5**

**War on the
Horizon**

Chapter 5

War on the Horizon

After sending Gadra to the Empire, it was time for a little interrogation. The first person on my list wasn't Shinji or his friends, but Ramiris. I just couldn't ignore some of the things that had come out of her mouth. She had pulled pranks on me before, so I was pretty sure that she was hiding something else.

"What? I'm not hiding anything!"

Ramiris started to act very suspicious and fidgety... It was clear that she was hiding something.

From now on, I won't give you any more cake! With this threat fresh in her mind, Ramiris spilled the beans, and fast.

"What do you want to know, captain?"

Captain... Well, whatever. There was no point thinking about it too much, so I began pressing her a bit.

"Adalmann had a much better showing than I expected, all well and good there. That said, what's the deal with the others? I didn't think Albert could drive back Shinji and his friends all by himself! I didn't think that there would be a death dragon here either... These oddities aren't happening on other floors though, right?"

Albert wasn't just your average *strong monster* anymore. He had evolved from a death knight into a death paladin, ranked at Special A. He could take full advantage of his abilities. Before his evolution, he fought an even battle with Hakurou. Now, there's no telling how strong he is.

"Hasn't Albert been teaching the guy named Arnaud? This time, he decided to go test his strength again in the lower floors."

"Hold on, hold on!" I hastily stopped Ramiris's explanation. I found it weird that Albert was the one teaching Arnaud. After all, Arnaud was a captain of the Holy Knight Order. He had to be pretty strong, maybe even more so than Albert. And yet, it was *Albert* who was teaching *Arnaud*? That's why I just couldn't get what Ramiris was saying.

"You see, after Arnaud and his men got scolded by Hinata last time, they went out and decided to try to challenge the Dungeon again. This time, they managed to make it through the 70th floor because the Demon Colossus was still under development."

"Uh-huh, and then...?"

"Those kids got their asses beaten again, of course!"

"Gahahahaha! It was a sight to behold!"

Ramiris explained happily, as Veldora nodded with a chuckle.

That must've been very interesting, by the sound of it.

«Report. The battle log has been recorded.»

For real?! You're awesome, Raphael-san! I'll watch the recording later, but for now, let's focus on Ramiris's explanation.

"So, how far did Arnaud and his men go?"

They might've gotten to the dragon chambers from Floors 96 to 99. The terrain effects active in those rooms were bound to bring any flesh-and-blood humans to their knees, for sure.

"Hmm, if I recall correctly, it was—"

"They were crushed the moment they encountered the next boss. It was funny to watch them cry and flee with their tails between their legs!"

Hey now, that's quite the sadistic streak you've got going there.

...Hold on, *the next boss*?

"Huh? Was the boss on the 80th floor really that strong?"

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"I mean, isn't Arnaud one of the Ten Great Saints that could even stand against an ex-demon lord like Clayman?"

It suddenly clicked as the words were leaving my mouth. On second thought, Adalmann or Albert probably could have beaten an unawakened Clayman. Moreover, with that weird death dragon thing, who's to say they couldn't have defeated even an awakened Clayman.

"Um... Well..."

I was pretty sure we had Zegion as the 80th floor's guardian. Could this mean that he had metamorphosed inside his cocoon and emerged in his fully evolved, perfect form?

I heard that Veldora had been training him, but that just didn't add up to me, either. After all, Zegion was an insect-like monster. I had no idea how he'd put the super dubious "Veldora Style Killing Arts™" to good use. I only allowed it because Veldora seemed to enjoy doing it, but I probably shouldn't have taken it so lightly.

Way back, I had used my own cells to heal Zegion's wounds and repaired his exoskeleton with magisteel. Maybe thanks to that, he could move at high speed and even summon his own subordinates.

Since this was backed by Treyni-san, I wasn't going to complain. However, the idea of pitting you against a super-fast insectoid—an insect-type monster—right after a slow-moving colossus definitely rubbed me the wrong way.

"Hey, so how is Zegion nowadays?"

Just when I was about to further question the suspicious Ramiris, Veldora cut in: "My disciple, Zegion, has undergone a complete metamorphosis! He's become an invincible warrior and inherited my techniques!"

"....."

"Better yet," he continued, "Arnaud and his friends weren't even worthy of facing my disciple! The boss of the 79th floor already took care of them all!"

It was starting to make sense. Arnaud and his friends were beaten by the 79th floor's boss, Apito the Queen Wasp. She was able to travel at ultra-high speeds and spew deadly poison.

Despite the many years Arnaud and his fellow knights had honed their swordsmanship, they couldn't even touch her. Alas, all of them got stung by her insects and fled in tears...

That's incredible! I felt like laughing.

"You should've told me! You knew that I was busy working!"

"Hey hey, hear me out!" Ramiris squealed. "It wasn't just me. It was Mentor who started talking about training or something, then went on to teach an insect!"

"Y-you idiot!" Veldora wailed. "Is this a betrayal?!"

"Because it's not fair that you're acting like it was none of your business, Mentor!"

"Grrrr..."

I suppose Veldora was in on it as well... I guess that people all wanted a part in something as fun as this. That said, I still felt like I'd been played. I couldn't believe that they were doing all of this behind my back...

Actually, it was a mistake to have left things up to them. I'd have to think about that later, but for now, there was something else bugging me.

"Hey, I've been wondering just now, what did you mean by *training* Zegion?"

He is an insect, right? Could it be that Zegion's final evolution had granted him a humanoid form?

I guessed correctly.

"Kukuku, so you have finally realized! I have known from the start that you didn't realize this. So I kept my mouth shut until now to keep things interesting!"

Heh, Veldora was being cheeky again. Though, this time, he bamboozled me hard.

I began to look through the Dungeon's recordings, and asked Raphael-san to show me an image of him. In the image, I could confirm Zegion's slender human form.

That's it. It was just like that insectoid Shion beat in Lubelius—Razul. Zegion looked just like that absurdly strong Razul. He emanated the aura of a powerful individual.

It was all thanks to the mutation in his evolution that he could attain that form. And it was this form that opened the door to a wealth of new combat techniques.

Apito had undergone a similar transformation. Her body had morphed into a figure resembling a beautiful female. I should have noticed this sooner when Hinata was mentoring her. I thought that they were just doing some mock battles, but it turns out that she was actually learning things from Hinata. Apito picked up some great techniques and became very nimble in action.

It appeared that she had also been sparring with Zegion to learn even more advanced moves.



Arnaud and his men's bitter defeat was testament to this.

"So, Arnaud and his friends re-evaluated their skills, but..."

They resigned themselves to beginner status and began to conquer the Dungeon from Floor 1.

However, a single knight halted them in their tracks on the 60th floor. The death paladin Albert, the trusted confidant of the Immortal King Adalmann, who was the strongest of all the paladins hundreds of years ago, defeated them.

"And since then, Albert has been beating them to a pulp every time."

After defeating Arnaud's team by himself, Albert had asked: "I heard they'd rebranded themselves as 'Holy Knights'; but I didn't know their quality also changed—diminished, even?"

That infuriated Arnaud, making him go all out; but even his strongest Art, Aether Break, was useless against Albert. Albert wielded his sword with the same skill he had back when he was alive, and with his monster evolution added on top, Arnaud never stood a chance.

His immortal body never tired and could even recover broken limbs. It really was borderline cheating, so unless you could leverage his weaknesses against him, he was unbeatable. On top of all that, Adalmann had a 'Holy-Demonic Reversal' Skill that made him way stronger than he already was.

Of course Arnaud's team lost, I thought.

Adalmann's team absorbed the magicules in the labyrinth and evolved into high-class monsters. Arnaud's timing couldn't have been worse to challenge the Dungeon.

However, you could also look at it another way. He was lucky to have the opportunity to be taught by the strongest knight from hundreds of years ago.

And now, Arnaud and everyone in the Holy Knight Order were training under the guidance of Albert on a rotating schedule.



As it stood, the 60th floor became a dangerous area. But...

"So then, what about the other floors?"

At this point, I could tell the general situation. Adalmann and Zegion weren't the only ones who underwent a crazy abnormal evolution.

I was spot on. In the Dungeon, there was a group of strong monsters called the Dungeon's Elite Ten. If I were to assume, it was possible that they possessed combat skills on par with my executives.

Needless to say, Adalmann was one of them, as was his subordinate, Albert. Apito managed to get into the Dungeon's Elite Ten because of her abnormal evolution, under the alias "Insect Queen." As for Zegion, it seemed like he had become the reigning figure of the Elite Ten. Next up was Kumara. If she absorbed the power from her tail beasts, she could turn into her true form, which was her adult form.

"Listen up! I'll fill you in!" Ramiris announced and gave me an update on the current forces inside the Dungeon. Starting from the bottom:

The four elemental dragons that Ramiris had carefully raised under Milim's instruction had successfully evolved into dragon lords. It was the result of their exposure to Veldora's eminence of massive amounts of magicules. The fire dragon lord, ice dragon lord, wind dragon lord, and the earth dragon lord. These were the Four Dragon Lords.

I could barely believe my eyes, but there they were—and that wasn't even the end.

The guardian of the 90th floor, "Nine Heads" Kumara.

The guardian of the 80th floor, "Insect Kaiser" Zegion.

The boss of the 79th floor, "Insect Queen" Apito.

The guardian of the 70th floor, "Immortal King" Adalmann.

The vanguard of the 70th floor, "Death Paladin" Albert.

As a bonus, there were two guardians on the 50th floor, Gozer and Mezer. Frankly, the two of them didn't make the cut for the Elite Ten. As for the last, tenth, member, it was Beretta, who was also the manager of said group.

"Nevertheless, I want this trouble—*ahem, ahem*, this *honor* to be passed on to someone else..." murmured Beretta, glancing at Treyni-san and Ifrit—I mean Charys.

"Ara, I have the important task of taking care of Ramiris-sama," Treyni-san said, with a charming smile.

"Me too," Charys added. "I am the only devoted servant of Veldora-sama, so I am already busy taking care of him."

It looked like Veldora was taking full advantage of Charys, but at least Charys seemed to be satisfied. He already had his hands full, unwilling to take on another job.

My heart sighed; these two really did take after *that* butler.

"Seems like you're having a hard time, Beretta."

"You understand, Rimuru-sama!"

I nodded.

While catching up with Beretta, I uncovered a number of things.

First of all, who did the Elite Ten belong to? We ran the Dungeon for our enjoyment and the profits. Without Ramiris, who built the labyrinth, or Veldora, whose magicules filled the labyrinth, it couldn't exist. So, now that raised the question who the Elite Ten should serve. Following the chain of command, that would be Ramiris...

"Oh, yeah. I met with all of them and asked what they want to do!" Ramiris explained.

Beretta would be with Ramiris, so no change there. Every dragon lord turned into Ramiris's subordinate. Apparently, she even made a contract to seal the deal. Dragon lords had egos, so it was created with their consent.

Moving on to the rest of the team; Kumara had become friends with the kids and was living happily here, so she was overly grateful. I caught wind of her saying that she would become my pet, disregarding the fact that I already had Ranga as one.

Zegion and Apito admired me greatly, too, so they declared themselves my subordinates.

Needless to say for Adalmann, he definitely had a couple screws loose. It went so far that he even worshipped me as a god. Albert was under the influence of Adalmann, meaning his loyalty fell back on me by proxy.

Just like that, the five became my subordinates.

Gozer and Mezer kinda worked in the labyrinth, so they may as well be Ramiris's subordinates, but... I heard that they declined to join Ramiris and requested to serve me. Whatever. It's possible that they dismissed Ramiris based on her appearance, given their nature as a power-obsessed race.

"Wrong! Those children got their names from you, didn't they, Rimuru? They were happier with that than getting a paycheck. They told me they couldn't compromise it."

Oh, that'd explain it. It was nice to hear that. I should treat Gozer and Mezer better next time I meet them.

Just like that, I learned about an unexpected phenomenon in the Dungeon while I was inspecting the three intruder's actions. It was this occurrence that shocked me, but the fact that the guardians were stronger now was good. But it would be a bit of a problem if they evolved way more than we thought. It might be a coward's bad habit.

Be that as it may, with the existence of the Dungeon's Elite Ten, no one needed to worry about the Imperial army intruding and attacking us. However, I ordered them to hold back for the normal challengers. Otherwise, it would be impossible for these ordinary people to traverse the labyrinth.

The unfortunate thing was that they'd have to take on a labyrinth containing a number of demon lord-class monsters. The only floor that I wanted to be seriously guarded was the 100th floor, and I'd leave that to Veldora.

As for the other levels—at least up to around the 80th floor—I hoped for the challengers to take their best shot and attack them. We made the Dungeon with a lot of care, so I wanted them to see how cool it was.

But all that would have to wait for peaceful times.



After going through the labyrinth to make sure it was in good condition, I visited each of the guardians. Actually, I wanted to see just how they evolved with my own eyes.

Their growth was staggering. With the power they currently had in the labyrinth, I couldn't imagine them losing to the Empire.

After a few days...

I went to try out the observation magic I had finally finished after a bit of work. The place was the Strategic Military Control Battle Command Center—commonly

known as the "Control Room." The name had that tacticool oomph to it. Thus, that's what I settled on with Veldora and Ramiris... After I took a step back and thought about it though, I guess it was kinda long. In hindsight, I probably picked the wrong crowd to brainstorm with. Since Benimaru and the others simply called it the Control Room, few people knew its original name.

It was newly built next to Veldora's private room on the 100th floor of the labyrinth and could be accessed through the usual war room. If the city above ground was isolated within the labyrinth, this would serve as the main headquarters.

We were absolutely prepared for war. And if the invasion never came and all of this was for nothing, I'd still count it as a win, right?

The results of the observation magic turned out extremely well. The same big screens that we used during the tournament were set up to show situations from various locations. Several places in the Great Jura Forest, along the trade routes of the Dwarven Kingdom, as well as a lot of other critical places could be surveilled at any time. Everything from the sea route bordering the Kingdom of Farmenas to the peak of the Canaat Mountains—all of it was projected in full detail.

The principle behind it was simple:

Lens-shaped water droplets that I had devised for the physical magic Megiddo were controlled by spirits. The huge lenses that I deployed near the stratosphere reflected a magnified view of the target destination. And by reflecting it, they transmitted a detail-rich video of the place.

Taking a page out of Moss's book, I had sent out a herd of tiny slimes, each a 'Clone,' and used them as a medium to activate the magic on site. Because of that, they were all connected to my main body through 'Spatial Domination,' allowing for an instant data link, which meant that I could enjoy zero-latency streaming.

My clones were too tiny to act autonomously, which had the added benefit of requiring no magicles so long as I didn't consciously act on them. On the flip side, moving them to the places I wanted to see was quite the challenge, but Souei and Moss handled that for me quite well. It was a very handy, low-cost solution.

I named this physical magic Argos, the Eye of God.

The feed to the monitor was highly accurate after being processed by 'Wisdom King Raphael.' A close-up view of whatever distant area could be enjoyed from the warmth of the Control Room. The completion of this magic system was a delight to everyone. Especially Diablo, who was over the moon, but let's ignore that.

Next, the surveillance system actually had another benefit that we only found after it was finished. Now people could activate Megiddo in the place shown on-screen while they were in the Control Room. I tinkered around with it for a bit and was stunned. I fired a beam at Gobta's feet while he was training in a clearing, but I didn't expect it to work so well.

I'll never forget the look on Gobta's face as he jumped in shock.

"Idiot! It's because you're not paying attention!"

I may have told him off, but I didn't think it was his fault.

Megiddo's performance had also improved. Originally, 'Great Sage' had optimized this magic, but the current Raphael-san didn't seem to be satisfied... Following much more careful refinements, I had developed a system that used a number of lenses floating in the sky at all times, like satellites. By linking it with Argos, Megiddo could even be fired at night. Although it wasn't as powerful, I succeeded in converging the light by reflecting beams of light from one satellite lens to another.

To be clear, I really did get maybe a *bit* carried away here, but the results spoke for themselves, so it was time well spent in my book.

Powerful spirits were really the ones creating these lenses, so I just supplied them with magicules. Raphael-san was the one who did all the complicated calculations, so that made it easy to operate.

During the daytime it operated at full power, of course, since that overhead became unnecessary. With more light and heat blasting through it, it was one heck of a heat ray cannon.

If I were to face off against a human army, I bet I could reduce them to ashes without lifting a finger. After my little upgrades to the magic, it really seemed *that* strong.

*

Satisfied with the outcome of my experiment, I returned to my office.

Not a moment too soon, Shuna came by to let me know that we had guests. By that, I could see that there were quite a few guests.

Ah, let's just say that most of my time was spent meeting guests. I spent the rest just developing magic, thinking of cool new products, and ordering the right people to the right places. I was also running the labyrinth and consulting with Myourmiles-kun...among other things. Having fun was also part of my work.

With that being said, treating my guests well was very important, so I took it seriously.

Shinji and the other two were waiting nervously in the guest room, which Shuna escorted me to. They were granted asylum in our country, and so we asked them for as much information as they could share with us over the last few days.

Of course, this wasn't an interrogation, but a voluntary thing. We had interviewed them peacefully in separate rooms. They were allowed to do whatever they wanted to in their free time, so they could think about their decision regarding their futures.

Today, they came to report that.

"So, have you decided what you're going to do?"

They were torn between the choice of working in my kingdom or becoming freelance adventurers. If they wanted to continue being adventures, they could strike it rich by challenging the Dungeon over and over.

The drawback being, now that they knew how difficult the Dungeon was, they couldn't see the prospect of beating it in the future. The Demon Colossus would

be placed on the 60th floor, a boss that Shinji's crew would surely bite their teeth out on. Furthermore, even if they *did* beat it, Adalmann and his entourage awaited them on the 70th floor. It was a checkmate. This prospect of a dead-end career had them worried, as they weren't looking forward to grinding the same floor till the end of their days.

Knowing this had killed their drive to press on. In spite of the riches they'd earn, their lives would be monotonous and boring.

I mean, Adalmann and the others had become stronger than I expected, so I couldn't really blame the challengers of the labyrinth. Normally, them achieving such growth—more like evolution—was unthinkable, but I guess it couldn't be helped.

Whatever, forget about that.

I stopped worrying about how the other challengers were doing.

Then, how about working in my country?

Although I would give the right job to the right person, I also promised that they would live a steady life. However, right now the war with the Empire was near at hand, so they seemed to be afraid that they would be drafted into the war.

I didn't intend to force anyone, but I couldn't guarantee that the three of them wouldn't get involved.

"Yes," Shinji said nervously, "after discussing amongst the three of us, we decided to work for His Majesty Rimuru's country. Because Master Gadra is also going to serve this country, would you allow us to do the same?"

The other two nodded sternly, apparently on board with it.

"Understood. In that case, you're welcome to join us."

"Thank you very much!"

"I promise to do my very best!"

"...I'll do my best."

Just like that, the trio became part of my country.

So, what kind of job should I give them?

"I'll let ol' Gadra-san manage the 60th floor. This way, he can research the Demon Colossus in order to pilot it in the future."

That old man had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and became deeply invested in the topic. So much so, that he couldn't contain his excitement when I presented him with the Demon Colossus.

Right now, Adalmann was supervising him. In the future, I had plans of letting Gadra become the guardian of the 60th floor.

"So, you guys don't want any part in the war, right?"

"Ah...yeah," Shinji replied hesitantly. "There are people that we know, so if it is fine with you..."

Then, rather than becoming my subordinate, maybe they could become researchers in the Dungeon.

On that note, I decided to introduce the three of them to Ramiris.

*

We strolled into the dungeon and headed to Ramiris's lab.

"Ramiris, this is Shinji and his friends, would you like them to work at your place?"

"Ah, Rimuru! Those kids that visited before?"

"Yep."

Ramiris had been looking for an assistant, but she hadn't found one yet that was up to task. She couldn't do things as freely as she wanted with foreign researchers. On the other hand, unintelligent monsters just couldn't understand her crazy ideas. She had Dino, but she couldn't rely on him alone. Right then, Shinji and the others appeared, and they happened to be the right people for the job.

"Yahoo! I'm Ramiris. Are you guys interested in working as my new assistants?"

"Um..."

Shinji was bereft of words, but he didn't seem to realize who Ramiris was.

"Fantastic! Hey, Shinji! Fairies really exist?!"

Mark exclaimed in surprise. Was this the first time that they met a fairy? I had no idea how long they had been in this world, but his reaction to seeing a fairy proved that this guy was more genuine than I thought...

"I am looking for useful assistants. I'll give you a good salary, so, what do you think? Rimuru also said that since we lack researchers, educated otherworlders are a great value!"

Ah, Ramiris had said too much.

That was true though. They were highly skilled, and their thinking was flexible. They were always ready for work, so they'd make a great addition to the team.

"...I agree. I think I'd be more at peace with research."

Xin was straightforward with his opinion. Perhaps moved by this, Shinji quickly made up his mind.

"So then, please take us on!"

Hearing this reply, Ramiris fluttered around happily. "Fufu!" she giggled haughtily, puffing out her nonexistent chest. "Seems like you guys are gonna be useful. Very well, you all passed. However, you must obey my orders to the letter!" she declared to the trio.

I was shocked by how quickly she flipped. It felt like her modest approach a moment ago had been a ruse. To say that it was typical of Ramiris would be an understatement.

Ignoring the dumbfounded trio, Ramiris quickly came up with a list of conditions for them.

They would be paid three gold coins per month. Meaning their annual salary would be 36 gold coins, along with a bonus. It was better not to count on the bonus, though, because Ramiris paid it according to her mood, as did I.

However, it looked like she would be taking charge of their food, clothing, and shelter. They would probably mainly use our cafeteria, but that shouldn't be an issue.

That wrapped up Shinji and his two friends' speedy immigration.



A few days later:

It seemed that the trio got used to their job and were busy working as Ramiris's assistants. That was all well and good, so my next worry was Gadra. We'd lost touch with Gadra ever since he returned to the Empire.

I'm sure that old man's doing fine, he's a tough guy...

I started to worry about him though and hoped to get in touch.

With that on my mind, I went to the Control Room to have a meeting with Benimaru.

The big surveillance screen showed footage from my Argos. It showed all of the surveilled locations, but I couldn't spot anything out of the norm. I wanted to get information on Imperial territory as well, but I had to be satisfied with the military border for now. A lot of soldiers gathered there to guard the area around the base. That place was always busy.

"It doesn't look like there's going to be any movement today," I remarked.

"Yeah," Benimaru replied. "By the way, this magic is really nifty, isn't it? It's what you've been working on recently, right, Rimuru-sama?"

Since we were the only people here today, Benimaru engaged in a casual tone. I liked this more relaxed side of him. Unfortunately, as soon as someone else was around, he would go back to his rigid self. Well, except with Souei and Diablo.

I wanted to cherish the camaraderie we had, so every once in a while, I'd take the three of them to Ingracia for a night out and crack open a cold one with the boys.

"That's right!" Diablo jumped in. "The greatness of this magic begins with its unconventional conception and out-of-the-box thinking. The cost-to-performance is incredible. Not to mention its convenience, and the complexity of the calculations needed for it to activate are as fine as a beautiful work of art. So—"

"Stoooop!!" I shouted. "Hold it right there. If you can't stop gushing over it, just do it somewhere I can't hear you, okay?"

This was what happened when I got careless. Diablo's sudden gushing was something I just didn't want to deal with.

This magic was indeed great, but the only reason I could do it was because I had Raphael-san. It was a bit awkward to hear such praise because I couldn't take full credit for it.

"Yeah, Diablo. If you don't pull yourself together a bit, you'll bother Rimuru-sama."

"That's ridiculous. What are you saying, Benimaru. That's not true, right, Rimuru-sama?"

"No, Benimaru is right. You're overreacting too much. It's always *wonderful Rimuru* this, *incredible Rimuru* that, it's totally overblown!"

This was the perfect time to properly call Diablo out on it.

He deflated like a punctured balloon, utterly devastated. It wasn't anything serious, though, just him being dramatic.



When I heard that Diablo was a powerful demon or something called primordial, I didn't know what to do about it. But if you really thought about it, he was a weirdo from the start. He even made a fool out of Guy, so you'd just make a fool of yourself if you took him seriously. I had realized that, so I wanted to be alert.

"Kufufufufu, how incredible of Rimuru-sama, even your mere words inflicted excruciating mental damage to my soul..."

"Didn't I just tell you to stop it!"

Right? This guy was incapable of self-reflection. Having a stern word with him was just fine.

Our heartwarming conversation was interrupted by a sudden report.

<Rimuru, there has been a direct spatial transfer to the labyrinth! This feedback, it came from the old-timer that recently became our ally!>

<Understood. I'll go to the 70th floor right away.>

When I stood up, Benimaru and Diablo realized that something was up. I was impressed at how quick they were to react, so I let them know what was happening.

"Seems like that Gadra's back, but something's wrong. Let's go check it out."

"Understood. I will remain here as a guard."

"Then I will escort Rimuru-sama."

"I'll rely on you."

During important times like this, I could count on Diablo. If only he were always like this, then... Nope, never mind. Diablo was brilliant, but he seemed like two entirely different people at times.

On that somber note, we headed to the room we had assigned to Gadra.

As expected, we found him right there. Well, now I didn't have to worry about him because he was right in front of me, alive and well.

"Oh dear, I could already see the other side," Gadra murmured, all the while still looking as spry as ever.

The only people here, other than me and Diablo, were Adalmann and the others. Ramiris and Veldora got here late but got back to work once they found out that Gadra was safe and sound.

"So, what happened?"

"Well, during the Imperial conference, I suggested that we do not go to war, as Rimuru-sama ordered. In spite of this, they are intent on moving forward. I already expected that, so I wanted to make a direct appeal to His Imperial Majesty Rudra as my last service to him."

And then he said he requested to meet with the emperor, which was accepted. Their meeting was meant to take place today. Gadra entered the emperor's castle, only to be stabbed by someone. It had all gone down just moments ago, not even ten minutes had passed.

It would be dumb to ask him if he was okay.

"Oh right, we gave you the Resurrection Bracelet."

"Yes sir, Ramiris-sama's power is marvelous. This bracelet saved my life. I was expecting something like this would happen, so I prepared a teleportation spell in advance."

Seeing him safe now, I figured that might indeed be the case. That was quite the clever idea. If you were to return to the labyrinth, no matter how injured you were, or how close you were to dying, the Resurrection Bracelet would bring you back to life.

Gadra's return and resurrection reaffirmed how useful Ramiris's power truly was. Even so, it was owed in part to Gadra's finesse to set up magic in advance. It seemed like he also passed this technique on to Razen. I'd have to try this myself some other time.

In my case, I had 'Thought Acceleration,' so if I combined it with that, I might be able to create more amazing magic.

"So, who attacked you?"

I didn't think there were that many people capable of beating Gadra, even in my country. He was always on guard, with thorough defensive magic, so I didn't think he would be slow to react even if taken by surprise...

"The thing is, I was attacked without detecting the presence of the culprit, robbing me of my chance to confirm the identity. I do have an idea about who it was, but it's very hard to believe..."

Gadra turned and showed us his back, where we could see a gash in his robes. His wounds were healed, but his equipment was not restored. His robes had traces of corrosion on it, which made it clear that it wasn't your average physical attack.

"Stabbed in the heart from your back, huh?"

"The assailant even managed to break through the defensive magic. It looks like they have someone with an intriguing technique."

Even Diablo was impressed. That was how you could tell this opponent was not one to be underestimated. There was likely someone powerful enough to kill me in the Empire. Maybe he was the one who stabbed Gadra, but it was better to assume that there were still others.

Gadra himself wasn't certain about his attacker's identity. He wanted to look further into it, so I decided to leave it to him. He didn't seem to be lying because he looked seriously confused. It may still be too early to trust him, but I'm not one to burn a bridge like that.

"Well, I'm glad that you're safe. This just shows us that the Empire is strong... We must double our efforts to be careful in the future."

"Rimuru-sama is right," Diablo added. "We can't get any new information now, even if we pushed our luck further than this."

We seemed to be on the same page.

For now, we should be content with the information Gadra had obtained, nearly paying the ultimate price for it. With that in mind, I decided to question him a little further and thanked him for his troubles.

*

From Gadra's story, the Empire was headed for war. They wouldn't publicly declare war against another country, though. To them, their emperor was the absolute authority, so they didn't acknowledge the existence of other countries.

However, that was just a facade. In fact, they somehow had diplomatic ties with the Dwarven Kingdom, and had not interfered in their governance.

When the Empire invaded other countries, they always came fully prepared. That was why instead of a declaration of war, they would announce a recommendation to surrender. They would only do it once. If the country surrendered, then great. If they didn't, then war would come. The Empire would give no mercy.

What a condescending and prideful country. *You can't become friends with other countries if you're that annoying, you know?* Worrying about that was useless, since the Empire never participated in any international affairs anyway.

That's why they didn't ratify the Western States Council's international laws, so there was no use arguing when they started a war, as they were not bound by these laws. Agreements after defeat, handling of prisoners of war, a number of prohibitions in wartime—without any of those arrangements, the Western Nations were very much afraid of the Empire.

That was, indeed, scary. At worst, they would justify the slaughter of civilians. That meant that if we were to lose the war to the Empire, we would lose everything. And maybe, the word "reparations" wouldn't even come into play. Everything would belong to the Empire, leaving the losing country with nothing, not even a single right, after unconditional surrender. In order to be able to negotiate with the Empire, it would have to end in at least a draw.

Then, my side wouldn't have to go nice on them. All we had to do was to settle this once and for all and cut off the root of the problem.

Now that we were certain about the Empire's movements, we also switched to "war mode." First of all, I set up a joint operation headquarters in the Control Room. I did it on a whim; nevertheless, something like this was important.

Benimaru and Souei would always be on standby here.

Souei still stationed his 'Clones' in several places so we didn't have to rely entirely on my 'Argos' for reconnaissance. With Moss's help, we could get information with a high degree of accuracy.

At this point, our advantage was considerable. To put it bluntly, when it came to warfare in this world, the real action only started once the opposing armies clashed. We were trying to gather intel on the enemy's troops with the use of scouts and long-range magic, but in this world, it was common practice to only do so when the clash was imminent.

The concept of information warfare existed here, but no country's military conducted surveillance of enemy forces as thoroughly as ours. That's what Hinata and Gadra told me, so it's not me being presumptuous, ok? It's a hard fact.

"This footage is from the sky...?" Gadra asked.

"Kufufu," Diablo laughed. "This is created through Rimuru-sama's magic. It only uses a small amount of magicles, and the reaction occurs outside the atmosphere. Only few could sense this magic reaction, such as those with danger precognition Skills like 'Ultra Instinct.'"

"I-indeed. I've always been confident in my ability to sense magic, but this magic appears too natural for me to think it was being controlled by someone."

"Of course! Even an archdemon, who may excel in magic but lacks experience, wouldn't be able to appreciate this masterpiece. How brilliant, wouldn't you agree?"

"That goes without saying! This is really quite astounding!"

For some reason, Diablo started showing off my creation to Gadra with a smug grin. They were both in awe and Gadra was getting visibly excited.

"Shion."

"Understood!"

Since they were quickly becoming a nuisance, I ordered Shion to isolate them in a separate room.

Once I had peace and quiet again, I got down to business.

The bird's-eye-view surveillance footage was a fantastic cheat. Think about it: Not long ago, I was worried about where we would be attacked from, but that couldn't be simpler now. After all, we were not just monitoring the possible routes for invasion but also our shared border with the Empire, so we'd know it the moment they started moving.

Taking shogi as an example, it was like playing against a blindfolded opponent. That means your opponent could only be sure about the positions of their own pieces. Assuming you didn't act like a total amateur, this was your game to lose, even against a master of the game. This wasn't a minor handicap, but an absolute advantage. On top of that, there were no rules in this war. Victory was justice.

The prospect of a one-sided invasion was scarier than I thought. As long as nothing had been promised, we could do anything in this war. However, I did set one rule: "Do not attack civilians!" That was it. Of course, I strictly prohibited our side from striking first. Plus, once I declared that the war had ended, further attacks were forbidden. I believed that no one would disobey me and violate my orders.

So now, all of the country's executives were gathered in the Control Room.

Benimaru was the general. Hakurou was the advisor. Souei was the intelligence officer. Rigurd and the chiefs of the three powers that support him: Rugurd, Regurd, Rogurd. Representing the women, we had Shuna and Lilina. There were also the unsung heroes, namely Rigur, Kaijin, and Kurobee. Vesta and Myourmiles served as consultants. Gobta and Gabil served as the commanders of their corps. Even Geld laid down his work and came over. I also called the three demonesses led by Testarossa. Diablo seemed to have done some self-reflection, so I let him join the meeting, too. He stood in his usual position, on good terms with Shion. Gadra and the trio also came to contribute their information about the Empire. And

not to forget, Masayuki, now called the moral support of the people, of sorts, showed up late.

"Wait a minute. Why am I the *moral support* of the people?! Please don't say stuff like that! Come on!" he shouted, giving me some serious side eye.

Oops, he really did just say that in front of everyone.

For some reason, Gadra was staring at the two of us during our little exchange. Something must've been on his mind, so I decided I would ask him after the conference.

And last but not least, our collaborators, Veldora and Ramiris. Beretta, Treynisan, and Charys were also on stand-by in the corner of the room.

There we go, that's everyone.

I gently stroked Ranga sitting next to me and looked around at everyone in their seats.

"I suppose it comes as no surprise why I gathered you all here today. We must discuss our strategy against the Empire. Benimaru and I came up with the outline of the plan, but I would also like to know what everyone else here thinks. Please express your thoughts freely!"

" " "Yes sir!" " " everyone answered in chorus, kicking off the conference.



Looking at the screen, you could see vast numbers of Imperial soldiers lining up one after another.

Visible beside them were also large hunks of steel, rolling with continuous tracks wrapped around their wheels as they sputtered in loud bursts. Those were tanks. Going off of what we saw from our bird's eye view, they appeared to have 2,000 of them.

"Wai—oi! Why do they have tanks!" I called out, unable to believe my eyes.

I hurriedly asked Shinji and the others and found out that the Empire was pushing for the development of modern weapons using the otherworlders' knowledge—science and technology.

Instead of gas, it had an internal-combustion engine running on magicules. These were supplied by the constant intake of outside air, which had the added benefit of not only harvesting magicules from the environment, but also served to cool the hot engine. This tank was highly versatile, and in terms of its performance alone, it easily outperformed the best tanks in my previous world.

Gadra said that they analyzed the magic-controlled power reactor they had excavated from ancient ruins and modernized it. Also, magic stones could be used to fuel it. During normal operation, it gathered magicules from its environment. But for combat, magic stones were used.

This was an all-terrain vehicle fit for even the roughest roads, reaching a top speed over 100 kilometers per hour. Although coming at a great energy cost, it even had the ability to float a short distance above the ground.

I felt like I was late to the party and frustrated about the fact that I didn't make them myself. The idea of a tank in this world of knights never occurred to me. We had built a train, meaning we were *this* close to making tanks, too...

—But we didn't have cars, either, so skipping straight to tanks would've been weird. I always thought that it would be a shame to popularize the use of cars, too. They were convenient, but equally dangerous, you know what I mean? Everyone would clamor to get one, but in the end, it would be impossible to ever meet demand. Resource scarcity was still a thing here, so the split between haves and have-nots was inevitable.

In my opinion, using trains in urban environments was more convenient than cars. Then once everything was up and running with the trains, I wanted to invent luxurious cars for the rich. They were meant to be something people could strive for, as the ultimate status symbol.

Well, that would have to wait until after the war. After all, their tanks weren't the only thing of note.

They also had ships that flew in the sky. *Are you for real?!* I wanted to shout. Having that kind of thing would make transportation a piece of cake. They could single-handedly solve logistics problems when used for war.

At that point, I realized that maybe I was getting too cocky. Perhaps I was being a bit optimistic when I assumed our air superiority. I had thought about developing that sort of thing as well, but dismissed it as impossible. One does not simply develop flying ships overnight.

Given enough time, we maybe could've done it, but development wasn't *that* straight-forward. It takes a lot of trial and error before a product is ready for practical use. So, we had to applaud the research and development team of the Empire; those guys were brilliant. But I must admit that I had a slight desire to capture at least one ship whole.

Had I tried to think more outside-the-box and been a tad more liberal in my demands, we could've been sitting here with our very own—you know what? Forget it. There was no use crying over spilled milk; it was something to think about for the future.

After the war ended, I would try and develop a lot more things on a whim.



The situation with the Empire was as I just saw.

It was nothing new to me, but for some of the people here, this was their first time seeing anything of the sort. They just stared at the screen dumbfounded, unable to hide their astonishment.

"As far as estimates go, we could be dealing with a million invaders in total! Well, it's already evident as we can see. I know you may have been surprised by their weapons, but that doesn't change the fact that we have the upper hand. Don't worry."

The most important part of war is to know how strong the opponent would be. At this point, we knew their abilities as if we'd proverbially stripped them naked.

Raphael-san counted that the enemy troops numbered a million soldiers in total. Now that may sound like a crazy number, but it was still unlikely for our side to lose. *That* was how strong our side was.

"Gadra told me that there are three major corps in the Empire," I said. "One of them, which is called the 'Armored Corps,' has the tank troops that were shown on the screen. They call it the 'Magic Tank Division' and it is undoubtedly the main force of the enemy."

Then, I went into further detail about the inside information I had on the tank division.

That's not all the intel Gadra gave me. He also attended the strategy meeting and told me everything about it. They must have learned about Gadra's escape, so it was likely that they made changes in the plan that they had initially laid out in the meeting, but it was safe to assume that they didn't change the main gist of it.

After all, Yuuki was also there with the goal of starting a coup. He would definitely stir the other commanders up by insisting that they didn't have to be on guard as Gadra was already dead.

Gadra also said that the Armored Corps commander Calgurio took the bait, hook, line, and sinker. He believed that the Dungeon held treasures and was planning to beat the other commanders to the punch.

If so, he would probably hate to make major changes to their plan, so he was likely to agree with Yuuki's suggestion. It was dangerous to act on assumptions, but it was easy to guess the intent of their actions if you looked at how Calgurio was positioning his army.

Gobta was the first to speak after I finished explaining.

"Um, about my army that is on standby in the inn town, are we gonna fight against those tanks?"

Gobta brought up a good point. In fact, from the point of view of the corps commander, this question had to be asked. It was a matter of life and death. Gobta, who would always sleep during meetings, had matured. Indeed, it was because people take responsibility that they—

"Why are you asking such an obvious question?" Benimaru demanded, turning to Gobta while I was deeply moved. "The First Army will destroy their tank corps under your command!"

"I didn't know about that..." Gobta murmured in a daze, somewhat shocked.

Well, I could totally understand where he was coming from.

"Are we going to have to defend the inn town to the death?" he asked, with dread in his eyes.

"Of course not!" I said with a smile. "From what I know about the tanks, you have a shot at beating them if you play your cards right. The only problem is that we don't know how many people would be hurt during the battle. To begin with,

it's harder to defend than to attack, so the inexperienced Green Numbers will only serve as targets for the tanks. The plan isn't for you to fight till the bitter end."

I took my time explaining this to try and reassure him. Hakuro, who was in charge of supporting Gobta, could apparently sense what I was playing at from the onset. He just listened and agreed to what I said.

"Then, what should we do?"

"The commander's role is to think about that, but it would be hard for a first-timer like you. Benimaru, explain it to him," I said with an air of authority.

Actually, like Gobta, I was no better than an amateur when it came to army stuff. I didn't know much about tactics, so I just let Benimaru do the finer details.

But my approach of taking it easy and delegating stuff had many upsides. If Gobta managed to step up and worked hard, I would have even more time to slack off.

We both listened to Benimaru's explanation, hoping that Gobta would do his best on this one.

"Listen, Gobta. The inn town is important, but it doesn't matter if you lose it. If it gets destroyed, then we can just re-build it. If it gets taken by the Empire, then we will just take it back. The problem is about the residents being hurt. However, Rimuru has already come up with a solution. We have issued an order to the residents there to evacuate to the capital Rimuru."

Yep. The moment we knew the Empire would make its move, we started evacuating the civilians. It was taking time, but it should be finished before the Imperial Army arrived.

"Ah, come to think of it, there aren't very many residents there."

"Exactly. Your job is to safely evacuate the rest of them. Once you're done, go here," Benimaru pointed at the huge map spread across the table. Specifically, the central city of the Armed Nation of Dwargon.

"Huh?"

"Look at this video. From what we can see, the Imperial Army is planning to divide its forces and invade along several routes. While some of them have already entered the Great Jura Forest, there was no movement in their tank troops. If you look at the direction these troops will be going, it's clear that they're planning to move along the foot of the Canaat Mountains. There aren't as many trees there, so it doesn't affect the advance of their army."

"I-I see..."

"You don't get it, do you? Your goal is to defend the Dwarven Kingdom," said Benimaru, as he placed a piece representing Gobta's army in front of the Dwarven Kingdom. Next, he took out a piece for the dwarven army and placed it next to Gobta's.

"It is a united front."

"Ooh!" Gobta gasped with surprise and excitement as it finally clicked.

We had formed this military tactic based on Gadra's information and had already talked to Gazel about it. In accordance with our alliance, we told him that the Empire's aim was the Dwarven Kingdom. He also pledged to send reinforcements to our aid as he had promised.

Naturally, Gazel also knew that the Empire was on the warpath. He said that he was tired of turning down their repeated requests for permission to march. But sooner or later, the Empire would run out of patience, he predicted.

Gazel was happy with my offer, and it was of mutual benefit.

We would abandon the inn town and later rebuild it if it got destroyed. Though, if we didn't bring the battle to its doorstep, the Empire would probably spare it. It didn't really matter though, since we could always reconstruct it after the war ended.

"The Empire is passing through a conspicuous route because they want us to know where they will attack from. Anyone would notice an army of that size marching."

"Um, is that what you call a *tour de force*?"

Gobta, you little smartass, when did you learn such fancy expressions? So this bastard did do his studies—I was somewhat impressed.

"Right," Benimaru continued. "This route falls right on the border between Dwargon and Tempest. Both countries will definitely notice them, and it's their way to easily gauge the other's reaction. If we carelessly provoked them, they would use it as an excuse to start the war immediately. However, since it is strictly forbidden for us to attack them first, we will start with a warning. Do you follow?"

"Yes."

"If we don't make a move on them, the Imperial Army will cross the Ameld River and take the high ground outside of the entrance to the Dwarven Kingdom. It's a great place for them to deploy their army since it's flat and doesn't have many trees."

"I see..."

"If they end up doing this, Gazel won't sit by and wait. He's going to send his troops out and start negotiating with the other side. It's the same for us, and the Empire will have both Tempest and Dwargon as their enemies."

Benimaru moved the pieces on the map, complementing his explanation with a visual demonstration of the plan.

"According to Gadra-dono, the Empire was wary of a pincer attack from both our armies. As long as they hold that place, though, that's not going to happen. After all, attempting to surprise an enemy who is waiting with open arms is tactical suicide."

The point of a surprise attack was to catch the opponent with their pants down. But if they anticipated our plan, not only would our advantage be moot—we'd be walking into a trap.

"That's why we'll 'let them' attack us, and then crush their army head on!" Benimaru said, slamming Gobta's piece into the Empire's.

"Ooh!" Gobta was impressed.

The other officers didn't seem to have any complaints, but I wonder what they thought about the difference in fighting power between Gobta's army and the Empire's.

"Gabil, the Third Army's commander!"

"Yes!"

"Your duty is to guard the evacuating civilians. Watch them from the sky and look out for people who are falling behind or need help."

"Understood!"

"Once everyone's evacuated, move on to aid Gobta straight away. If the timing is right, you two can meet before the Imperial Army arrives."

"My corps prides itself on being the fastest in Tempest. We *will* make it on time!" Gabil replied confidently to Benimaru.

But it wouldn't be that easy. When the time came to evacuate our residents, we intended to run the trains at peak capacity. Even so, moving tens of thousands of people would still take a not insignificant amount of time.

Another chink in the plan was the unprecedeted speed that the Imperial Army was moving at. When you factored in legion magic, we could estimate them to be marching at a surprising 80 kilometers per day. The Imperial Army was currently stationed near the border. The distance from their camp to the battlefield was about 1,500 kilometers. At this pace, they would reach the battlefield in about 20 days.

The reason they could keep up this pace was because each soldier had undergone some type of surgical augmentation. From what I heard, they could go without eating or drinking for a week, so their top speed was probably even higher still.

Gadra said that the tanks could move at about 10 kilometers per hour without refueling. Since they could absorb magicules even at night, the soldiers could rest while the tanks were replenishing their energy. Surely, they would be foolish to exhaust themselves before the war began.

Gadra's explanation made sense, so Benimaru and I calculated accordingly.

"The Imperial Army might get here faster than expected! So don't let your guard down!" Benimaru warned.

"The Imperial Army should deploy their main force here, but as Gobta said, what they are doing now is a tour de force. In other words, a diversion. Their main army is on a beeline towards this very position!"

Benimaru took out different colored pieces for the Imperial Army and scattered them in the Great Jura Forest.

They wanted us to think that the tank unit *was* their main force, while keeping the actual main unit separately from them, huh? Since all of the enemy's moves were on full display for me, I honestly just had to sit back and stay sharp.

"Even if we may be overwhelmed," Benimaru continued, "we still have Geld to defend this land! Geld, please call your men back as soon as possible."

"Understood. I've already ordered them to return with 'Thought Communication.' It won't be long before everyone gathers under me."

Benimaru and Geld looked to be on the same wavelength, as they got their points across in a few words. That was Geld for you, reliable as ever.

After that, Benimaru turned his eyes back to the map. "Their main force will continue to hide from us. Unfortunately, Rimuru-sama's surveillance magic 'Argos' can't tell us what's happening in the forest. That's where Souei comes into play."

At that, Souei nodded and stood up. "The forest is overgrown with thick trees, making it difficult to monitor from the sky. Even if my subordinates tried hiding throughout the forest, there's too much ground to cover and there is a risk of being discovered. For this operation, I am counting on Moss. He has the ability to release a lot of tiny 'Clones' and use them to collect information. As such, we cannot expect them to fight, and either way, Moss has assured me that losing a clone wouldn't set us back. As of now, the eastern part of the Great Jura Forest is under Moss's surveillance. We know that the Imperial Army is divided into platoons and is currently advancing there, so it's up to us to crush them individually," Souei finished with a cruel smile.

He did kinda spook me, to be honest. I was glad he was on our side.

Taking each platoon out individually wasn't the problem. The main force behind them was. So, Benimaru's plan was to wait until they came together to a certain extent.

"If the Imperial Army's aim is the Dungeon, then all we will have to do is lure them to its entrance and take them on from there. If there are still any Imperial troops left on the ground at that point, Geld's Second Army and my main unit will take care of them! That's all!"

The plan was straightforward and easy to understand.

But there was one big question still hanging in the air—that was addressing our comparable lack in military power. No one had said anything yet, leaving me wondering what everyone thought about the plan.

As I waited, hesitant about whether I should raise the question, the Control Room suddenly erupted with cheers.

"Understood! With Gabil-san backing me up, there's nothing to be worried about. Victory will be ours!"

"I'm glad to hear you say that! I'm not one to be outdone by Gobta-dono; I will show you how to fight!"

"I was worried that we wouldn't get an opportunity to prove ourselves, but General Benimaru-dono has, of course, not let us down. Indeed, bestowing us with the greatest honor of protecting our country, no less. We shall unleash all our might!"

The three commanders were overjoyed at Benimaru's declaration.

It didn't just stop there. The civil servants enthusiastically discussed their opinions amongst themselves, too. Excitement was in the air, and the three demon girls were enjoying a nice chat.

But like...the difference in military strength...

I too had confidence that we would win this war. Yes, I had a serene outlook on the matter myself, but that didn't necessarily mean I wasn't the least bit anxious. I was slightly put off by the utter lack of worry everyone else exhibited. Even Gobta was full of zeal, not a trace of his earlier unease left. I still had my qualms about leaving this big role in his hands, in spite of having Hakuro as his consultant.

"Are there any questions after hearing Benimaru's explanation?"

I pushed the question into the room, with no response.

Instead, Benimaru said on behalf of everyone: "Don't worry, Rimuru-sama," Benimaru said with a brisk laugh. "We aren't worried about losing. Not from an abundance of temerity, but because we are going all out. A battlefield awaits us with our chance at glory. If that is where we meet our fall, we can only lament our own shortcomings. We will be forced to face our reality, a world where you will eat or be eaten."

I was met with many similar reactions from all monsters alike, including Shuna and the other girls. They didn't fear losing the battle, they feared the idea of running from it. And in some sense... I kind of understood their feelings.

Then, I'd make sure to show them my full support.

"Testarossa, Ultima, Carrera!"

" " "Yes sir!" " "

The three demonesses stood up in unison and bowed to me.

Now was the time for me to assign each a mission.

"Accompany each corps commander and assist them!"

"Understood, Rimuru-sama. I will leave Cien as our representative on the council. I will personally see this war to the end!"

"It's finally my time to shine!" Ultima shouted gleefully. "Please leave it to me, Rimuru-sama!"

"Fufufu," Carrera giggled, "you can count on me, milord. I will show you every bit of my power!"

The three of them looked up and replied to my order eagerly.

I nodded and introduced them to their respective commanders.

"Testarossa, you'll go with Gobta."

"Yes, it's my pleasure," replied Testarossa. On the other hand, Gobta looked doubtful, asking: "Are you sure? A stranger to the battlefield, like this woman here, ain't fit for the First Army, y'know?"

He was treading on some very thin ice.

Although pretty hypocritical of me—I had only recently found out that these girls were, in fact, these fiendish creatures known as primordials—Gobta's lack of awareness was painful to watch. *You're a dead man if you keep this up, you know?* I thought to myself, but kept my mouth shut. It would be more fun to watch this one unfold on its own.

"Ara, you're so dependable," Testarossa mused with a smile, but her eyes gave a chilling glare.

I think Testarossa will forgive you if you apologize, Gobta-kun. And so, I would look forward to the day when Gobta found out who Testarossa really was.

Gabil, on the other hand, had definitely matured.

"I have a lot of weaknesses, so I'm counting on you!" he said as he bowed his head to Ultima.

According to what I heard from Diablo and various others, Ultima was the most sadistic of the three demon girls. Carrera was the most likely to go on a rampage, but Ultima was the scariest. While she would dutifully follow my orders, she would also seek out loopholes that let her get back at her opponents. That's the type of person she was.

Gabil had made the right call here. Ultima seemed to take a liking to him already and replied, "Yeah! I'm also counting on you!" cutely.

Gabil had always warned himself not to get carried away. It seems that it worked and had saved his life. After all, it's important to be mindful of that every day.

Geld shook hands with Carrera just fine.

Somehow, I felt that they both shared this warrior spirit, which was why I thought that these two would go well together.

I was proud of the pairings I made. Had I swapped Gobta's and Gabil's partners, things would've been looking grim for our goblin friend already.

Feeling quite pleased with the outcome, I gave the three pairs words of encouragement. Barely anyone knew who these three ladies really were. This was because a gag order was in place on everyone who had been at the meeting when Guy showed up. I didn't want anyone to end up frightened, so I had instructed the three ladies to keep it on the down low.

I told them to obey the orders from their corps commander and not to reveal their true identities, but I was quite concerned over what may happen if they ever snapped. And to think that I could've gone on in blissful ignorance...

Oh well, I shall trust them.

Unless I gave them orders, they would be standing by quietly.

Anyway, with all that said and done, the three pairs were formed. Whatever challenge came their way, I knew they could handle it. I could finally put my mind at ease.

*

"That's all we planned to talk about, but is there anything anyone still wants to add?"

The rest would depend on the Empire's reaction, so we'd have to stay flexible.

Working with King Gazel was also important, so I had to make some detailed plans with him in advance. However, that was the operation headquarters' job. The corps commanders had their own work cut out for them, so if there were no other pressing matters, we could adjourn the meeting.

I was about to call it there, when suddenly a hand shot up. It was Masayuki.

"Um, could you give me a moment?"

"What is it, Masayuki-kun?"

"Err... I have a question—"

"Mm-hmm."

"The fact that you made me a corps commander aside, you didn't explain what the Volunteer Corps is supposed to do."

Oh, I forgot about that. He must have quite a few questions. He was still a high schooler, so it made total sense for him to be nervous after being given a corps.

Had we been in ancient Japan, it would've been normal for someone his age to lead an army. For a youngster living in peaceful, modern-day Japan though, I could see how it would be overwhelming.

It was pretty hard for me too, you know. Before I knew it, I had become a demon lord without a boss to guide me. By contrast, Masayuki was a pretty lucky ducky.

"Don't you think so?"

"So please explain!"

Ah, roger that. It was truly a shame I couldn't relay the full extent of my internal monologue. No matter how I said it, it would sound like I was making excuses. *It is what it is.*

"Oh well. I do feel kinda bad about dropping this huge responsibility on your shoulders."

"Eh, no, I..."

"However, you're better suited to calm the town's residents than I am."

If it were just the monsters, then we wouldn't have to worry as much if the war started. Morale was high among them, so no one would try to disturb public order.

The immigrants were different, though. They might disturb the peace and do not-so-good things because of their fear and anxiety.

"That's why I need you to help alleviate everyone's anxiety, especially now that we're going to war."

"I see... If that's what you need, my power will be helpful," said Masayuki, seemingly convinced.

"Ha-ha-ha, you're being modest! I, Myourmiles, and everyone else know that you don't want to be partial to one country due to your position as a Hero, Masayuki-sama! But please lend us your strength, for the sake of the powerless people!" said Myourmiles, gazing at Masayuki, eyes sparkling. He still had the wrong idea about Masayuki's capabilities, but I wasn't one to rain on his parade.

I mean, even Hinata seemed to have the wrong idea about Masayuki.

How fearsome you are, Masayuki! I'd make sure to keep a keen eye on how the legend of Masayuki would develop during the war.

"...You're right," Masayuki replied begrudgingly. Looking at his expression, I could tell that he was already sick and tired of it. I felt sorry for him, but I wanted him to do his best here.

"Then, I guess I will try to maintain public order with the Volunteer Corps that you've entrusted me with."

"Please. I figure you already know about this, but thanks to Ramiris, I think the damage to the town will be minimal. When the war begins, the plan for the urban area on the ground is to isolate it within the labyrinth."

Executives and other relevant parties should've already been in the know. There were probably some rumors floating about from the people who were late to the evacuation drill, since I hadn't cracked down on them. The idea being that it would help alleviate some anxiety.

"Uh-huh! While my power *is* amazing, it's all thanks to Mentor!"

"Yep, this great feat was achieved by lending Ramiris my super powerful magicules. You could call it a triumph of friendship."

Thanks to Ramiris, we could isolate the town from the outside world, and this was also only possible with Veldora's help. I honestly should thank them both.

"Thank you, you two. You really helped a lot."

"Eh, really? Well, I guess so! You can praise us some more, you know?"

"Gah-ha-ha-ha, she's right! You can praise us some more!"

"Yeah, yeah. Thank you guys very much!"

A bit of praise goes a long way. And this time I really owed them one.

Despite being isolated in the labyrinth, you could still see the sky, and some of the inhabitants didn't even notice what had happened. They wouldn't witness any of the Imperial Army's violence, which I thought was absolutely wonderful.

"But Rimuru, just keep this in mind," Ramiris warned.

"Hm?"

"In the unlikely event that Mentor is defeated and the 100th floor gets conquered, the town will be ejected out of the labyrinth. It's an inevitable reaction to the strain it causes."

"I see, we'll need to consider that as well. But that's *if* Veldora loses, right? If such a thing happened, the fate of the town would be the least of our worries."

In that nightmare scenario, it means we had become engaged in a battle that called for all our strength. No way we could afford to care about the town then.

"Well, there's no way *I* would lose, anyway."

"Right. We even have the Dungeon's Elite Ten, so we don't have to worry about that!"

Indeed, just as Ramiris said, I didn't anticipate Veldora partaking in any action, to begin with. Nevertheless, if push comes to shove...

"If that time comes, we'll have Masayuki."

"Huh?! W-wait a minute!" the person in question protested. "I have accepted your request of maintaining order because I think I might be able to do it, but for that situation, what is it that you think I could do?"

Masayuki exclaimed that he had never even led an army, a feeling we could all sympathize with. Even Myourmiles, who held Masayuki in very high regard, nodded in agreement.

"Don't worry, Masayuki-kun," I said. "I don't expect you to be able to command an army right now. I'm currently discussing this with Hinata; I asked her to send us an aide from the Holy Knight Order. I'm sure she'll grant my request, and if so, that person will help you as your second-in-command."

"Oh, really? That's a relief."

"One other thing! I'm putting you in charge of guarding the kids, so you'll be safe and sou—I mean you'll keep them safe and sound!"

"Wahahaha! If it's Hero-sama that will protect them, they couldn't be in better hands!"

"O-of course," Masayuki affirmed as he broke out in a cold sweat.

He also knew that the kids could hold their own, so he understood that this was for his own protection. Besides, Chloe was going to be there. If the situation turned dire, then she would be there to protect Masayuki and the others.

That concluded the important topics of this conference.

We prepared the best we could, but who knows what will happen once the chips are down.

And I wasn't without worry, myself.

Chloe's memories of my death.

Right now, there was someone in the Empire strong enough to kill me—there was no doubt about that. If that guy appeared, even the Dungeon's Elite Ten wouldn't be able to stop them. Wait, on the contrary...

«Report. The Dungeon's Elite Ten are being used to expose the enemies' cards.»

I figured. It seemed like Raphael-san's first priority was my safety. While that did put a smile on my face, I was also determined. No matter what, I would protect my friends. I would never let anyone get hurt in this stupid act called war.

And on that note, I ended the meeting that day.



From the looks of it, Masayuki had successfully persuaded the townsfolk. The scenario became something like "He reasoned with the demon lord and made him promise to protect the town."

"Well done, Hero!"

"Our savior!"

Masayuki had taken in the praise of the adventurers and immigrants, all with a perturbed look on his face.

But even with that expression—

"That worried crease Hero-sama's brow is oh-so handsome!"

"Despite pressing a sizable concession from the demon lord, Hero-dono is still not satisfied."

"Indeed. What a refined dignitary."

"This town is protected by Hero-sama, and with Demon Lord Rimuru to back him up, I have nothing to fear from the Empire's invasion!"

"Yeah! All will be well if we leave everything to him!"

These one-sided interpretations did nothing to slow Masayuki's mounting popularity. All the while, his anguish went unnoticed in the public eye.

As the townsfolk were peacefully going about their days, that fateful day had finally come. The Imperial Army made its appearance. The time of peace had come to an end. Whisked away, like a midsummer night's dream.

The war had finally begun...

Epilogue

The Emperor's Hegemony

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

Epilogue

The Emperor's Hegemony

"You're awake, Rudra."

The words were addressed to a man sat atop his throne, dressed in opulent clothing. The speaker, a beautiful, blue-haired woman, was the Marshal, the one in charge of the meeting hall.

"Yes. How did the meeting go?"

"We've decided to move forward with the expedition."

"Thank you for your hard work. Did Gadra oppose the idea?"

"Yes, he did. The old man is very realistic. Weapons from otherworlders cannot rival the True Dragons. There was no way he could *not* have known that, and it would be silly for him to assume otherwise."

"Hehehe, that's obvious. Nevertheless, we must carry out this great expedition. Thou shalt know that I am the ruler of this world."

It's what I promised Guy, after all, Rudra whispered. Snapping back to reality he turned and smiled pleasantly.

"By the way, Velgrynd. Tell me, how do you think this expedition will go?"

Velgrynd—the name of one of the only four True Dragons of this world. She was the symbol of flame, the crimson dragon that wielded blazing heat. She was a being even older than Storm Dragon Veldora, and immortal too. Her name was Scorch Dragon Velgrynd.

There was only one person with this name in the world.

And it was this beauty who answered Rudra's question.

"We will undoubtedly emerge victorious. We shall force the dwarves out of their hideout and crush that new demon lord's ego. I will also beat some sense into that lazy, dumb brother of mine and make Guy realize the ruler of this world is Rudra—you!"

She was not a single bit hesitant about calling this name. Indeed, she was Velgrynd. One of the strongest beings, a True Dragon—Scorch Dragon Velgrynd.

Despite being in the presence of such a majestic being, Rudra continued in a friendly tone: "Is that so? That would be wonderful. Do you really think your brother will attack?"

"Of course he will, Rudra," she answered immediately. "He will definitely show up. That kid likes to get in on the fun. However, I feel that he has yet to return to his prime after his seal was undone. I didn't detect any violent magical storm, like the ones that ravaged the lands in the past. In the past, I would've felt that aura from any corner of the earth, but now it seems to have disappeared completely. Perhaps his resurrection was incomplete?"

"...In that case, perhaps my army has a chance against him."

"That would be very fun indeed. That demon lord dares to bribe my foolish brother and deceive my dear niece. I will be sure to punish him properly." At that, the two shared a conspiratorial smile.

To Rudra and Velgrynd, it did not matter whether the attack plan succeeded or not. Rudra was playing a game with Guy, and they had wagered the right to rule this world. This game didn't have any complicated rules. You simply had to use your "pawns" to overwhelm your opponent. The world was their board, monsters and humans their pawns.

At first, Guy's pawns were monsters and majins, while Rudra's were a portion of humanity. They had kept up this game, switching their pieces over the centuries. And now, the game was coming to a head, as the situation on both sides grew chaotic.

Fundamentally, stealing pawns from each other was fair game. Not to mention, their strongest pawns were their partners—the True Dragons. There was only one absolute rule in their game: *they could only use the aforementioned pawns*. In other words, as long as Guy and Rudra did not confront each other directly, they could do whatever they wanted.

If this world were destroyed, naturally, the game would end. But neither of them wanted that, which was why certain preventative measures needed to be set in place.

With that being said, there were certain wild cards in this game. These included the remaining True Dragon, Veldora, and the primordial demons. These wild cards were not directly involved in the game. Whether they were turned into allies or enemies was entirely up to the players, Guy and Rudra.

One of Guy's pawns—his ally, Demon Lord Leon—was held under constant pressure by Jaune, the Yellow Primordial, in his domain. In the West, any reckless action could bring down the wrath of Violet, the Violet Primordial, who resided there. And in the East, there lurked Blanc, the White Primordial. These demons were immensely powerful and immortal. It wasn't impossible to wipe them off the board, but it would require careful preparation. As opposed to suffering great casualties, they had a better chance negotiating with them and turning them into allies. It was the best solution. In order to turn the tide in his game with Guy, Rudra and Velgrynd agreed that this was the right option.

If Velgrynd were to fight by herself, she could even eliminate Blanc. But this came at a cost and was bound to cause unimaginable damage to the surrounding area. In conclusion, fighting them wasn't a viable method.

Apart from that, an error in their judgement showed itself: The Western Nations had begun to act with their own ideals and logic. The native religion called Luminism was born in the western lands and gradually grew into the dominant monotheistic religion. Its authority was solid and unified the people of the West.

They had already discovered the true identity of Luminas as a demon lord, but it was all too late by then, because the religion had since taken root and wove itself into society. By the time Rudra gained complete control over the East, the

West had begun unifying under a single banner. That was the point at which Guy and Rudra's game became locked in a stalemate.

"Because of the active presence of the Heroes Chronoa and Granbell, invading the West became unfeasible. They posed a huge hurdle for us. Had it not been for those meddling Heroes, victory would've been yours a long time ago."

"Not necessarily. My path to ruling the world will forever be fraught with intrigue—it's probably the trial Veldanava laid out for me. That guy's always been fond of pranks."

"Yes, indeed. My elder brother really was a handful..."

The two of them smiled as they took a moment to relish the nostalgia.

"But the opportunity has arisen," Rudra said. "All the necessary pawns are in place. I will grasp victory soon enough."

"I shall checkmate Guy and sister Velzard this time."

"Hehe, Guy has been waiting for an opportunity, too. If you and Veldora were to fight, surely he would jump at the chance."

"Indeed, how annoying," Velgrynd replied. "Had that not been the case, I would have taken care of that child Veldora myself—"

She was talking about the failure of the last expedition. Had Velgrynd moved out, Veldora would not have posed a threat. On the flip side, this would've made them vulnerable to Guy. If Rudra were to use his strongest pawn, a True Dragon, he needed to have everything prepared perfectly.

And this *was* the perfect time to do so. Rudra's spies across the world had brought back all sorts of information.

"Even though it's been a long time coming, the wait was worth it. Our biggest roadblock to invading the West has been removed."

The true identity of *God Luminas* was *Demon Lord Luminas*. With this knowledge, they could narrow down a ballpark estimate of her strength. Moreover, her demon lord double had died, and the Seven Celestial Sages had fallen too. Plus:

"That Granbell, the roadblock, has passed away. The threat of the Western Nations has been drastically reduced."

"That is indeed the case. Those who dared to stand in my way have met their demise entirely on their own."

Both of them firmly believed that this had to be a divine revelation preceding Rudra's domination of the world.

"By the way, Rudra, how are you doing?"

"Perfectly fine. My power—'Army of Angels, Armageddon'—can be activated at any time."

'Armageddon' was Rudra's ultimate trump card. The conditions for its activation were very strict, and once it was triggered, there would be a long wait before this Skill could be called upon once more.

There was only one reason why the Empire had stayed put until now—they had been waiting resolutely for the day that Rudra could unleash 'Armageddon' again.

Now with the threat of Granbell out of the picture, needless to say, Rudra believed that they would be victorious.

As for Guy, he still had not been able to control the demon lords completely. They were uncooperative with each other. All the demon lords did as they pleased. Each of them possessed great influence individually, but they were no threats in Rudra's eyes.

"This time, everything is stacked in our favor."

"But do we have enough time? I really want to bring my foolish brother to our side. That way we can use him to deal with Guy. If we could even manage to dispose of my sister, Velzard, then Raine and Mizeri won't stand a chance against us. That brings me to my next question: How is your power of 'Domination'?"

"Rest assured. If you could keep Veldora occupied on the battlefield, I can use 'Regalia Dominion' to achieve complete control over him."

A gentle smile emerged on Velgrynd's cruel yet beautiful face upon hearing this.

"Ara, then victory is all but guaranteed."

"Naturally. Everything is going just as I planned."

"Wonderful, though I am rather worried about you—"

"Oh, stop that," he chided. "This is the natural order of things. The human body is truly inconvenient..."

"Rudra..."

"Successively inheriting my will and memories each time I reincarnate has taken its toll on my 'soul.' It would be fine if I had some time to rest like Gadra, but that is a forbidden luxury for me. If I were to do that, my 'power' would be sealed again."

That way, Rudra would have to start over if he wished to unleash his power. If he were to do that during every reincarnation, he would have no chance against Guy. That was why he had been waiting for his power to mature this whole time. Now that he felt his power reaching full strength, the stage was set.

Despite everything, Rudra was pushing himself quite a bit in order to maintain this state. Not only did this incarnation of him have no empress, he did not even have a concubine. Even though the supposed empress of the Empire was nothing but a title, this was highly abnormal. This meant that no imperial heir was born as a spare for Rudra. Having one wouldn't separate his power. His incarnations were very special; the heir he brought forth would inherit all his power and knowledge. It was the purest form of hereditary monarchy—in a sense, it wasn't an heir at all. The imperial heir could be said to be the emperor himself.

However, he did not do this during the present incarnation. It had to do with the use of 'Armageddon.' If the imperial heir were to inherit his power, his Skills would be limited until he matured to adulthood. Obtaining immense power came with repercussions, and he wouldn't be able to contain it. Even Rudra couldn't hold up against it.

Yet, right now, this was the best situation they'd chanced upon. All the stars had aligned, and to forfeit the opportunity, solely to reincarnate as the prince would waste yet another decade.

Rudra did not want that. But this greatly worried Velgrynd. Maintaining his full strength seemed to push Rudra's mind to its limit. The duration of his sleep had been shortening and he was often exhausted. Under these circumstances, Rudra's soul was wearing away rapidly. If he gave his power to the heir, it would delay the activation of 'Armageddon,' but it would also ease his symptoms. Yet still, he adamantly refused.

This was his time. He wanted to settle his game against Guy once and for all.

Velgrynd could not bear to see Rudra like this.

"How much time do you have left, Rudra—?"

"You don't have to worry. At the very least, I can guarantee you that I will not fall before I conquer this world."

"I-I see. I should have expected that, from you of all people..."

"Don't be so sad, Velgrynd. When I achieve victory, I shall end this all. Have faith. Simply observe how I dominate this world," Rudra said with an arrogant smile.

He was the embodiment of a ruler in every sense of the word. He who ruled all and walked the path of hegemony. That was the Hero Emperor Rudra.



Captivated by Rudra's ambition, Velgrynd steeled her resolve. "Indeed. Then please look forward to it. Those who stand in the way of your crusade will die in peace. I shall rain mercy down on them!" she announced as she gently embraced Rudra.

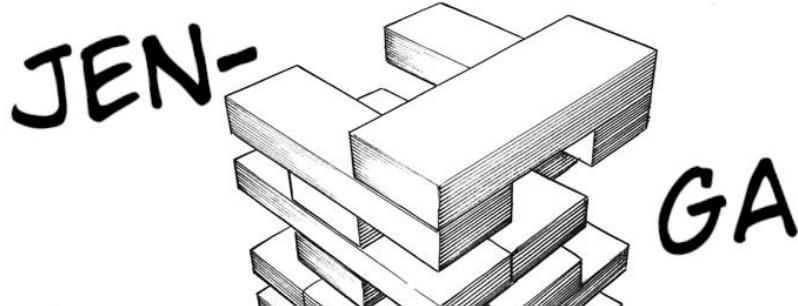
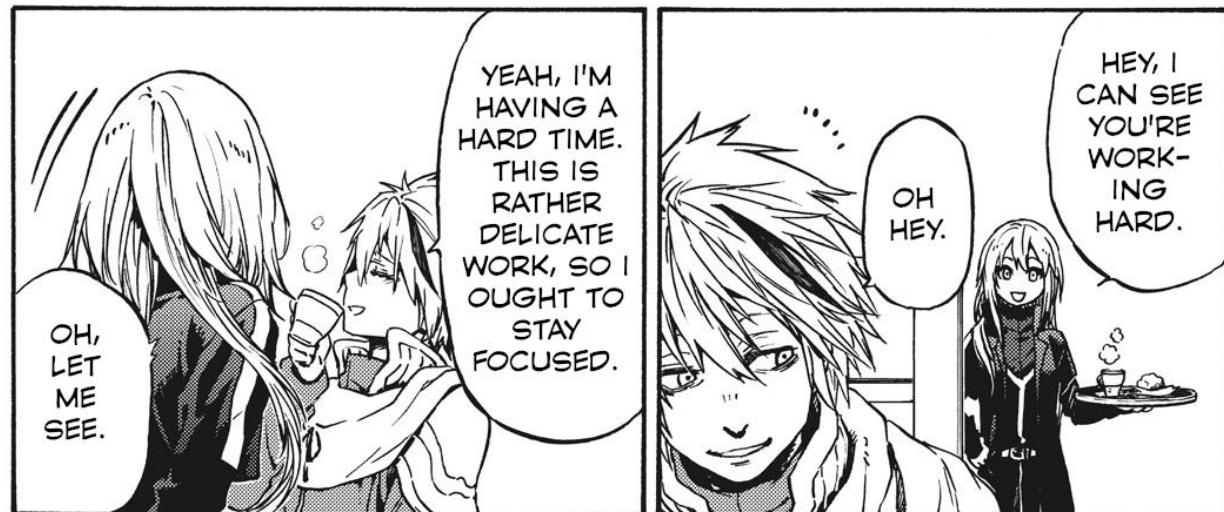
The two of them continued to chat well into the night.

On the following morning, a legion of unprecedented proportions departed from the Empire and began their march on the Tempest Federation.¹⁹

¹⁹ There is, indeed, no afterword for this volume.

Special Focus When Playing

Art by Taiki Kawakami



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime 12

Story by Fuse, Illustration by Mitz Vah

