

FUSE

Illustration by
Mitz Vah

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That Time I Got
Reincarnated
as a SLIME

11







*Report. The object is a material body.
Unusual amount of existential energy
detected. Its maximum level is equivalent
to that of the subject Veldora.*

*There stood an incredibly beautiful woman, naked
as the day she was born. Her eyes were closed, her
lustrous dark hair fluttering as she shone in a silvery
light. It was like something out of a fantasy, and I
was immediately smitten.*

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

11

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 11

FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by Mitz Vah

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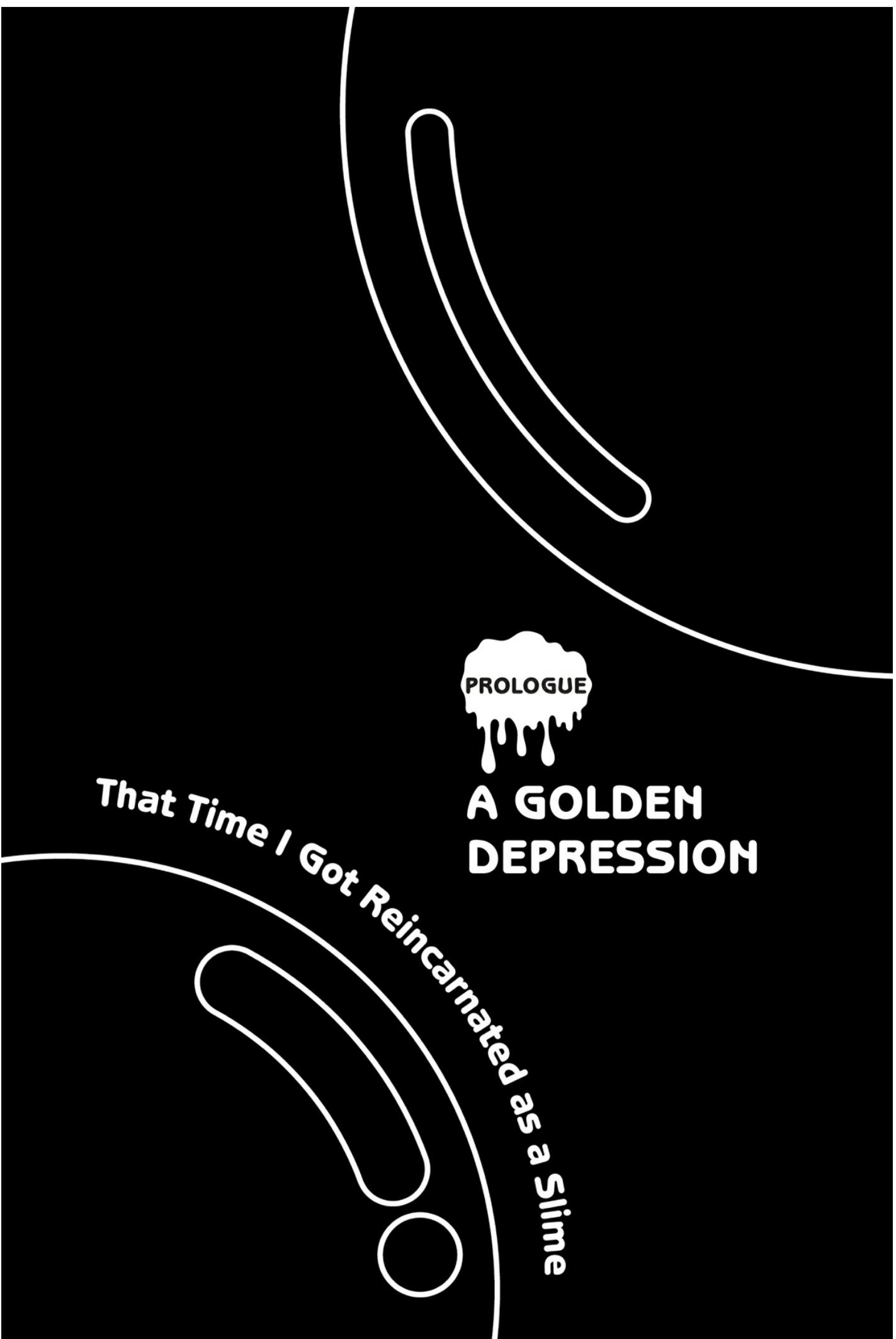
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PROLOGUE

A GOLDEN DEPRESSION

A white manor. A garden lined with colorful blossoms. The young girl's smile—and a boy watching over her. It was a vivid, unfaded memory of happier times, and he wished to gain that happiness back.

But it was difficult. He built a manor—a city of gold, with a beautiful garden that seemed to re-create the paradise of heaven up above. It was even more splendidorous, even more impressive than what his memories told him. But no matter where he looked, he just couldn't find the final piece of the puzzle. Even with his power—enough force to become one of the great pillars supporting the entire world—he was unable to get his beloved girl back. If she couldn't be found, the smile would never return to his face. He had, after all, established all of this for the sake of that one young girl.

His name was Leon Cromwell, a demon lord known as the Platinum Saber. And the name of the girl he searched for...

At the throne room of the vast, spiraling palace looming in the center of the Golden Land of El Dorado that he ruled over, Leon exuded as much military might as he could at the three suspicious-looking characters taking a knee before him. They were dressed unusually: all black clothing with large, umbrellalike hats to match the weapons merchant Damrada. It went without saying that it was Laplace and his cohorts.

"...You, then? This is the second time, is it not?"

"Yes, my lord. It remains a great honor and a joy to have made your acquaintance. However, we regret to inform you that we cannot honor the request for the certain classified materials included this order."

It was Teare who responded, looking suitably composed. They had the lone woman in the group handle negotiations, hoping to give the demon lord the

best impression possible.

That, however, would come to an end today. Now they would follow the plan Yuuki devised and halt activity in the Western Nations for the time being. Misha, one of the leaders of Cerberus, would take over as the main contact point with the Rozzo family, continuing regular business, as Yuuki's team moved operations over to the Eastern Empire.

What's more, with the loss of Maribel, the power of the Rozzo family itself had taken a major hit. The Kingdom of Seltrozzo was the main point of procurement for the "classified goods" mentioned, and right now, it was unlikely the Rozzos had the force remaining to perform the stable-summoning ceremonies that were required. Plus, Tempest had now joined the Council of the West, which essentially meant the Western Nations were now under the influence of the demon lord Rimuru. There would be more eyes on them than ever before. Everyone agreed that now was the best time to pull out.

"Oh? A rather bold thing to say. I see you're wasting no time demanding more money, unlike Damrada."

"No, Lord Leon. It is nothing like that. As you know, the demon lord Rimuru is attaining a prominent position within the Western Nations. He appears to frown on the summoning of otherworlders, and he strictly prohibits it. Thus, we have come to the painful conclusion that it will be difficult to continue defying his will."

Listening to Teare's brisk reply, all Leon could think was: *I knew it*. He had received similar reports from his plants in the Western Nations; he was fully aware this was just a matter of time. Besides, this approach really had too many unknowns to it. In fact, the chances of success were astronomically low. It would've been foolhardy to expect success from the start. He was, after all, being far too specific with the type of summons he wanted.

He had sent orders to his team, having them perform summonings on multiple occasions. Over thirty summoners aided in the effort, and it took seven whole days to ensure that every required condition of Leon's was fulfilled when conducting the ritual. But it still worked less than one percent of the time—and since the same people couldn't be involved in another summoning immediately

afterward, they had only so many tries. Their chances were close to zero from the start.

Leon himself had conducted a few summonings, but every one of them failed. His last success produced Shizue Izawa, and sixty-six years had passed since then. The more you narrowed down the conditions, the longer the interval required between each attempt, and there wasn't much reason to expect the next summoning to work, either. So he came up with the idea to perform "incomplete" summonings they could attempt with more frequency. The person Leon was looking for was still a young girl, so an incomplete summoning that resulted in a young child would boost their chances, no matter how slimly.

So his project spread across the Western Nations, as he engineered as many attempts as possible to collect as many children as possible...

And now it had all come crashing down. There was no other way, and there was no new great idea to explore. Leon found himself burning with an intense impatience, but still he kept his voice cool as he spoke.

"...Rimuru? We have no treaty signed with the West, and I've made no request for cooperation. We were interfered with in the end, but that's all in the past now. But why are you shutting off business with me? If the West is beyond our grasp, there's always the East."

Leon's penetrating voice echoed across the throne room. The powerful coercion that filled every syllable was like a point-blank attack at Teare, whose body froze. He was simply on another level. Your average magic-born couldn't even bear standing before a demon lord, and even a strong, high-level one like Teare had trouble dealing with Leon. But Teare wasn't alone.

"Ah, allow me to explain that matter, my lord. To tell ya the truth, things are starting to get a little suspicious over in the East as well. It looks like they're tryin' to prepare for war on the sly over there, so apparently there aren't any sorcerers free enough to take up the work. It'll be hard to find the personnel we need."

Leon squinted at Laplace. Deep down, this annoyed him. He cared very little for what became of the West and East, but a dragged-out war would impact his own mission. He thought it seemed that he would need to reconsider his

direction from the bottom up. But he didn't betray this on his face, his expression as cold as ever as he continued staring at Laplace.

Facing the full brunt of it, Laplace grew uncomfortable.

This sure is bad news. The fake demon lord I killed was nothin' compared with this guy. Ain't nothing like the real thing, and all that. Maybe the boss is right. Tryin' to exact revenge from him directly might not be such a hot idea...

Yuuki had ordered him to refrain from any under-the-table dealings for now. Even with the very man who killed Kazalim right here in front of him, Laplace had no intention of doing anything to Leon. He wanted to live up to Yuuki's trust, so the only thing on his mind was carrying out his work. Still... If your sworn enemy is in front of you, of course you're going to gauge your chances a little. And as he evaluated his opponent's power, seeking out any small weakness he could find, he concluded that the demon lord Leon truly was a monster. If they got into an actual fight...he couldn't say what would happen. Maybe he'd win; maybe he'd lose. Even if his cohorts Teare and Footman joined him, there was no guarantee they'd emerge victorious.

So Laplace was treating this visit as strictly work-related. But as he did, he correctly understood why Yuuki had assigned this job to them.

The boss wanted us to see this guy for ourselves, no doubt. Know thy enemy, 'n' all that. Hell, even the boss said he'd have trouble with Maribel if they went toe to toe. She only messed up 'cause Rimuru was more of a monster than she thought. 'Course, trying to gauge that guy's strength is a real tall order...

Maribel's fatal error had been misjudging Rimuru's strength. The fact that someone like her, a born talent when it came to schemes and strategy, decided to directly engage her target was a blunder in itself. Laplace thought so, and so did Yuuki and Kagali. What could she have been thinking? What did she fear? As a third party, it was hard to imagine what had made Maribel decide this was a war of attrition and to try to end things quickly, no matter how disadvantageous that was.

Besides, it was Yuuki himself, in the end, who had guided Maribel toward that line of thinking. Maribel certainly overestimated her strength—there was no debate over that—but Yuuki was the one who planted the idea in Maribel's

mind that she had a fighting chance against Rimuru. Weaving together a web of false information, he had successfully put all her plans out of order.

Not even Yuuki thought for sure that Maribel would lose, of course. His goal was to pit these two forces against each other and gauge their abilities. It ended up with the demon lord Rimuru winning, Maribel (a thorn in Yuuki's side as well) dying, and Yuuki himself becoming the new master of her unique skill Avarice.

That was what he really wanted, as much as it stunned Laplace into silence once he heard about it. You couldn't really *aim* for someone else's skills like that—but as Yuuki put it, he had a hunch it would work.

It's crazy. Just completely mad. Maribel's luck failed her, to be sure, once it became so clear she was talkin' up her prowess too much with the boss. Nothin' can beat the power of information, in the end. And that's true for Leon, too. I hate to say it, but unless I'm sure I've got the upper hand, staying hands-off with 'im's the wiser choice here.

Such was his conclusion.

So they decided to halt their plans and focus on expanding their influence and gathering intel. Those objectives hadn't changed, and now that Yuuki's goal was realized, they had no reason to stick around in the Western Nations. Now they were trying to wriggle out of their dealings with Leon without making him blow his top.

Laplace couldn't let himself falter against the pressure of Leon's gaze upon him. He distracted himself by talking some more.

"Now, mind you, this ain't the end of our dealings forever, my lord. We'll contact you again once the coast is clear, so to speak, for summonings. We're just looking for a little more time until then. And remember, we have a network spanning the globe, so if any kids wind up in this world in the meantime, we can scoop 'em right up for you."

"...Well, our hands are tied on that front. I will leave that matter to you, then. But I do have one question."

"What would that be, my lord?"

"Why are you so loose-tongued?"

"Um?"

Laplace gave Leon's question a befuddled stare. He had no idea where or when he might've misspoken.

Did I screw something up? Ah well. If he's willing to continue workin' with us, then let's keep this party going!

It didn't faze him much. In his mind, life had to be *enjoyed* to be worth living. Even if he made a mistake, as far as he cared, that was then and this was now. Resisting the urge to lunge at Leon, Laplace quickly made up his mind on the matter as Leon spoke.

"Is it really right for merchants, so keenly aware of their self-interests, to speak so loosely of affairs such as war? If Damrada were here, I don't think he'd do anything quite so foolish."

"That..."

He had a point. But Laplace still felt in the right. Yuuki had ordered him to make that statement—and he told him about something else, too. Recalling it, Laplace could feel all the pieces falling into place in his mind.

The next thing Leon was likely to say was...

"What are you hiding? You seem to want to point my eyes toward the war, but you will have to try better than that."

The question was exactly what Yuuki predicted. It put Laplace at ease, even as it exasperated him. *There's just no dealin' with him, is there? The boss knew full well that the conversation would turn out this way.*

Leon, reading Laplace's words too deeply, surmised that he was hiding something. A demon lord like him, who correctly knew the value of information, mistakenly thought this was a scheme to distract him from some other goal. But it wasn't. Laplace and his friends were just doing what Yuuki told them to; there wasn't any deep thinking behind it. It was a simple fact, but one there was no point in telling Leon. He'd just assume that Laplace was making futile excuses.

This was all the work of Yuuki, who wasn't even in the room, and there had to

be some meaning to it. And of course, Laplace had some hints.

"Ah yes, Lord Leon, you're a shrewd character, indeed. To tell you the truth, this really *is* the end for the confidential goods for now, but we actually still have five at a certain location. These were the kids that Shizue Izawa intervened with and took care of."

"...Hmm."

Yuuki had wanted to leak word of the children in Rimuru's care to Leon from the start. But if his team simply blurted it out, Leon might assume there was some ulterior motive behind it. That's why he waited until the end of their chat to instruct them to save the children. His uncanny ability to predict a conversation, something that could potentially flow in any direction, was one reason why Yuuki was such a fearsome presence. It even scared Laplace a bit as he continued following Yuuki's instructions.

"There are three boys and two girls, you see, all otherworlders. The problem is their location. It's a spot that we don't have access to."

"Shizue Izawa... Shizu, is it? And this place is Tempest, is it not?"

"You got it. I hate to disappoint, lemme tell you, but we're all merchants here. We don't wanna expose ourselves to *too* much danger. By the way, their names are—"

"Ken Mizerre, Ryozeiki, Gale Gibbs, Alison, and Scoey Colbert."

Before Laplace could recall the names, Footman, silent until now, barked them out. Yuuki, picturing Footman as unsuited for negotiation, had only asked him to memorize that name list.

"Yes, those are the ones. Not that you'd have much interest in unavailable goods, my lord..."

Laplace smiled. Leon, meanwhile, frowned peeishly.

"Your diction leaves much to be desired. Are you sure it was Scoey, and not something more like Chloe?"

Footman gave the irritated question no answer. Any further prodding, and Leon's anger might develop into all-out belligerence. Footman, after all, was in

the most danger out of anyone in this room. Normally, it would've been smarter to not say anything—but despite riling Leon up, it wasn't the wrong move to make.

"Excuse him, Lord Leon," Teare said. "The names of otherworlders are always difficult to transliterate into our languages, so they're likely not completely accurate. But if I may, I was told that the names aren't important regardless."

She bowed, and Laplace and Footman followed suit in vaguely comic fashion.

"Indeed, the names don't matter. I pin the blame for losing these goods on you, but it's not enough to count as violating our terms. I will accept your intelligence about an upcoming war as ample apology."

Swallowing assorted emotions, Leon maintained a cool composure—and with that, the meeting came to a close. Laplace accepted the money for the goods provided, and he and his cohorts put El Dorado behind them.



"Well, what to make of that...?" Leon whispered after they left.

His long hair tied back in a ponytail shone a beautiful gold color, a stark juxtaposition to the gloominess of his long eyes. Standing at attention next to him was Arlos, the Silver Knight, his adviser and one of his closest confidants.

"Should we do away with those three? If they've upset you, Lord Leon, I see little value in keeping them alive."

Leon scrutinized Arlos's words. Compared with Damrada before, this trio had acted very suspiciously. He wondered how they and Damrada could even share a profession. Leon barely trusted merchant types to begin with, but he also wanted to avoid conflict with the Cerberus organization. He may have had his agents planted across human society, but compared with *that* massive group—based in the East, expanding its influence in the West—it wasn't even a competition.

So he coldly decided that he'd use them while they were useful. In particular, he believed that humans were better suited than monsters for rooting out otherworlders. If he wanted to reach his goal, Leon required human help.

"Let them be. I'm more concerned about the information they had for us. If

the Eastern Empire is truly about to mobilize, we could very well have a world war on our hands. I don't know how the other demon lords will react, but I hardly want us pulled into worldwide chaos."

"Indeed, my lord. All of El Dorado shines under the light of your authority, but I can easily imagine large-scale conflicts across many other lands. We must be prepared for that."

Arlos nodded at Leon's reply.

El Dorado, the land Leon ruled over, was on a continent of its own, separated by ocean from the rest of the world. In Earth standards, it was larger than Australia, and every inch of it was Leon's domain. A gigantic active volcano was perched in the middle, constantly erupting the whole year through, but the ash it spewed was carried away by magically conjured wind, never falling on the beautiful central city. Nearby, the volcano had laid a vast variety of ore deposits, which were worked into assorted types of magical metals. The gold ore veins found there produced so much precious metal that Leon was secretly dealing some of it to human civilization.

The city was the pinnacle of glory, the crown jewel of a kingdom protected by magic. That was how Leon pictured his Golden Land of El Dorado, and not only Arlos, but everyone else who lived on this land would want nothing less than to be dragged into some ugly human war.

"I will have some emergency defensive magic readied for deployment, and I will put our security protocols at their highest level."

"Yes, if you could, please. But things never work out the way you want, do they?"

"...What do you mean, my lord?"

"I mean war. If enough people die in one, it could awaken some creatures that would trouble all of us terribly. I know Jaune, the Original Yellow, is slumbering in this land somewhere. I doubt she's taken physical form yet, but..."

Leon groaned. It was all so ridiculous. What was the Eastern Empire thinking? He didn't know, but any war naturally involved a lot of death. The more blood

that was shed, the more the monsters exposed to it would be energized. In the worst case, it could awaken one or more dangerous demons—a true calamity for humankind. Leon, with his unique background as a former Hero, knew exactly how foolish that was.

Of course, as a demon lord, this was just him being sentimental. While it saddened him to see, no matter what sort of misfortune all those unknown faces witnessed, he wouldn't lose a wink of sleep over it.

No, Leon's concern was about a far less likely possibility. What if, by some chance, this harms the very girl he's looking for?

"If that time should arrive, let us show the full force of our powers!"

"Yes. I look forward to seeing that. Also..."

"Allow me to deploy a few Azure Knights to their nation as well."

Leon and Arlos placidly nodded at each other. No need for detailed orders. Arlos had a gift for reading Leon's intentions and putting them into action.

"Make it so," Leon said as he closed his eyes.

Then, in that now-empty chamber, he opened them again and stared into space.

...Scoey Colbert, though? I know I shouldn't expect too much, but that's almost too close to her name. Even if it's a trap, I can't ignore it.

Whether it was a trap didn't matter. The demon lord Leon's ultimate goal was to find her, his childhood friend—and the girl he had to protect.

That girl's name was Chloe Aubert.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
1

OBSERVATION, RESEARCH, RESULTS

CHAPTER 1

OBSERVATION, RESEARCH, RESULTS

In one corner of an opulent mansion, a shady-looking group was relaxing on sofas surrounding a table. The site was a base used by the Cerberus secret society in the West, run by Misha the Lover, one of the group's bosses.

The woman attending to Misha provided tea for the guests, bowed, and left the room. That was the signal for the conference to begin.

"Ah, I see. It went well, then?" Listening to the report, Yuuki Kagurazaka smiled broadly.

"He went exactly the way you said he would, Boss! And I thought for sure Laplace messed it up at first..."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Laplace is a careful man, but he's not a born negotiator, after all."

"Whoa, hang on! I'm better'n any of *you* guys!"

Teare and Footman only seemed to be on the same page when they were picking on Laplace. He complained loudly about it but wasn't truly offended. It was just some friendly banter.

"Well, it all worked out, didn't it? I'm just glad you managed to keep your cool with Leon right in front of you."

"Yeah. 'Cause honestly, I half expected you'd resort to violence in there."

If it did, all it meant was cutting off ties with the demon lord Leon. Now that they had decided to lay off the Western Nations for a while, Yuuki laughed the concept off as no great shakes.

"He was a terrible man, I tell ya," the dejected-looking Laplace said. "But why'd you have me tell him about the kids anyway?"

Yuuki shot him a half grin. “Oh, it’s nothing, really. Leon’s trying to collect ‘incomplete’ kids, and I’m all but certain that’s so he can expand his fighting power...but part of me wondered if there’s something else behind it, you know?”

“Ah. So you wanted to reveal to him that the demon lord Rimuru has five of them?”

“Not just that. We can still only guess at how Leon’s treating these kids, you know? Rimuru saved them by showing them how to handle spiritual force, but Leon doesn’t know about any of that. So I was interested to see how he’d react to these children he thinks are doomed to die pretty soon.”

“I see... That is a curious question, yes. And depending on his reaction, we can try predicting his next move.”

“Right. For now, we’ve got nothin’. We needed to jolt ‘im a little, I suppose.”

“Yeah, you see? I mean, it was more out of curiosity than anything, though. That’s just how I am. I sweat the small stuff.”

Kagali and Laplace could appreciate that. As Yuuki said, he was worrying himself too much about this...but if they wanted to peer into Leon’s intentions, that piece of info was a useful way to do it.

What if the demon lord Leon took action? He wasn’t rash enough to take on Rimuru just to gain five more fighters for his side. The risk of riling him far outweighed the potential boost to his forces. Leon was smart enough to see that. Normally, then, he’d let these children be—but what if he didn’t? If he didn’t, it meant Leon had some other goal in mind.

“However,” Kagali said, “I doubt Leon would do anything drastic just for the sake of a few children.”

“You don’t think? ’Cause I leaked info on that war and got nothin’ but funny looks for it. Was I wastin’ my time?”

It would have been pretty interesting if Leon made a move, but the chances of that were low. Kagali and Laplace saw the wit of Yuuki’s idea, but both assumed that it wouldn’t amount to much.

All Yuuki could do in response was grin at them. “Yeah, like I said, I’m sorry. But unless you massaged it like that, it would’ve been weird if you just talked about the kids out of nowhere. If you started with that, then with *your* acting skills, I dunno...”

He paused. But his intentions came across well enough to the group.

“I hate to say it, but it’s true. Footman’s too tongue-tied and short-tempered, Laplace is shallow and fishy-looking, and I alone could never have pulled it off.”

Teare, acting entirely blameless, made Laplace roll his eyes and Footman sneer at her. This, too, was often how their conversations went. But then Teare seemed to recall something.

“Maybe I’m overthinking it like you said, Boss, but there’s something that bothered me a little, too.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Well, when Footman rattled off the list of goods, Leon was all—”

“Leon?”

“He asked about the names again. When Footman said *Scoey Colbert*, he replied along the lines of ‘Are you sure it’s *Scoey* and not *Chloe*?’ If he claimed that the names didn’t matter, I don’t see why he would even care, but...”

“Ah, he’s just high-strung like that, y’know? He fusses over the details.”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! So irritating, isn’t it? Maybe he was just poking some fun at my pronunciation.”

Laplace and Footman saw no major concern. Yuuki and Kagali, meanwhile, exchanged looks.

“What do you think?”

“I doubt he would’ve reacted if he truly didn’t care.”

“Yeah, but really, there’s no way he... That’s just too much of a coincidence, isn’t it?”

“Well, if it’s fate we’re dealing with, there’s no such thing as never, you know...”

“So you think he really...?”

“It would indicate to me that yes, the demon lord Leon’s primary goal is that girl Chloe.”

“Seriously?”

Yuuki looked stunned. If that possibility was correct, it meant they had just inadvertently tossed away their upper hand against Leon. Kagali, meanwhile, was even more frustrated. The anger was written all over her face. If *that* was Leon’s goal all along, then her comrade Clayman wouldn’t have had to be killed.

“Um... Huh?”

Teare couldn’t hide her surprise at the unexpected possibilities that sprung from her observation. But it was the cold, heartless truth.

“Are you kidding me?”

“Is that what you really think?”

Yuuki and Kagali were born schemers; that much was true, but not even they had insight into everything. They always thought two or three steps ahead, ensuring they could handle any situation that arose after failure. Laplace knew that well, but even he thought they were overreacting this time—and Footman solemnly nodded his agreement.

“Well, it’s still just a possibility. Not one we can afford to ignore, but nothing’s set in stone yet.”

“So your curiosity didn’t cost us anything after all, huh, Boss?”

“Cost? Hell, it might’ve earned us a hell of a lot!”

“Right. I don’t want to expect too much, but if things turn out that way, wouldn’t it be pretty fun? And if we work things right, we could use this to pit a couple of annoying demon lords against each other. That’s a win-win on our end, I’d say.”

“Yeah. It’s not like it matters to us who wins in that case. Let’s just frame this as more fun in the wings.”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! I still think we’re overreacting, but it’s no harm done.”

"Well, no need to go overboard on the expectations. It's not like everything's gonna go the way we want it, y'know?"

Laplace, sensing everyone relaxing a bit on the issue, attempted to sum matters up. Once the group nodded in understanding, it was time to move on to a different subject.

Misha called for her attendant and got another round of tea going.

"So how 'bout you update us on *your* stuff, Boss?" Laplace asked after a brief break.

"Yeah... I'm concerned about the Chloe thing, but we can focus more on that later. Let's move on to the main topic."

Yuuki nodded at Laplace and took a sip. Then he smiled and went over the fruits of his negotiations.

While Laplace and his cohorts were dealing with Leon, Yuuki's side was involved in high-level talks of their own—with the shadowy figure that ran the Western Nations. The topic: how to clean up after the whole Maribel affair.

"As you all know, the cover story is that I was under Maribel's control, so she's taking the entire blame for this."

"Ah, and now you're workin' to back up that story?"

"Exactly. I mean, if I was under her thrall, I couldn't really head out to the Eastern Empire, could I?"

"No, you're right."

"Yeah."

"I thought that was kind of off, too."

"Regarding this Avarice power, it was a toss-up whether I'd be able to grab it from her. More than that, my main aim was just to get Maribel killed—after she was, I'd be free to move around again. So once I firmed up that position for myself, I thought it was time to negotiate with the venerable Granville Rozzo."

Yuuki's sights had been aimed squarely at Maribel. He needed to distract her so he didn't completely lose his position in the West—and eventually, that

distraction led to her death. With her out of the picture, Yuuki had his free will back, and anything nefarious he did before could be framed as Maribel's orders. And it worked. Maribel was gone, and Yuuki had obtained powers far beyond what he expected. The negotiations went similarly well—and what he heard there was the main reason why Yuuki called for this meeting.

"So if you don't mind me starting at the conclusion, we have one more job to do before we head east."

He glanced at the surprised faces surrounding him, trying to look serious.

"Got that? Now let me give you all the details, start to finish."

With that, Yuuki began describing his conference with Granville.



We were at peace. And in Rimuru, the capital of Tempest, every day was packed for me.

Once things calmed down a bit, I sent out another ruins expedition team, but they didn't find a body or anything. Either Yuuki was telling the truth, and she blew herself up, or he'd done something with her. Regardless, any issues stemming from this incident had already been swept away. Maribel was a princess of the Kingdom of Seltrozzo, but spreading word that she attacked us in the ruins would just aggravate the situation. So I contacted Seltrozzo on the sly and had them chalk it up as an "accident," something made possible by our mutual desires to keep it from becoming a Big Thing. Once you're an old-enough royal family, "accidents" are just part of the package, so our arrangements went pretty smoothly.

Still, their king and queen just seemed so emotionless to me. Under *those* parents, I could see why she relied on her knowledge from her past life so much. Had Maribel gotten to enjoy a normal, innocent childhood in her new life, would things have turned out differently? I couldn't help but wonder, as much of a what-if thing that was.

And that brings me to the Five Elders. Granville Rozzo—eldest of them all, boss of the Rozzo family—was the real puppet master pulling Maribel's strings. I'd been steeling myself for some kind of retribution toward us, but there had

been nothing. Perhaps they were admitting they were up to some no-good antics and decided not to respond as long as we kept our mouths shut. It'd been over a month, actually, and Granville had kept mum—and that was more than enough time for our needs, too.

Taking advantage of Soei's information and grasping the goings-on in the Western Nations underground, we were now sure there was no greater threat over there than the Rozzos. We did pick up on a few groups of interest—along the same lines as the Sons of the Veldt, that mercenary team—but it wasn't clear whether any of them shared in our interests. If they were clearly hostile, that was another matter, but we had no reason to rile them. I didn't want to go prodding any hornet's nests I didn't have to, so I decided to just keep tabs on their movements.

We were on good terms with the Free Guild and enjoyed the backing of the Western Holy Church. Really, I don't think any organization was big enough by now to pick a fight with us. It was only natural, then, that Tempest was now leading the largest faction in the Council of the West.

At the start of another peaceful afternoon, we were holding our regular cabinet meeting. In what amounted to the blink of an eye, our nation had all but taken the place of the Five Elders...and maybe that's why we had this pile of new issues to deal with.

The Council of the West, after all, played an enormous rule in establishing consensus among the Western Nations. Councillors voted on measures to enact, which basically meant that the more councillors you sent, the more of a say you had. Now that I had at least *some* goods on every nation in there, though, the group's members looked upon our representatives as mediators of sorts. Our rising influence in the West thus meant the number of complaints and petitions sent our way was skyrocketing. Talk is cheap, of course, and apparently a lot of people were taking advantage of the bargain to push their pet projects.

This is exactly why world domination is such a stupid idea. I don't think you get a single chance to take it easy if you're in a ruling position. Now I understood why the other demon lords didn't seem to care much about lands outside their boundaries. If you wind up inadvertently taking over some

destitute area or another, you're obligated to address whatever people are dissatisfied about there. People talk about eliminating disparities like it's easy, but from the eyes of the one doing it, it never went that way.

The *right* way, I imagine, is to take that region's assets—their labor, their resources—cover the expenses, and redistribute the resulting profits. You want to be careful with siphoning in wealth from other regions, because you might start to have *real* inequality on your hands then. Now that our nation led the largest faction, the other nations were looking for payback. We can shut them out for now, but before very long, we're bound to have an opposition on our hands.

The question now became who we'd send to the Council as our permanent representative. We needed someone smart, sociable, and possessing a certain amount of charisma. Ideally, someone with the force to talk someone into submission, but...

"Also, sorry, but I'm out."

With this sort of thing, the first person to speak up wins. I will admit to having the gift of gab, but I had zero intention of taking on more trouble for myself.

"I'm not sure I can, either," Benimaru said right after me. "The previous Council meeting taught me all too well that I don't have the stomach for those mind games. In a battlefield with no physical combat allowed, I'm as good as useless."

I felt he was being a bit modest, but he likely meant most of it. Benimaru certainly *would* have trouble against all those sly old nobles.

"My mission is intelligence gathering. I cannot afford to leave my position as Rimuru's 'eyes.'"

Soei was out, too. That much I expected. I didn't want to lose him, either.

Geld bowed out as well. He had common sense, and I knew I could rely on him, but I had left a mountain of important work in his hands. Our construction schedule was packed, and he definitely didn't have the time to take on more. I thought Geld would be a fine councillor, but I would have to eliminate that choice for the time being.

Which left...

"Ah, um, me?!"

I passed a quick glance at Gabil, quietly taking in the proceedings up to now. Gabil, surprisingly enough, was a pretty sensible person, and I could, you know, *maybe* see him shining in this important post.

...Well, all right, there was a *lot* to be anxious about with him. But there was really no one else. Hakuro was my military adviser, charged with building up our soldiers. Shuna could be trusted for the job, but if she left for that, it'd impact work around our own nation. Rigurd and the other goblin elders were off the list for similar reasons. We had tons of thorny issues to tackle—a legal system for our new nation, negotiations with other countries, managing our growing population, and much more. They were taking the lead on all those issues, and if Shuna or Rigurd departed, it could grind the whole thing to a halt. We were training a new generation of leaders, yes, but I wanted to see them grow some more first.

"I—I am in the midst of a project to capture and bring back wyverns to train as mounts to improve our air offense. It requires the extensive use of a great number of types of potions, so I would like to continue recording data for this project..."

Ah yes. There was no doubting that Gabil was the right (lizard) man for the job. It seemed better to let him nurture our budding wyvern force than send him off to the Council against his will.

"All right. Gabil, keep up your current work."

"Yes, sir! Understood, sir!!"

Gabil was visibly relieved. I didn't want to force him into anything, so this, I thought, was fine.

You know, maybe I've wound up expanding our forces in too much of a hurry. It was a poor idea to spread my hand out when I didn't have enough trained personnel, but the workload just kept on rising. It was a problem, but ah well. Let's see if there are any other choices.

...And just as I thought that, my eyes settled on Shion. She was staring at me,

all asparkle.

“Sir Rimuru, I—”

“Denied!”

I reflexively cut her off. She was volunteering, I assumed, but she was out of the question.

“Wh-why?!” she asked, surprised. The question itself was also a surprise to me.

“Let’s just pretend, for a moment, that you were a councillor. And let’s say there’s some pudgy, leering elderly man in front of you. Another councillor. And now this councillor’s placed his hand on your shoulder, all friendly like. How would you handle that?”

“It’s obvious. I would grab the man’s neck with my left hand, lift him up, and *punch and punch and punch!!*”

Bzzzt!!

Hence why she wasn’t in the running. Shion’s grown, I’ll admit. I had no doubt about that, but there were still a lot of situations that made me anxious with her.

Like before, for example...

I found Shion in the dining hall. She gave me a big smile and presented the dish in her hand.

“Sir Rimuru! I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve finally made a cake all by myself! Here you go! It tastes the same as Lady Shuna’s cooking, with several times the quantity. Please, go ahead and try it!!”

I was already regretting this. But Shion was proving to be a capable tea brewer...and that must’ve put me off guard.

“Um... Thanks. Appreciate it.”

Unconsciously, I accepted it. That was a mistake. A large block of something resembling opaque Jell-O was on the plate. My face fell. *Uh, this is cake?*

Staring at this object, I looked around for assistance, but nobody was there.

Did they all escape? No, Gobichi was at his post...sprawled out on the kitchen floor. So there's one victim.

I now realized I had visited the dining hall at the worst moment possible. But it was too late.

"Hey...um, this is...cake, you say?"

"Yes! I've perfectly re-created the taste!"

The *taste* is perfect? So everything else about it is awful? Shion certainly *seemed* confident, and watching her only made more butterflies materialize in my stomach.

Regretting my carelessness, I decided to take a single bite. You could predict the results.

I scooped up just a bit with my spoon and brought it ever so slowly to my mouth. I thought I was going to immediately retch. It *felt* like Jell-O, but the taste was all sugary-sweet cake. It was gray in color, and the feel was decidedly gelatinous. It instantly reminded me how important the look of a cake was to the overall experience. Well, not just cake. With any kind of food, visuals are key. If you just tossed a bunch of ingredients on a plate, nobody would find that appetizing.

"What do you think? It's good, isn't it?"

She smirked at me. I know she wanted to say "It's *perfect*, isn't it?" But she just lacked the fundamentals. And by fundamentals, I meant she was tripping over the entire definition of what food is.

"Sit down. Sit down there, please. We need to talk!"

"Huh?! Wh-what's wrong...?"

Shion's smirk melted into a pair of teary eyes. Her head was already tilted downward, but I didn't let that stop me.

The ensuing lecture lasted a very earnest thirty minutes, as I explained to Shion what cooking was. She seemed remorseful, at least, and she promised that next time she'd discuss things with someone else and follow their advice.

...And so forth.

After that lecture, I recalled that when Shion was practicing her tea service, Diablo was guiding her through it. He claimed that a mere taste test of her work upset his stomach, and such sacrifices on his part were what helped Shion grow so well. If I let her practice by herself, she'd never notice where she was going wrong. Leaving her to her own devices, then, was a mistake. No matter what the task was, Shion always relied on her innate special skills to get fast results. It's hard to grow that way. She needed someone overseeing her.

Thus, there was no possible way I could name Shion as a councillor. If she caused any kind of problem in the Council, it could shatter the relationship I'd taken all this effort to build with humankind. And if I wanted someone there to stop her if she flew off the handle, I had a pretty limited pool to pick from in this nation. If I *did* have someone like that, it'd be far more effective to just name *them* councillor.

Like Diablo, maybe.

"I think Diablo could handle it pretty well..."

I kind of let my true feelings fall from my lips. Everyone in the meeting room nodded.

"Yes, Diablo would put us all at ease."

"It'd be easy for him to cajole those nobles into doing our bidding."

"And I doubt he'd ever back down against violence or take bribes."

Rigurd, Benimaru, and Gabil all deeply trusted Diablo. Shuna and Shion joined them.

"With his brains and cleverness, I'm sure he'd make things go your way, Sir Rimuru."

"I hate to admit it, but my undersecretary is a talented man. Besides, if he can get out of my hair and go to Englesia for me, my job as *first* secretary will be more important than ever! I'm not sure you'd find anyone more qualified."

They all seemed in agreement. Shion had less virtuous motives, perhaps, but there was no doubting her appreciation for his ability. Nobody voiced any objections, and there were no other brilliant proposals, so we settled on Diablo

as being our top candidate.

But I'm sure he'll hate it...

"Y'know, I get the feeling he's going to despise doing odd-job work like that. That's why he's gone out to look for minions of his own, and for all I know, maybe he'll find someone good at negotiating for me. So for now, let's call Diablo the main candidate, subject to future changes."

That seemed good for now.

Of course, until we actually pick someone, it'd be me showing up for Council meetings. I wanted someone else in there fast, so hopefully, I thought, Diablo would be kind enough to come back soon.

*

This was an urgent issue, sure, but for the most part, it was *my* problem. Fortunately, after deciding to wait on Diablo, the conference ended without any other major hiccups.

Nothing beats peace. It's a good thing, not having any problems, and it's even better to have free time to enjoy. So I decided to pay a visit to Kurobe. Why? Because thanks to having some more time on my hands, I had discovered something I wanted to talk about.

I called for him upon entering his workshop.

"Kurobe! You got a moment?"

I waved at the nervous-looking apprentices as I went to the inner room. There, I found Kurobe observing a row of several swords.

"Ah, Sir Rimuru! Just who I wanted to see. There's something I wanted to report to you about, actually."

"Oh, to me? What's up?"

If he had something to report, it was likely some new work of his. He always gave form to my ideas, working with Kaijin to develop all kinds of things, so presumably he had created some other useful item for me. And I was right.

"Well, regarding the thing you asked about earlier, I think I have a complete version!"

Kurobe pointed at the swords in front of him, in all shapes and sizes. Judging by how happy he looked, I assumed they were pretty special. But what did he mean by what *I'd* asked about earlier? I blathered on about all sorts of nonsense on the regular, so I couldn't recall exactly what he was referring to.

But a quick Assessment took care of that.

Understood. This weapon is a broadsword—level: Unique.

Ooh, it *is* a Unique! And if Kurobe crafted it, it's *got* to be quality. But I didn't think that'd be enough to make Kurobe act so self-assured around me like this.

With his talents, he could forge several Uniques a month. If he employed his usual methods, he could finish up a blade in one day. These averaged Unique in quality; even if they were "failures," they were still in the upper echelon of Rares. If he was more thorough with his work, that took two or three days, but it pretty much always resulted in something Unique or better. He was still far away from crafting a Legend-class weapon, it seemed, but I really believed he'd do it someday. Plus, if you had a talented fighter wielding one of his blades, that alone could progress it up to Legend, I thought.

He chose all his materials carefully, using only the purest of magisteel. Weapons made from that took on the will of their owner to evolve further, so I really didn't think it was long before we'd see our first Kurobe-forged Legend-class blade. Thus, I assumed he wouldn't go *this* far out of his way to show off some more Uniques, but...

I took a closer look at the broadsword. The most notable thing on it was the marble-size depressions at its base—three of them. Otherwise, nothing stood out. It was a perfectly capable sword, of course, but I wouldn't say it stood out of the pack among Kurobe's creations. (If one of his apprentices was behind it, that was another story.)

This might be a strange thing to say, but it was a completely normal Unique. There was no special inscription magic applied to it, apparently... But hang on. Now I saw something.

"What is this? It's an impressive Unique but nothing too rare for you, is it?"

Hiding my excitement, I pretended not to spot it.

"Oh, did you forget? Heh-heh-heh-heh... This is *special*, this is. It looks like a normal weapon at first glance, and no magic's been applied to it, but you won't believe what it features."

At this point in time, not even my—well, Raphael's—Analyze and Assess skill could find any unusual effects to it. If it was what I thought it was, perhaps I *should* expect a lot.

As I stood there, heart thumping, Kurobe took out a glowing ball, then casually installed it in the hilt.

"Just stick it in a hole like this, and then..."

Report. The weapon broadsword has transformed into the magical weapon broadsword.

Aha!

What was once a regular weapon was now a magical one. So that crazy idea of mine was finally in production?

"Whoa! You really completed it?"

"Heh-heh! So you *have* noticed, Sir Rimuru? That's right. This is the exact mechanism you described to me!"

Right, right. I *did* discuss this idea with him. I knew Kurobe was always working on his research, but I had no idea he wrapped this up so quickly. It almost scared me. He was a taciturn man, never one to brag about his achievements, but his work explained with perfect eloquence how great he was. Truly, a role model for all artisans.

"Wow! Kurobe! I mean... *Kurobe!* This is amazing! Seriously, this is the most amazing invention ever!"

I was now audibly excited. Kurobe gave me a satisfied smile and a strong nod.

"Hee-hee-hee... Wonderful."

Now he was smirking. I had almost never seen a smirk look so natural on someone's face before. Shion's smirk mostly irritated me, but here, I just had to hand it to Kurobe.

There were several ways to craft magic weapons. In my case, I could use Raphael's Combine/Disassemble skill to easily apply magic effects to just about anything. Kurobe could do something similar, but Kaijin and their apprentices didn't have the ability to cheat like that.

What did they do, then? The most common way was to have an enchanter inscribe something on it. Dold knew how to do that, so he would come around to inscribe what this workshop finished. This "completed" the magic weapon, and then you just had to run some magic power into the inscription to trigger the designated spell. But you could only infuse a weapon with so many different spells—two was usually the limit—and once you inscribed a spell, there was no removing it.

The other method, as I think I've mentioned a few times before, has to do with how the weapon evolves. Once it's exposed to the magic force of the user, weapons will often have certain extra powers applied to them. It's tough to aim for this, and it takes a lot of time, but sometimes a weapon gains unexpected force. This method was also the subject of ongoing research toward a way to streamline weapon evolution. (By the way, I had donated part of the large cache of Unique weapons we obtained at the Amrita ruins toward this research. I wasn't expecting it to lead to quick results, of course, but it's important we kept up a continual effort.)

So what had Kurobe just made? Oh, just something that rendered everything that came before it obsolete.

I first brought up this idea while drinking with Kaijin and Kurobe. First, we'd take a sturdy magisteel weapon, perfect for the transmission of magic. Next, we'd create a set of magic-generating external plug-in "cores." Then, I theorized, you could have a magic weapon that wasn't hardwired for just one spell or the other.

For example, what if you placed a magical stone infused with elemental force in a sword? The answer was the blade before me. And it wasn't just some magic stone in there—it was a high-purity jewel.

"What do you think, Sir Rimuru? Just like you pictured it? So here's a sword with holes ready for magical expansions. And meanwhile, Kaijin's succeeded in

compressing magicules into these pure, refined magic crystals!”

Kurobe held his nose in the air. So Kaijin *was* part of this. Generally, it was Kurobe who forged the base weapon and Kaijin who put in the jewels and other final touches. It took the two of them working together to complete something as wonderful as this, I assumed.

“We call these element-infused magic stones ‘element cores.’ We just call ‘em cores around the workshop. Gabil’s been out capturing wyverns, so since Vester had some free time, he helped with the research, too. Those two had been working on spirit cores, you know—a kind of power reactor, right? So he said they already had a way to infuse magic stones with the four primary elements of earth, water, fire, and wind.”

I recalled Ramiris lecturing me about how it was key for a spirit core to generate all the elements at the once, or something. If Kaijin’s team was working on that, making stones with just one element must’ve been simple by comparison. Beyond that, it was all about adjusting the core sizes and output levels, and there you had it—an element core composed of one of the four basic elements.

These were, of course, disposable items. Once the magic inside it ran out, it was just another pretty jewel. But Kurobe told me that these could be reused if brought back here.

“So there’s no way to recharge the energy inside?”

“Oh, there is. But it requires an experienced magic user infusing their own force into the core, so it’s not for laypersons.”

“I see. Sounds like it could create some new jobs. Like, workshops you could bring weapons to and have them charge up their magic for you.”

“Yep. I think, on the field, you’ll want to pack some spares with you. That could be a market of its own.”

True, true. I thought that maybe shops dealing in monster drops could mix in some magic-core sales, but now I figured we could have entire dedicated stores for them.

“But you need to be careful. This is still in the experimental stage, but

depending on the combinations you try, you may wind up changing the elements.”

“Combinations?”

What did he mean? You can change elements... Wait!

“As you can see here, this sword has three places to insert jewels.”

I knew it!

“So if you insert two opposed elements into the same weapon, you’ll wind up with some element you didn’t expect?”

“You got it!”

Kurobe nodded at my guess. That was big news. This definitely needed some more R and D, then—not the kind of thing we could put on the market *that* fast.

Negative. All data used within the labyrinth can be collated and organized.

Um, right. Yeah. That’s true. It’d certainly save us some research time, so in terms of safety, the labyrinth would be ideal. In that case, maybe we ought to bring on a few labyrinth challengers and have them generate a bunch of on-the-field inspection data for us. Even if they made some amazing discovery that way, after all, the tech could still only be produced within Tempest. Maybe some of it would leak, but if we were gonna bring this to market, that’d happen sooner or later anyway. Better to have them test these weapons out in an easily controlled environment.

“By the way, what kind of dangers do you anticipate?”

“Well, you can insert as many jewels as there are holes, so if there’s just one hole, no problem there. But if you put in, say, a wind core and a fire one, that results in more force. Water and fire reduced the force, but water plus two fires caused the thing to explode on us. It wasn’t just three times the force—more like several dozen times. So I was just talking with Kaijin about the need for more testing.”

Sounded like there were some pretty dangerous combos. More experimentation was needed, yes, and we’d need to test every result. Just as Raphael suggested, putting them in the hands of labyrinth explorers was our

quickest bet.

"Is three holes the maximum?"

"Yep. Three's the best we ever managed."

In fact, a three-holed weapon was apparently something they had around a one-in-one-hundred chance of forging—and that was *with* Kurobe's full effort. Thus, they still only had this one here. Their apprentices, meanwhile, were still way too green to craft anything like this. Only four of their most advanced students successfully forged weapons with one jewel slot. (Even Kaijin only managed one with two holes, which tells you something about how tricky these are to make.)

"Yeah, so this is the only successful three-slot weapon we have so far. But with the right combination of cores, I think you could easily get Legend-class force from it."

Kurobe sounded proud. Magic swords are already valuable enough, but if one let you change its element on the fly, that just blew away all common sense. Imagine a magic weapon you could flip a switch on, so to speak, and instantly strike at your enemy's weak element. It was amazing. I couldn't even guess at its value, but I don't think Kurobe was kidding when he hinted it was Legend class—and with the right configuration, it really *could* be a Legend-class force.

From the bottom of my heart, I had to congratulate Kurobe and his team. It was astounding.

Based on our discussions, we decided that core-compatible weapons should be sent to the labyrinth first. We'd also manufacture a large number of throwaway, non-rechargeable cores and toss 'em into the maze's treasure chests. And once Kurobe's apprentices could learn how to craft these weapons in bulk, I planned to make those into labyrinth boss drops ASAP. Three-slot weapons weren't gonna be easy to make, of course, but the way I heard it, those plans were doable as long as we didn't strive for top quality—if we cut the durability enough that the weapons dropped down in class, that ought to be doable.

"You see any problems with that?"

"Nah, I think we can make it work. They'd be pretty brittle, so I wouldn't wanna rely on one in *real* battle, but..."

Kurobe seemed a little reluctant, but his stuff still oughtta hold up well enough for testing purposes. As long as we could get some data on the assorted core combinations, I was happy, so hopefully we could find a way to make lots of weapons with two or more slots and get them into labyrinth runners' hands. Besides, serious labyrinth regulars weren't idiots. You'd have to be a third-rate dungeon hacker to risk your life over some mystery weapon. I figured people could switch between their regular equipment and an experimental kit for this, keeping things clean. These weapons ought to be useful for parties without magic users, too.

Yes. Let's make test subjects out of our customers.

"Rimuru, why are you grinning evilly?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Oh, just your imagination, Kurobe!"

He promised me that he'd get production of a full lineup underway soon. With his consent, we now had a plan in action. We'd have to use a lot of high-quality magisteel, but it ought to provide more training for the apprentices—and it'd let us test things out and produce market-quality goods suited for on-the-field use.

I was already picturing these blades being part of the standard-issue uniform on anyone ranked lieutenant or above in our army. These, combined with a few cores to cover for the bearer's weak elements, had the potential to raise the standard for all our forces.

"Okay. Have at it!"

"Yes, sir!"

For now, it was all in Kurobe's hands.

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"So, Sir Rimuru, did some kinda business bring you here today?"

That jogged my memory. The sudden reveal made me forget all about it, but I *did* need to speak with him.

"Yes, well, it's about this sword of mine," I said as I took out my straight sword and presented it to Kurobe.

"Does it have a slot in it now?"

"No, not that. I wouldn't have been so surprised today otherwise."

"Right, yeah..."

My blade was infused with my magic force and colored darker than the darkest of nights. But now, when I held it and let my magic flow into it—

"Wha...?! The blade—it's glowing gold... No, it's the entire rainbow. A whole array of colors!"

Kurobe stared agape at it, clearly shocked.

"Amazed, huh? Well, so was I, lemme tell you. So that's why I'm here."

I was in my chamber, looking at it, when all of a sudden *this* happened. It'd surprise just about anyone, this dazzling rainbow sword. We didn't mix gold into it or anything, but now it was shining brighter than orichalc.

So I looked into it, and...

Understood. This is the divine metal Crimson Steel.

...is what I got back. Apparently, it's this really great metal that performs even better than the orichalc I produced, but I decided to visit Kurobe to find out for sure.

"What...? What could *this* be? I can't Assess it at all..."

"It's called crimson steel, apparently."

"C... Crimson steel?! That actually exists? That's a mythical ore said to retain its elemental attribute for eternity. I thought it was just a fairy tale..."

Kurobe was almost too excited for words. I had thought it was a pretty remarkable mutation, but I guess it was even better than I thought.

So the two of us began researching this crimson steel blade.

What we found was that it didn't react to anything apart from my own magic force. When Kurobe gave it a try, it remained jet-black as usual. Metallically

speaking, it just reacted like magisteel at that point, even though it was really crimson steel.

It's apparently the ultimate metal, one that repels all types of wavelengths. It even fully absorbs light without reflecting it, which is why it was so dark in color. This was also why, amazingly enough, it defied all attempts to Analyze and Assess it.

Only when I ran my magic through it, transforming it into battle mode, did it begin to shine. I was worried it'd stand out too much if I whipped it out in public, but by now I knew that, as long as no magic was in it, it behaved. It was also way more durable than your average weapon—because it could "*retain its elemental attribute for eternity*," that meant it was basically unbreakable. If it ever *did* break for some reason, I could just infuse some magic to repair it. It made me wonder how a fight between two crimson steel blades would turn out, but it's not like there's any way to test that out.

One thing I could say right now, however, is that this sword really *was* suited for me. Compared with anything else in the world, its evolution had made it impossibly durable. Combined with my Absolute Defense, it oughtta stand up to some pretty rough use.

Even better: This sword wasn't yet complete. I was planning to chisel out some slots on the hilt for cores, so I could change its element at will. Just imagining that put me in a dream state. It's already an excellent piece, and it'll get even better? So much to look forward to.

"What a blade that is, though. It hardly looks like I forged it any longer..."

"Oh, not at all, Kurobe! You did great work on this!"

"Thanks, Sir Rimuru. Always glad to hear that from ya!"

It took someone like Kurobe to birth this sword. He was endlessly modest about himself, but there was no doubt in my mind.

"Now I'm wondering if I could've beaten Hinata with this."

A Kurobe masterpiece like this *has* to be equivalent to Legend class, right? But Kurobe himself surprised me even further.

"Against Moonlight? Her own Legend class? Hmm... Well, maybe even better than that, eh? With *this* blade, maybe we're getting into God-class territory. Like what beat Sir Veldora himself."

God class. The ultimate of lofty peaks. No weapon of that class was known to currently exist, and none were even described in legend or tradition. But here it was.

In fact, Milim's Temma Sword, similarly magical, was also in this class. She showed it to me once. I couldn't Assess it back then, but Raphael stated that it was higher quality than Hinata's Moonlight. And now I had something that came to that point—this amazing culmination of force. Even now, Kurobe thought, it'd rank among the upper echelons of Legend-class weaponry, so I felt safe expecting it'd reach that peak in the end.

We both marveled at the sword for a while.

"Man, swords like this are just so cool, aren't they?"

"They sure are. I don't see patterns along the sword *this* pretty too often at all."

That Japan-style *hamon* pattern, the fruits of all of Kurobe's technical talents, dazzled the eye up and down the permanent, unbending crimson steel. It seemed like a work of art as we gazed at it, sighing in reverie. It was so beautiful that I thought we could've stood there staring forever. Truly, the best sword in the world—and it's still evolving. It seemed safe to say that I had a God-class blade here, and considering how low my expectations had been at first, I couldn't be any more elated.

*

I heard hurried footsteps coming toward us. They didn't slow down when they reached the door to my office. Instead, the door flew open without a knock.

Only Milim would do this. If anyone besides Milim tried something so rude with me, they'd swiftly face a pummeling at the hands of Rigurd—or in the case of Veldora or Ramiris, no snacks for a week. Today was a special day, however, so I let it slide.

After all...

“R-Rimuru! It’s hatching! It’s about to hatch!”

She had taken to constantly carrying that egg around with her as of late, never letting it go. And she’d been holed up in my nation instead of her own—meaning she wanted easy access to me, in case of complications.

I could tell she was frantic. The avatar core—the egg nestled within the body of Milim’s lifelong friend Gaia—was now beating a rhythm with its faint glow. Clearly, it was a matter of time. Gaia was about to be born as an entirely new sort of monster.

“Kweeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

With a few well-placed cracks, a tiny-size dragon burst from the egg. Call it a mini-dragon, if you want—maybe about a foot and a half tall. You’d never guess this was originally a Chaos Dragon.

“...Is that you, Gaia?”

“Kwee, kwee!!”

Girl and dragon hugged each other tight. A tearful reunion.



*

Gaia had wasted no time hatching after Milim burst through the door. Now the greatest danger was past, so presumably she'd be going back home now...or not.

"Right! Time for us to head out on an adventure with Gaia!"

I...was expecting she'd say that, so I had my answer preloaded.

"Isn't Frey worried about you?"

As Milim's sort-of guardian, Frey was bound to have a word or two to say about her frolicking around the countryside without her permission. If Gaia was still incubating, that was one thing, but now that the birth went off without a hitch, Milim no doubt had a pile of work waiting for her.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! No need to worry!"

No need to worry?

Rimuru attacked Milim with Concerned Advice!

But Milim parried the strike!!

I kid, I kid.

But hey, if *she* says so, I'm not gonna refute her. I had been pretty busy recently cleaning things up post-Maribel. Only now had I regained a little "me" time. Maybe we should all go out and have some fun for a change.

"Besides," she smugly added, "it's exactly what she needs. Dragons are apex predators, so she'll only eat monsters she catches herself, even as a baby. I gotta teach her how to hunt!"

Dragons, she said, didn't starve that easily. In fact, as long as Gaia had ready access to water and magicules, that was enough to live on. But it wasn't enough to grow on. If we wanted her to be big and strong, she needed exercise (in the form of battle) and good food (in the form of slain monsters). Hence, Milim explained, the need for a thrilling adventure, right now. To me, it looked like she just wanted to play hooky from Frey again, but in her own way, maybe she was thinking pretty deeply about this.

"All right. In that case, I know the perfect spot."

"Oh?! The labyrinth, right?"

"You guessed it!"

And in another minute, we kicked off Operation Get Gaia Big & Strong.

*

But first, we needed some help. I decided to tap Veldora and Ramiris, reassembling the old gang for another labyrinth challenge.

With Gaia among us, we now had a party of five, and even though she was still a newborn, she'd be safe in the Dungeon, or at least much more so than the outside world where God knows what could be waiting for her.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! We're all busy right now, but of course we'll do you a favor! Feel free to tap upon all my powers!"

"Yes, yes, now that we're here, you've got nothing to worry about! Put your mind at ease—Gaia's in our hands now!"

I was suddenly very concerned.

...No. It's all right. Just trust them.

Veldora and Ramiris had matured, after all. They could factor people besides themselves into their decisions. And even Milim understood that this was education for Gaia, not playtime; I doubted she'd let herself run *too* wild.

"All right, let's go!"

With my shout, we all Possessed our avatars simultaneously, and our adventure began.

Job one was to power-level Gaia. It was Veldora, Ramiris, Milim, and me, with the flight-capable Gaia behind us. As a dragon—in fact, formerly a Chaos Dragon who could've destroyed the world—she couldn't have been a wimp, and she didn't disappoint. After just a few battles, she had already begun grasping the general idea, spewing wide-range breath attacks at whole groups of foes. Her Chaotic Breath was a thick, concentrated miasma, tinged with a curse that corroded every type of matter. It was close to Rot (part of Belzebuth's arsenal) in effect, and it was easily strong enough to keep base-

level monsters at bay.

Gaia also bore the earth element within her. This ability, writ into her “soul,” made it possible to control gravity. If the Chaos Dragon released from that seal earlier had any sort of intelligence left... I shuddered to think about it. There’d be Chaotic Breath and gravity fields that weighted on you like boulders all over the joint; the fallout would’ve been far, far worse. But that’s in the past. Now Gaia was Milim’s cute li’l pet and our erstwhile companion, nothing to be afraid of.

Then a Blood Boar appeared, a B-ranked monster with powerful kicks who lurked around Floor 30 and below. Its head and shoulders were protected with hard bone and muscle, its outer hide thicker than steel. It was nearly seven feet long, but it could still head-butt you at speeds up to thirty miles an hour. Nothing to trifle with. Run into one in a long, straight corridor, and you’d be up the creek with no easy escape.

But even someone that dangerous was no foe of ours. Gaia promptly broke out her gravitational magic, slowing the Blood Boar’s charge down. Not missing the opportunity, Milim’s single swipe hit at a weak point, felling the beast. The Blood Boar got its name because its mane was dyed red with its foes’ blood, but now it was a kind of staple food for Gaia. It was a pretty good achievement for day one, and I looked forward to her future growth.

We were now a perfect team.

Gaia had a skill called Gravity Field that potentially reduced the effects of physical attacks. Deploying one alongside my Magic Barrier gave us a good debuff for any magic attacks as well. We developed a few team moves like this over the next few days, and before long, Gaia became the keystone to our party battles.

After that, between on-the-field battle practice and Gaia feeding, we had made it down to Floor 49. Awaiting us was Bovix, the boss that gave us so much unexpected trouble last time.

“Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha! Bovix better prepare to be flattened!”

“Yep, yep! I’ll barely even have to lift a finger!”

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now I'm getting pumped up!"

"Kweeeeeee!!"

They were all really into it. What? Wasn't I, too? Don't be ridiculous. We're all pitching in for Gaia's sake, remember. But...you know...maybe a little. Maybe we were having a *little* fun. But it's all for Gaia's education, okay?

It was with that lofty cause in mind that we left the labyrinth after another day of hard work.

"Looks like you're having fun."

Waiting at the door was the spine-freezing sight of Frey, with a friendly smile and a couple bulging veins on her forehead.

"Geh...! F-Frey?! W-wait! No! I can explain all this!!"

I didn't think it was the first time I heard that line. I wonder why? And I had a feeling the rest of this conversation would seem awfully familiar, too.

"You promised me you'd come home after Gaia was born, didn't you?"

"N-no! Gaia needs me!"

"Yes, I know she does. But is that a good reason to break your promise?"

"But her training..."

"And just like Gaia, you yourself need some training of your own. Wouldn't you agree?"

"...?!"

She got her.

It was just beyond Milim's ability to out-debate Frey. No matter how willful and self-indulgent she was, Milim couldn't beat her. And I had no intention of grabbing that tiger by the tail, either. Who'd ever want to get caught up in *that*? I mean, all Frey's giving her is the cold, hard truth.

Milim wound up resorting to whining and carrying on in the end, but it was all fruitless against the iron wall of Frey's smile as she dragged her away. Which, well, it was Milim's fault *this* time, too, so what could I say? If she'd at least let Frey know first, I doubt she would've gotten this pent-up about it, but ah well.

"I'll come back soon!" Milim shouted as she left, but I didn't think she'd be able to pull that act a third time. She wasn't being grounded or anything; I'm sure she had Frey's permission for regular visits, although maybe not for a bit now. Even Frey knew the dangers of not letting Milim take a breather now and then. That's why she was going easy, but if Milim kept pressing her luck, who knows what'd happen? Not that I should butt into someone else's family drama, but maybe I should teach Milim the benefits of keeping your coworkers on the same page at all times.

Such were my thoughts as I saw Milim leave. For now, I'd have custody of Gaia. Her unlimited-use Resurrection Bracelet kept her safe in the labyrinth, and she had a ton of food to eat in there. What's more, I could set my avatar to auto-mode and have it work in tandem with her down there, helping her train. She's still a bit young for Milim to take over that process, so we planned to transfer her over once she was strong enough.

I thus had a new labyrinth companion.

By the way, I had no way of knowing this, but our party of five wandering the halls was becoming feared as a unique set of bosses. Rumor had it that they'd present themselves with one of two strength levels—the normal one was troublesome enough, but sometimes they'd ratchet it up even further. Essentially, whenever we directly controlled our avatars, we were treated as a nightmare beyond anyone's ability. I'd only learn about that a little while later.

*

If we kept playing down there while Milim was gone, we'd never hear the end of it. She'd tell right away from how our avatars grew while we had auto-mode turned off, and even without that, she had a sixth sense for that kinda thing. It's like playing with fire.

So let's go over some of the more serious things I've been working on.

One urgent piece of business was establishing rules for our dealings with the Western Nations. As demon lord and leader of the Jura-Tempest Federation, I had final say on pretty much anything within my borders. I left some of that to Rigurd and the rest, but the most important matters required my confirmation.

I had a lot of power, really—our judicial system, legislation, and

administration ran on my complete discretion. I held sway over all three, giving me supreme authority over all affairs of state. I was also commander-in-chief, running the main keystone of our nation; one order and I could send the whole army on the march, and any officers could only be appointed with my approval. We were a federation in name only—I was a de facto despot.

Of course, in practice, I spread these responsibilities around a bunch. Our administration was entirely Rigurd's field, and Benimaru, serving as my agent, enjoyed full control of the military. We were in the midst of fielding talented new people to serve as their assistants.

Meanwhile, Rigurd had been studying the concept of a three-branch government. Rugurd, Regurd, and Rogurd, all former goblin elders, each held the top position in our judicial, legislative, and administrative branches, respectively. But there was a problem. The whole idea of a three-branch system was that every branch had checks and balances over the other. The legislative setup of Japan was no exception. But in our case, the border between legislative and administrative was far too vague, and I had no idea what to do about it.

For one thing, we needed to establish an actual legislature. I decided to divide this into an upper and lower house. I'd name the members of the upper house, and we'd vote on the lower house members—that kind of thing. An appointment to the upper house was for life, unless you caused some kind of problem and were unseated, but only votes could get you into the lower house. Elections, of course, aren't easy things. It would be a trial-and-error process for us.

It'd be the legislative branch's sole job to enact laws, and the administrative's to follow them and run the nation. I wanted our administration to be loaded with talent. Looking at the Japanese government, even if the prime minister changed out pretty frequently, the bureaucrats behind the nuts-and-bolts operation of the country were like steadfast mountains (barring recent events). I needed people with the perseverance to doggedly build up long-lasting policies over time, never throwing in the towel. Long-term projects often grew a lot of fat on them, and administrators could always get bought off and do nefarious things, but I hoped that everyone keeping a careful watch over

matters would prevent that.

For these administrative positions, I recommended the elders of the assorted species associated with Tempest. Those too advanced in age to serve could name representatives to fill in for them. Going forward, I thought we'd see this evolve into a meritocracy. For now, we still needed to talk about alleviating opposing interests between races, but in the future, I imagined there'd be more of a sense of unity, of a single nation of Tempestians. It'd take time, but I wanted our nation's policy to be peaceful reconciliation.

That's fine and all, of course, but there was an issue. A lot of the talent pool for this kind of thing belonged to the weaker species, while the heads of the more warlike races weren't suited for working with complex written documents. This was kind of a big problem. Should I focus on our strength as monsters or on our intelligence and willingness to cooperate with humans? The question agonized me.

No matter their muscle, I couldn't give major authority to the lawless. This was public knowledge around Tempest, and the beefier Tempestians were kind enough to be satisfied with military posts for me. But that meant they had no authority to speak about our administration's direction, and depending on how our policies went, that might sow some discord later.

Our legislative leaders would gather feedback from the people and stamp their seal of approval on it. But if our administration was run by the brainiest of the brainy among our weaker races, the stronger ones could stand to lose their civil rights. Even now, I could see the discontent that'd result. A government administrator had a heavy task. They had to manage the nation's budget, taking command over the massive amount of riches flowing into Tempest. Mjöllmile was our top man in finances, but he alone wasn't enough to catch any discrepancies. Our administration also had to oversee how our land was apportioned out. I wanted proper zoning and development, but that whole process looked easy to muck up. To prevent logjams, they needed the authority to send out orders under my name.

Finally, the judicial system. The judiciary's most important job was to deliver justice for arrested suspects. Policing came under the authority of the administration, but all three branches would have the power of arrest—one of

the checks and balances. The judiciary had to judge them in courts, and that meant it had to be the most impartial branch of all, not listening to public feedback and solely protecting the legal order. Judging by the law, and not from your gut, is a lot harder than it looks, and keeping tabs on that was another consideration that gave me a headache.

So Rigurd and I were studying hard in order to flesh out our three-branch system.

The legislature would listen to the people, talk things over, and enact laws. Being consistent with this would help us pursue an open government. For the administration, we were training Rigurd and other talents to serve as bureaucrats. I also wanted to hurry along the establishment of a law enforcement agency, in order to strengthen the authority of our nation's core organizations. Benimaru's military, as well as Soei's Team Kurayami intelligence unit, answered only to me. To keep from duplicating orders and causing confusion, I decreed that they didn't need to follow the administration's commands—along those lines, I planned to appoint a fairly big name to lead our public prosecutor's office.

That left one more thing: a problem with our judiciary. Running an impartial court could easily make our judges into targets. If I wanted to be thorough with this, I needed people with not just intellectual skill but physical strength. Our judges would have bodyguards, of course, but that still left me with concerns. Anyone who did something like attack a judge out of spite would absolutely get the death penalty, but some attackers may just be willing to accept that. Monsters are far stronger than people. No matter how well guarded you were, you could be lunged at in a flash. Thus, I preferred that our judges had some strength of their own to work with.

"Hmm... In that case, I'd be worried about Rugurd by himself."

"Indeed. He's my right-hand man in every way, but in terms of muscle, he'd lose out to an army lieutenant. Rogurd would never let your average youth beat him, but..."

Rugurd could be a calculating schemer, but in his decisions, he was completely above the board. The judge's bench was the perfect position for

him, but if push came to shove, he wasn't strong enough to defend himself. Rogurd definitely could hold his own one-on-one against an army captain, though. Shame he was already exercising his authority over our assorted government organizations right now. Transferring him to the judiciary would be tough.

"Also, you know, I'd really like to establish a public prosecutor's office in our administration. Gobta and the gang can keep tabs on criminal activity around the nation, but doing the same for our leaders and legislators is asking a little too much, isn't it?"

"Yes, you're right. In addition to our diverse array of monsters, we have a number of well-known magic-born visiting our lands. The Founder's Festival has attracted many powerful fellows to the city as well. They could potentially cause all kinds of strife."

The Founder's Festival had a lot of positive impacts for us. It also attracted a bunch of would-be strongmen with a penchant for violence. That was, in a way, what we aimed for, but some of those fools couldn't keep their brawling inside the labyrinth. Our security team had beefed up its forces since Gobta's return, but to Rigurd, that didn't seem like enough.

"You mean magic-born who are A rank or so?"

"Just a few, but yes. They didn't show any outward signs of violence, but I do think we should stay on our guard."

He was right. Better to be prepared. There was wide variance between people's abilities to fight, so if we waited until a magic-born went berserk, it'd be too late.

"So a prosecutor and a judiciary...and we still need to decide who to send as our Council of the West representative. Everybody's already got enough on their plates, so I hate to make any unwise personnel shifts..."

"It could lead to potential chaos, indeed."

Mmm... A lot of headaches. Our systems were starting to fall into place, our laws being enacted...but our mechanism for keeping the whole thing running was still weak. And don't get me started on all the unfilled posts. I know this is

one of the harmful side effects of growing so fast, but what I'd give for some more people...

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But no point stewing over people who weren't there. I needed a change of pace, so I decided to make a couple field trips to our worksites.

Geld's construction of a new capital for the former Beast Kingdom of Eurazania was proceeding smoothly. All the foundational work was already done—the stakes driven into the bedrock, the magically reinforced concrete kept in place by rebar and steel frames—and seeing it was awe-inspiring.

Magic-infused solid rock provided more merits than simply being sturdier. It emitted its own wavelength of magical force, allowing it to repel lower-level magic. You couldn't transport it with gravity-reduction spells, which was a disadvantage, but that merit still made it worth the trouble. Once that huge, towerlike palace is completed, it'll be impervious to most magical attacks, whether from the outside or inside.

On the site, I could see gigantic blocks of cut-out and polished magical rock, several hundred times harder than concrete, lined up in rows. In the middle, supported by this foundation, was a support column that thrust into the heavens; blocks were suspended from it to construct the outer walls. The scale was so gigantic that even this column struck a dizzying presence. People darted around like ants; everything looked out of scale, proving just how massive this structure was.

"Well, hello, Sir Rimuru! Thank you so much for coming."

Geld ran up to me, grinning as he greeted me. I had used Dominate Space to transport myself here, not wanting to get in the way of things, but Geld must've noticed me anyway.

"Hey, Geld. Long time no see. I'm glad to see everything's going well."

"Ha-ha-ha! Thank you very much. I'm sure everyone will be delighted to hear that from you!"

His cheerful laughter echoed across the site, much to my relief. He wouldn't be acting that way if things were awry. You can only enjoy your job if you're

working in a bright, happy atmosphere.

"No, I mean it. This is better work than I imagined. It almost feels like you'll be done early, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and I can only think it's because we've all opened up to each other."

As Geld explained, he had been thinking for a while after our previous discussion. He took his thoughts to the POW magic-born, going around and listening to their complaints and grumbling. If someone just doesn't care, then nothing you can say will reach their heart. Geld wasn't the type to rule by force; instead, he started by learning everyone else's thoughts.

"A lot of them feared their future treatment. Given how they openly warred against you, Sir Rimuru, they worried they'd all be done in once construction was completed."

"Huh? There's no way I'd do that."

"Of course not. We all know you're not that sort of coldhearted demon lord. But they are new to all this, and they didn't know your nature, so I imagine they still had their concerns. So I told them all about my own experiences..."

To be exact, he told them about my battle against the orc lord and what became of the orcish armies under him. The magic-born seemed only half ready to believe it, but there were many high orcs on the construction team, and they all backed up Geld's story, helping ease any doubts.

"Some of them said you were being too much of a pushover, Sir Rimuru. So I said to them, so what? If you can't even defeat *me* in battle, how are you going to rebel against a demon lord? That quieted them all down."

Geld grinned.

If this were Shion or Diablo, they might've blown their top and brutally murdered any magic-born who said that. Again, it showed me just how broad-minded Geld was.

So he had managed to open the hearts of our former POWs. Once a week, he said, he rewarded their efforts with wine and a tasty spread. Now they were cooperating as one, all smitten by Geld's sheer manliness. They really felt like

they were being useful, which was the biggest thing of all. If they thought their work wasn't being recognized, it'd kill their self-esteem.

Hard work not only freed them from being prisoners, it also showed them the joy of a job well done. It should be obvious, but this was far more efficient than any kind of forced labor.

So the higher-level magic-born's cooperation was providing us with a huge boost. With the increased labor force, we no longer had staff shortages. Work started to just hum along, and so construction was going faster than I expected. Compared with a building job in my old world, the pace was kind of frightening. In fact, there really was no comparison. All this with no heavy machinery, driven by elbow grease alone!

It really made you take a step back—but then again, one look at the worksite quelled all questions. Common sense never applied to magic-born. Some could take weights of several tons and just heft them on their shoulders, all by themselves. Any scrap material or rock could be pulverized with a single fist. Flight was a given with these guys, so safety at lofty heights was never a concern. Any regulations drafted with humans in mind simply didn't apply.

I just had to nod, in awe, and accept it. No *wonder* this was going so fast.

*

And this wasn't the only building site.

In war, deploying in multiple directions at once is usually ill-advised but not with construction. We decided that a multitiered plan that followed a certain order would be more efficient. It'd train our combat engineers as well, so I left teams of crewmen to our commanders, assigning them areas to cover.

To be exact, we now had four distinct construction departments—one in Dwargon, one in Englesia, one in Eurazania, and one in Thalion.

In Dwargon, we already had a complete highway in place. The inns serving it were finished, the roads widened to allow for a dedicated magitrain rail line. We were even hiring adventurers as day laborers—wherever work's available, people come soon after, so things were pretty busy over there.

Next, Englesia. Things here were about the same as Dwargon. We had built

the highway there on the wider side as well, so rails were being laid down. That work would be completed soon.

Construction over on Eurazania came last. We were expanding the highway right now, taking care to preserve the local ecosystem as we did. Any trees cut down during construction were slated for use in the building of the new capital, so we were fine-tuning our transport logistics.

Thalion, meanwhile, was slow going. We had to start by clearing out forest land, so we were experiencing more delays than I thought. I'd assigned high orcs to handle this task as they were capable of carrying things around via their Stomachs. The high orcs were the most skillful group for this, so simply making a road wasn't a problem. However, they also had to transport the trees they felled, and that required labor. Once things wrapped up in Eurazania, we planned to shuttle the staff over to Thalion to help out. For now, at least, they would open a path in the forest. We could take our time paving the highway later on. Opening the planned tunnel and installing rails were both projects we decided to put off for later.

That was the state of things in the four regions.

Not everyone agreed with a magitrain line between us and the Dwarven Kingdom. Some people feared the possibility that we'd misread the Eastern Empire's moves and let information on the project leak out. They could potentially steal the magitrain plans and use them against us in a military invasion, a kind of double-edged sword. We could also have the rail lines we spent so much time on get torn up and destroyed.

Others suggested that we should be focusing our building efforts on things like anti-Empire military outposts. The highway's largest lodging facility was on the site where the road met the Ameld River; they wanted this reworked into more of a fortress city. I gave it some thought but opted against it. It seemed pointless. There was no telling how the Eastern Empire would move yet, so I hesitated to add further needless work to our plates. Even now, with more workers on hand, we still had tons to do—I didn't want to divert labor to more low-priority projects.

That didn't mean we weren't on alert. We didn't take action because we

assumed the Empire would do nothing—instead, if they ever seriously decided to confront us, we'd simply crush them with everything we had. I had no interest in extended mind games here; it'd be stupid to stay on hyperalert for ages on end. Depending on what they did, I was ready to use our full powers to bring any conflict to a very quick resolution. My cabinet and I reasoned that was the cleanest way to go at it.

Yes, we did need to worry about damage to our railways and so on, but if it happens, we can always rebuild. We couldn't delay development because we were scared of potential future events—the angels' attack, for one. No matter who's confronting us, we weren't about to step down. If the enemy comes riding in, we annihilate them and start building again.

We needed to consider protecting ourselves, but really, our greatest asset wasn't things. It's people. If we keep our workers safe, we're good. And after pursuing that plan, I found that our construction work was going at a shockingly fast clip.

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My final stop on this impromptu inspection trip was the Kingdom of Farminus.

As promised, Yohm had recruited a team to handle the preliminary work for a magitrain line. They had picked sites for the rail line, according to the report I read, and surveying had just been completed. I figured they'd get to work on that after the harvest season was over, but Yohm—or Mjurran, really—made this a bigger priority.

"Why wouldn't I?" she said with a smile. "We know how rich we can get off the foreign currency we receive for our crops. If we should ever have a famine, that's enough money to easily provide food support. I would absolutely hate to see your magitrains ready to deploy and us without any railways to support them."

She was more passionate about the project than I was. As the queen of Farminus, she was now taking an active policy making role for her kingdom.

"Ha-ha-ha! Guess I don't even have to be here, eh? This is more up Rommel's alley anyway. He's runnin' things on-site."

Yohm grinned as he introduced me to Rommel, a man I had seen a few times before—the sorcerer on Yohm’s team during his adventuring days, if I recall. He looked nervous as he updated me on their current status, unfurling a map detailed enough to be classified material and explaining in detail where the highway would go. It had all been surveyed to the level of detail I requested, and I had promised to make the final checks, so I quickly headed over, examining the whole path before the day was through.

“There’s still a few kinks we need to work out, but overall it makes the grade. You wrote down exactly who’s responsible for each section, right?”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru, we’ve procured everything as you outlined to us.”

“Okay. Then have the people running this section, this section, and also this section investigate these spots for me again.”

It seemed to me personnel training was going well here. They had a complete project map in place, all within permissible levels of accuracy. Some of the teams weren’t quite all there yet, but I could tell they were diligently studying their craft. If they could look things over one more time, I was sure they’d recognize their own mistakes. A bit of tough love, maybe, but I couldn’t get lazy here. Maybe we’d have computer precision if I did everything, but that’d be meaningless. I wanted them to earn the achievement of doing this themselves. It’d help raise the next generation of engineers.

At this rate, I didn’t think the fixes would take much time. We could likely push construction up a bit. I’d probably need to ask Kaijin soon to get our automatic magical generators ready for them. These generators were real impressive, all but guaranteeing the safety of travelers on the highway to Blumund. Since they operated as stone slabs reacting to magicules, they served as guideposts for the highway as well. Tempest’s visitors liked them a lot, as did our soldiers who ran the highway patrol. The magicule count around Farminus wasn’t as high as the Forest of Jura, but we planned to put the generators in regardless.

Yohm and his court gave us a warm welcome that day.

“I gotta love how you’re still swaggerin’ around by yourself everywhere. Doin’ whatever ya want, huh, pal? I’m jealous.”

The drunken Yohm seemed pretty serious about that. But he misread me. I wasn't alone.

"I've got Ranga with me, actually."

"You called, Master?!"

He popped his face from out behind my shadow.

"Whoa! You were there? You startled me..."

"I'm sure he did. I doubt many people could hope to lay a finger on a demon lord, but it is the duty of any humble servant to be concerned for his master's safety. It is true for me as well, my liege, and I hope *you* will consider acting more like the king you are."

"Yeah, sure, Edgar. You know I'm gonna be free of this job once yer grown enough, right?"

Edgar was the son of Edmaris, the previous king. He seemed intelligent enough, and I certainly couldn't doubt his lineage. Yohm, apparently, still felt a little like he usurped the throne of his own country, so he was keen on naming someone from the mainline royal family as his crown prince.

"Don't be silly, Your Majesty! You know Queen Mjur is with child, and it is only natural that they will inherit the throne next! And it is my humble dream to serve this new ruler someday, so please refrain from any statements that could be interpreted as encouraging a succession battle!"

It sounded like Edgar had no interest in being king. But suddenly I wasn't so concerned about that.

"Whoa, wait a second. Did you just drop some big news on me?"

I was about to give Ranga a big, meaty bone when my hand stopped. Queen Mjur was with child? Yes, it was pretty simple for a human and a high-level magic-born to produce offspring, but...

"Your Majesty," Edgar began with a roll of the eyes, "after everything Sir Rimuru has done for you, you still haven't informed him of the pregnancy?"

"Aw, but I was too embarrassed—"

"And it seemed awkward for *me* to break the news, so..."

Those two really *were* made for each other. But didn't monsters and magic-born get weaker upon giving birth? Would Mjurran be okay?

"That won't be a problem," she briskly replied. "I was originally human, after all. And I may weaken, yes, but at this point in my life, strength means little. I'll retain all my magic and knowledge, so it will hardly be much of a hindrance."

"And by the way, that Gruecith *still* ain't recovered from the news. Guess it was too much of a shock for the guy..."

Ah. I was wondering why I hadn't seen him at all. But hey, there's plenty of fish in the sea, y'know? Not that it was for me to comment on anyway. There's never really been a significant other in *my* life. It's something Gruecith's was gonna have to tackle himself.

"Well, um, my condolences to him. Are your knight corps doing okay despite that?"

Diablo had managed to tame the bloodthirsty rebel forces of the past. I didn't think there was much to worry about, but if their captain was in *that* state of affairs, it gave me pause.

"Ahhh, it's going fine. His pals are still around, and I tell ya, Razen's really pullin' his weight, too. Livin' legend is right, I guess. He's constantly impressin' me."

Oh, right. Razen was here. Diablo had made a servant out of him, but it sounded like he was working hard in Farminus. Of course, Diablo's unique skill Tempter had forged a mortal contract between the two of them, so a betrayal from him was out of the question.

"Yes," said Edgar, eyes shining like the boy he was, "and Sir Razen's still got the energy to go around the country, inspecting and observing matters. He contacts us magically on regular occasions, and if the weeds of unrest ever show themselves, he immediately uproots them for us!"

It sounded like Razen was pretty popular in Farminus. To me, who had mostly just heard about him, I thought Razen did some pretty inhumane things—but when it came to protecting his nation, he was absolutely the man to count on.

I saw no need to dredge up past issues, so I listened to Edgar describe him. It was interesting, hearing about things from someone else's perspective. The winners write the history books, as they say, and the losers come out with nothing. To the citizens of Farminus, though, King Edmaris and Razen were the good guys. If I had lost the battle against the Farmus forces, right now I'd be touted as a fiendish warlord leading an apocalyptic horde of monsters. I didn't want to look down on anyone, but that's the kind of freedom winning got you.

Along those lines, the new nation Yohm established could be classified as a pretty big success. The more talented people in office beforehand were still maintaining their roles, keeping the nation well administrated and discontent at a minimum. They were also controlling the media to keep us from gaining a bad reputation, and Tempest was now seen as a friendly partner. At this rate, any prejudice against monsters was bound to dissipate over time. Diablo's talents really shone here, I think. He gave me pretty much the exact results I wanted. I guess he's just that good at reading people.

So everything was going according to plan. That gladdened me, and I rounded out the night talking merrily with Yohm and everyone else.

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While I was at work, Ramiris and Veldora were apparently tackling something of their own. Once I returned from my inspection run, they were waiting together to greet me. With them, it'd either be a major problem or something they wanted to brag about, and this time it was the latter.

"We've done it, Rimuru! We've competed our test unit. If the tests end successfully, we can begin mass-producing these with haste!"

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm! And lemme tell ya, I'm *brimming* with confidence about this! C'mon, check it out!"

I let them hurry me along.

Tempest currently had several research sites in operation. One was the workshop of Kurobe and his apprentices, open to the public. Much of their R and D was stuff that had no value if stolen, unless you had someone with Kurobe's talents. The special weapons I enlisted them for were an exception, but for the most part, we revealed all the weapons and armor created in there.

A little advertising never hurt, and we had decided to release this stuff with a splash, introducing a spring line and everything. I wanted to mold “Kurobe” and “Garm” into real, established brands someday.

But we were headed elsewhere, to a facility handling a range of research kept classified by the government. We needed an easily guardable site that regular people couldn’t get inside, and so we focused on inside the Dungeon.

On Floor 100 was Tempest’s publicly funded R and D center, led by Gabil, along with individual research spaces for Ramiris, Veldora, and me. We had another large facility on Floor 95, inside the park we established on that level. The beastman refugees were no longer there, and we had a huge amount of space, so I figured we may as well take advantage. We had alchemists from Dwargon, sorcerous researchers from Thalion, and vampire researchers with too much time on their hands from Lubelius assembled in Tempest, and we needed a large-scale facility to house them all.

Each of them brought their own specialized talents. The dwarven alchemists were gifted in spirit engineering, the field that birthed the magic-armor soldier project Kaijin and Vester were once involved with. In this world, natural phenomena were thought of as tied to the spirits—the five base elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and air, and the three higher elements of light, dark, and time. Science that harnessed these phenomena and technological systems that developed them were known as spirit engineering; it formed the mainstream of scientific thinking around here.

Our visitors from Thalion, meanwhile, were schooled in the largely concealed field of sorcerous science, a scholarly realm that only those who truly master magic could reach. Its core fundamentals were proposed by the Thalion emperor Elmesia’s mother, a genius elven researcher. Her teachings had been inherited and replicated by a large number of people.

The field even ventured into the philosophical, exploring just how far one could wrangle magic to change the world and its natural laws. It’s the sort of thing Diablo would love, I’m sure. The true worth of this theorizing, however, was in forcing certain alterations to preexisting phenomena, which would help advance the field of spirit engineering in turn. You needed to be a true expert in elemental magic to even begin to understand it, but the potential benefits went

without saying. (What also went without saying was that Thalion kept it strictly confidential, prohibiting anyone from revealing its secrets to other nations.)

Finally, there were the vampires, whom I accepted after my promise to Luminus. These were overcomers, vampires powerful enough to be deemed Calamity-level threats, and they were all rather eccentric characters, but at least there weren't many of them. I had very real concerns they might cause me trouble, but it turned out I shouldn't have worried.

"Hey, hey, Sir Rimuru! Lemme *tell* you how curious we are about all the fun stuff in here, man!"

This was my main contact among them, and he was an extremely cheerful, affable man. They just *loved* new things. None of them minded humans or elves or dwarves among their coworkers—not when they had such big intellectual curiosities to satisfy. Some of them came off as pretty arrogant, but Veldora and Ramiris worked alongside them, and while Ramiris was never gonna serve as a decent authority figure, her servants Beretta and Treyni weren't about to stand for it. Anyone too arrogant for their tastes got less than royal treatment.

"Yo, get me some tea, girl!"

"Yessss, right awaaaay, sirrrrrr!!"

"Man, work took a lot out of me today. My shoulders are killing me."

"Ohhhhh, let me massaaaage them, sirrrr!!"

And these were the overcomers? Eesh.

"Those damned fools! Pathetic!"

The vampires' leader whined a bit about it, but nobody dared lodge a complaint at Veldora or Ramiris. They were a lot more cooperative after that.

Their research, meanwhile, was actually pretty interesting. They were taking the opposite approach from sorcerous science—something Luminus dismissed as useless, but I disagreed. On Earth, we'd call their field of research physical engineering. They were trying to discover the rules of nature with all the magical elements removed. The laws of physics they produced from that, laid out in intricate detail, stemmed from the heart of their science.

This was all totally reproducible work, but while I should have expected it, in a world where the degree of magic in an area can affect things differently, it was treated as kind of a fringe field. Luminus didn't like it, which I thought was interesting in itself. Even if all this data gathering was just a pastime for a bunch of bored vampires, their massive archives held a lot of purpose for me. They made it easier to examine the effects of magic. Any great new breakthrough is the product of a number of much smaller ones, so I thought their research didn't deserve revulsion at all.

So I now had teams of leading experts in a variety of intellectual fields in my nation. The information they brought was invaluable, the potential results when you mixed them together incalculable. Our nation's task was to secure their safety and comply with any secrecy requirements related to their results.

I thus had all researchers wear special Ramiris-crafted bracelets, basically unlimited-use Resurrection Bracelets that also provided communications and teleportation within the labyrinth (although only between the research facility and the surface). The need for confidentiality would be an inconvenience for many researchers, so I thought this freebie could help them out.

None of them could leave Floor 95 without teleporting. Their data was recorded whenever they did so, preventing leaks. They could also ask a dryad to teleport them, but that required Treyni's okay, so any spy activity in the labyrinth would be doomed to fail. Of course, I thought the overcomers had an honest chance of fighting their way down the normal route—but it'd be inherently dangerous. Not even I knew all the traps laid throughout, but I doubted even a talented team of vampires would find it a cakewalk. We kept tabs on their movements, so we could tail them in case they tried anything and capture them once the labyrinth hopefully slowed them down.

We had such draconian measures in place for a good reason. Angels apparently come down to attack advanced civilizations in this world, and that was a big part of it. Ramiris's labyrinth couldn't be a better safeguard; even an angel attack could be kept away from Floor 95. If worse came to worst, Ramiris bragged, she could just "update" the Dungeon and swap Floor 95 out with Floor 99.

This city and facility in the labyrinth's deepest recesses was the safest spot in

all of Tempest. Keeping it fully isolated was a great way to stop classified leaks and maintain the health of its inhabitants. Floor 95 provided the most extensive services my nation had to offer, and I thought it'd be more than enough to satisfy anyone who took advantage of them.

By the way, our former main research site in the Sealed Cave was currently closed off. After multiple rounds of hipokute cultivation, the concentration of magicules in the herbs had started to take a dip. They were still high, but we anticipated that yields would continue their downward trend. So we decided to change cultivation sites—or really, we just devoted a section of Floor 93's flower gardens to hipokute growth, upping the magicule count to encourage sudden mutations among the weeds. Gabil's lab was already moved to Floor 100, too, so that made things more convenient for him.

The shuttered cave was now populated by wyverns, accessing the site from an expanded tunnel extending to the mountain's rear side. This was classified as a military secret, more or less, so the public wasn't allowed on premises. As a result, we planned for all top-level research to be done in the labyrinth from now on.

It was this large-scale facility on Floor 95 that the two of them guided me to.

We didn't visit one of their private rooms, signifying this was the result of collaborative work with the others. Work on the test unit was going well, apparently, as was the related research, and they even said it'd be done before our rail lines opened up.

I hadn't been down to Floor 95 in a while, and in the meantime, it had transformed into a sort of forest city. In the middle of a beautifully kept park, there was a townscape that seemed to sprout up among the trees. I was impressed at how quickly they set all this up, but was sure we were seeing some elven ingenuity at work. Maybe the treants as well. Either way, it was a lovely space.

Transient labyrinth challengers, of course, couldn't come in here unless they were studly enough to hack 'n' slash in the long way. I personally took advantage of the members-only elf club from time to time but almost never came here during the daytime, so I didn't think it had changed quite *this* much. I

left its development wholly in the hands of Veldora and Ramiris, and I have to say that I liked their work. It offered variety from the rest of the levels, and I'd love to enjoy a leisurely tour sometime.

That was on my mind as I followed them toward a modern research building, made of reinforced concrete and standing out within the park in the middle of the city. There was a large building situated next to it, with one block devoted to accommodations for visiting researchers. I had directed the construction of this building, but now, for some reason, it had this natural, weathered look to it. It struck a really unique presence, and I didn't mind it at all.

"Very charming. I like how it's kind of nestled among the trees."

"Right? Every research lab needs to look like it houses a dragon's hoard of secrets!"

Veldora was patting himself on the back, like a kid who just completed work on his secret treehouse hideout. I have no idea what, or who, gave him such a skewed view of the world.

"Everyone's getting along so well in there these days, y'know, there was talk about formin' a kind of secret society!"

A secret society? What were these people even *doing* in there?

"Hee-hee-hee! You're the one who blew the lid open on all their research first, aren'tcha, Rimuru? *That* sure took care of anyone looking to steal people's data and make it their own."

Ah yes, that *did* happen. There were a lot of walls between nations, and plenty of clashes of opinion between the world's scientists. Most researchers, keeping their homeland's interests in mind, concealed their tech while trying to absorb some from their rivals. I didn't see that as constructive, so I just laid bare everything we knew. The word *classified* didn't mean anything to Raphael anyway.

So I collated it all into easy-to-grasp instruction manuals for the public and passed out copies, using up all the valuable paper Yuuki procured for me. Maybe a *little* wasteful, but I felt it was a justified loss. I really wanted to manage our documents with real plant fiber-based paper, not parchment. The

stuff Yuuki gave me was apparently from the Empire, and it was almost as good as what I had on Earth. Giving it all away, I thought, demonstrated just how dedicated we were.

Ever since then, researchers had become a lot more frank with one another. Their intellectual curiosities drove them to seek collaboration—finally.

“Right, I collated all the secret info out there into written documents so anyone can browse through them. There were, ah, a few complaints about that, but I think it’s gonna do a lot to advance technology.”

“Oh, it will! And it has, Rimuru! There was kind of a big commiseration party after that dropped, and everybody hit it off with one another.”

As Ramiris explained, once everyone gave up on concealing their data and started working with others, it created a weird sort of solidarity across the lab. Since then, they had stopped being so obsessed over their home nations. Even the overcomer vampires were treated as friends and equals now. It was really fascinating to see, and I liked seeing it.

It was great—but what came after was the problem. The researchers were now their own little community, with Veldora and Ramiris at the top, and thanks to that, the community was now an organized group. A mysterious environment where everyone could research whatever they wanted to their heart’s content. A system exactly like the evil little secret society we had going. Ramiris, boundlessly fascinated by all this stuff, was now the mascot-slash-head-cheerleader of them all. Veldora, meanwhile, was positioned more like a mafia boss.

At first, I grumbled about it—I turn my eyes away for a moment, and *this* happens. But then it dawned on me that if I had been around, it probably would’ve happened even faster.

Wait. Nuh-uh. It wouldn’t; I swear.

“So anyway, here’s how we’ve arranged the externals of it.”

“What do you think? Cool, eh? Like a villain’s secret hideout?”

Oh, god, it *was* a secret hideout. A lot of Veldora’s knowledge was based off things regenerated from my memories, particularly manga and the like, so no

wonder I could identify this at a glance.

“Look at *you* guys, having all this fun without me...”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Let me assure you, we are only getting started. We’ll likely need to tap into your intellect shortly, you see.”

“That’s right, Rimuru! You’re always constantly surprising us, so now it’s our turn. So let’s show you what we’ve been working on, and then I wanna hear your feedback!”

Veldora laughed at my (completely honest) complaint; Ramiris provided me at least a little sympathy. If they were touting it up *that* much, I couldn’t pout like usual. Regrouping, I stepped into the lab.

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People in white coats restlessly beavered away. I passed by them as we came to what looked like a model train.

“Hey, Boss! Surprise!”

It was Kaijin, of all people, in a lab coat that didn’t look at all right on him. He seemed to be running things around here.

The space, the size of a college lecture hall, was lined with rails, to the point that you had to watch where you stepped. There were miniature mountains, valleys, tunnels... Maybe they were doing aerodynamic analysis or something?

“Wow. This entire space is a test facility?”

“Uh-huh. Way to get it on the first guess. But what’s *really* amazin’ are all the people gathered in Tempest for this. It ain’t easy to build a facility this size.”

Kaijin was right. This only worked because of all these scientists working under the same roof. They had used assorted types of magic to create this massive diorama of sorts, the precision-crafted model riding the rails made by Kaijin himself.

“What’s propelling this train?”

I could have Raphael Assess it, but I made the effort to ask instead.

“Steam,” Kaijin replied with a smile.

I nodded. That made sense. For now, your only option for driving a train would be horses—that was what we had pulling the cargo carriers currently using the highway rails. That allowed only for the same weight you could put in a carriage, of course. Using those rails improved safety and contributed to traffic management, but I can't say it made things dramatically more efficient.

There were proposals to employ golems or monsters to pull them instead, but that was still just a stopgap. We really needed to develop engines, and steam engines were our top candidate. Not, of course, the type from olden times that burned coal or whatever—we had conceived something that took the best bits from both magic and science. That's the whole reason why I called it a magitrain.

The concept called for an engine that would apply magic, driven by magicule energy, to the combustive energy created by steam. This was a sort of template for magical cores, and despite its simplicity, it still required some high-level magic tech.

Magic functioned on different principles from natural phenomena. You could use it to create the effect you had in mind, but it was difficult to derive a standard rule set based on that. For example, let's say you had a candle burning inside a closed glass container. The oxygen would quickly be replaced with carbon dioxide, snuffing out the flames—but if it was magically created flames, it would keep on burning forever. As long as the force and magicules instilled by the caster didn't run out, the flames will never disappear—although, of course, no caster had infinite power.

Based on this experiment, magical flames clearly ran on different rules from scientific phenomena. It was thus difficult to take one magical procedure and apply it successfully to something else. That, I guess, was why nobody thought about connecting magic to physics in this world before now.

However, the magic in this example is so-called elemental magic. Spirit magic, where one borrows the powers of the spirits, is not affected by the image the caster places into their spell. It's magic that utilizes the power of a spirit, something that must conform to the laws of nature. As a result, flames driven by spirit magic still consume oxygen and produce carbon dioxide.

When I fought Ifrit, the Great Sage taught me a thing or two about steam explosions, and that trick only worked because Ifrit's flames worked under similar natural laws. If it was elemental magic instead, using magicules to rewrite those laws, it may've been completely ineffectual. (It's also why I could use spirit magic under that Holy Field.)

Also, in the past, I used inscription magic to heat up metal and illuminate caves, but in the end, that still didn't produce enough light. Dold did a little innovating to apply the elemental magic Light and change the inscription to transform magicules directly into illumination.

Basically, this world lets you use magic to skip procedure and go straight to the results. That had the adverse effect of delaying scientific investigation into natural phenomena. Science based on physical phenomena was better handled using spirit magic, itself based on nature—and that's how I hit on the idea of spirit-based engines in the first place.

"We had been using the heat we generate in the forge to do things like warm up baths, you know. But not even I thought you could use steam this way."

Kaijin gave me an impressed look. Me, I was more impressed that he actually created a steam engine based off my description alone.

"Well, the basic premise can be used for a lot of things—moving pistons, turning turbines, you know. Using steam, or heat energy, can help you do physical work, or you can convert it to electricity. The latter's something to tackle later, but it looks like you've worked out pistons just fine for now."

"Yeah, as you can see, Boss, you can get a lot of power from electricity if you use it right."

He turned to the miniature train. I had spoken to him and his team about electricity before. They must've kept up with their research, because now he demonstrated a pretty good understanding—even better than mine, maybe.

There were six cars connected to his model locomotive, each filled with little metal balls. If they were real, that was a pretty hefty weight it was pulling.

"We tried to replicate every possible environment in this test room. Right now it's in a tropical rainforest. In the next space over there's a desert climate,

and next to that is an area with heavy snowfall. We're getting data from each room so we can make designs for pretty much any environment."

Treyni was now explaining matters to me, Ramiris taking the opportunity to sit on her shoulder. The vampire in the room, canines sparkling, nodded their approval.

"Yes, yes, glad we could be of service! I just *looove* experiments like this!"

The vampire leader was a cheerful kind of guy, but definitely off-kilter. It wasn't that he "enjoyed" research so much as there was no room in his mind for anything else. But I'm sure they *were* helping a lot.

I had been provided a carefully kept notebook filled to the margins with writings. This was pulp-based paper. We could've imported it from the Eastern Empire if we had any relations, but there was nothing for now, so I was having them research how to create real paper. Gabil's team was good at this sort of non-headline-grabbing work, and when I left things to them, they quickly started test producing some low-quality paper from tree pulp. I hadn't given any further instruction since then, but through a trial-and-error process, they had quickly reached this current level of quality. I know they had samples to work with (and documentation from me outlining the whole procedure), but it was still amazing. They deserved praise, and I resolved to give it to them.

But back to the notebook. It was a neat piece of work—a series of questions, hypotheses, experiments, and results. Dynamic force and the magicules needed for an engine to provide it. Consecutive operation times and subsequent engine deterioration. Estimates on maximum load and weight distribution on the freight cars. They even used all that to calculate the stability of each room setup and figure out how fast they could operate the trains. All this data would come in handy when making the full-size locomotives.

I just took a quick read through the notebook, but it seemed to me like the needed theoretical work was already done. We had a working model, after all, so I figured it was time to build a test engine.

Unless...?

"Hey, Veldora, uh, this isn't the *only* test vehicle you built so far, is it?"

"Hee-hee-hee... Well spotted. You're an intelligent slime if you've already noticed."

Veldora grinned at me, Ramiris sneering on his shoulder. I looked around, only to find Kaijin and his team, Treyni, and even Beretta doing the same. They had all filed in at some point, standing in a row by one of the doors.

So this means...?

"It was a lot of hard work, y'know. Summoning a fire spirit within the engine wasn't enough. You need something for power control, and if it was done manually, you'd need a decently well-trained shaman in the train at all times. We *could* train enough of those for our whole fleet, maybe, but that'd take too much time. So they put together a magic circuit that automates the whole thing. It's a control board that combines the fire spirit core and the inscription magic that controls it. Put them together, and this is what you get!"

Kaijin slowly approached the door as he spoke. Normally, summoning spirits is where our attempts started to fall apart. Lower-level spirits don't have enough power, after all. You at least needed to summon a flame salamander or something mid-level like that. Those were B-plus monsters, and no normal person could summon one and keep them stable for long periods of time.

Was Ramiris involved with this? As the former Spirit Queen, it seemed in her wheelhouse. But containing my surprise, I watched as Kaijin put his hand to the door.

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"Whoa... This is it..."

It was waiting beyond. Its body shone a lustrous black, clearly made of magisteel and looking like some ominous monster of iron.

"Here is the result of our combined skills: Magitrain #0!"

Vester's proud voice rang out as I marveled at it. I thought we were still in the experimental stages, and it was already done. Still a test unit, perhaps, but the very first example of the train I always dreamed of. A huge step forward.

"We're planning to test the body's durability and performance. We're also going to add not just freight cars, but passenger cars, sleepers, and even dining

rooms."

"Completing the steam engine isn't the end of the story, of course. I still wanna get into the nitty-gritty to try to make this as complete a package as possible."

Vester and Kaijin were both excited. The other researchers seemed just as impassioned as they looked at #0, but I'm sure there was still room for improvement.

"For example, regarding the electricity you discussed with us, that's some pretty tricky stuff to handle. We had a wind spirit generate lightning for us, but harnessing that energy as is looks like a nonstarter..."

I'm sure it would be. Electricity can do anything, really, but it took a certain methodology to handle.

"We need to develop capacitors first. Once we do, we can use the heat the steam engine generates to create electricity. It'll be a lot easier to operate a train then, so I think it's a worthwhile approach."

This was all a little over my head, but Raphael was kind enough to translate technical books from Earth into the local language for me. I had already provided these to the lab, and I guess Vester's team was making ample use of them. It was sort of like recycling magic, and if it made things smoother for us all, then bring it on.

"Oh, and about that. I wasn't sure whether to say it when it came up, but I thought we could discuss it while looking inside this guy. A picture's worth a thousand words, as they say. Come on in."

Wait, were they already using electricity somehow? I began to doubt myself as I followed Kaijin in—only to find a surprise waiting for me. The inside of the locomotive was bathed in a soft, gentle light. I shot Kaijin a questioning stare.

"We readied ourselves for this the moment you gave us all those books, Boss. Right, Vester?"

"Yes. Sir Rimuru, ever since you tasked us with researching ways to use electricity, Kaijin and I have been poring through all the materials. There were still things we hadn't grasped inside them, but with this many scientists

gathered together, I thought we could get some help from them.”

“Right. That sorta thing. So they helped find answers to our questions. Plus, when we looked at that girl over there—Lady Ramiris’s Elemental Colossus, that is—it just blew our minds. After all, it’s basically a completed version of the magic-armor soldier project we had abandoned.”

Certainly, having a real-life sample to work with made things easier to grasp. The new Elemental Colossus currently under construction was already being used as an experimental test bed, it seemed.

“Very much so. Reading those books, and gaining valuable feedback from everyone else, made us realize our great mistake. Back then, we thought that spirit and elemental magic were the same thing during our experiments. That’s where we went wrong.”

“Yeah, so we looked at the sample to verify what we were missing.”

What they found was that different types of magic can run by wholly different sets of rules. Ramiris’s Elemental Colossus ran on spirit magic—or more specifically, it used a summoned spirit. Kaijin’s team was trying to operate a spirit core with elemental magic, but they just couldn’t get it started up.

“Our answer to this, unfortunately, was to up the magic output. This led to magic-generated heat with nowhere to go, and the experiment ended in failure.”

I see. Although, maybe the Colossus was arranged like this only because Ramiris couldn’t use elemental magic. Regardless, that wound up being the key to its success. The Colossus was driven by a primitive sort of spirit core, but with all the scientists on hand here, they were apparently on their way to restoring its full abilities. Once they fully analyze the master core I created for it, it’ll be a full-fledged magic core again.

“I don’t know whether to be happy or sad about this.”

“Me neither. Here’s this theory I gave up on, and we only failed because we had an assumption wrong...”

Here was something that, after all their research, showed no sign of working based on theory alone—but once they solved a little misunderstanding,

everything just worked. I'm sure all Kaijin could do was laugh about it.

"Right? So if we have a magic core, we can convert magicules to energy... although this energy comes in several types, too. It's hard to easily explain."

"This locomotive converts magicules into heat energy to work a turbine. It can also generate electricity as you said, Sir Rimuru, so that's why we can light up each car so brightly."

What a surprise. I mean, seriously. So this car was driven by a completed magic core. Giving magicules to each type of assorted spirit provides you the ability to convert them to useful energy—and you could even circulate this energy around. Electricity created by the turbine can be fed back to the magic core, they said, storing it for later use. I was sure they could generate electricity more directly, but apparently that made things harder to control, so they made it so the system used what the steam engine generated.

When it comes to electricity, high output isn't necessarily all you want. You need both a power plant and a transformer, not to mention storage batteries to keep that energy—and they were handling all of that just with a magic core. Plus, the magicule fuel was all around you in the air, and if it wasn't enough, you could just use a handy magic stone to power it. The running time depended on the magicules, but in a rich environment without aggressive operation, it was essentially forever (with maintenance downtimes).

Truly, a miracle power source.

"Well, Rimuru? Surprised?"

"Even we can do stuff like this when we get serious!"

I hated to see Veldora and Ramiris brag, but it really *was* amazing. Credit where credit is due.

"This is really great. Keep up the good work, guys!"

"Certainly!"

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. It's smooth sailing from here on out!"

They knew they were being complimented. Now I wanted to brag to someone. It wouldn't be long before our nation had a train system, and after

that, our magitrains would start sweeping across the world. It was exciting to imagine.

"So, Boss, there's something I wanted to discuss..."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Well, we wanted to hold a friendly icebreaker to celebrate the completion of Magitrain #0, and along those lines, um..."

Ah, a massive, all-out drinking bash and party in the name of a "*friendly icebreaker*," huh? And at my favorite nightclub, too, of course. Well, fine.

"Perfect! All right, everyone, let's drink out the rest of the evening!"

"Aw, thanks, Boss! I know you sponsor that fancy tavern, so I couldn't go around reserving it just for ourselves."

Kaijin flashed me a relieved smile. No, it's not really the kind of place I'd invite busloads of friends to party in. In fact, I don't think everyone here could even fit inside. Even for Kaijin, money wasn't necessarily the problem.

"Well, how about I have them set up some outdoor seating? We can close it off to the public for tonight and call it a staff appreciation event."

Given how well everyone worked with one another already, *icebreaker* was a misnomer. So I decided to cover the bill for a party to thank them for their efforts. Though, really, to be honest with you, any excuse was fine. There's no better way to celebrate something than with good drink. Whether it's a little get-together or a company event, as long as it's time spent with one another, it's all the same. And what luck—we happened to be in an elf-run town that was like paradise on earth. Time for everyone to share in the joy and charge our energy for the future.

"Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha! How understanding of you!"

"""We can't wait, Sir Rimuru!"""

The staff, just as excited as Veldora, all thanked me in unison, as if they practiced regularly. Even the vampires enjoyed some alcohol—I guess not requiring fresh blood widened their palates a bit.

And in the midst of the celebration:

"This is so great! Now I can drink on someone else's coin, too!"

"Yes, it's quite wonderful, isn't it? But careful you don't drink too much—"

"None of that, Lady Ramiris! Sir Rimuru told me that underage drinking is strictly prohibited!"

A certain pip-squeak tried seizing the moment to wet her whistle, but she was thankfully stopped in time.

ROUGH SKETCH



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
2

NEW
COMPANIONS

CHAPTER 2

NEW COMPANIONS

The demon trampled across the dark realm like a savage beast.

Beyond the Gates of Hell lay a spirit realm one could call the land of the dead, or even hell itself, and there he was annihilating demons, like a living manifestation of violence. The powerless ran screaming, the more powerful banding together to defend themselves, but to that demon, it was just helpless struggling. All foes fell to his might, and his rampage continued.

Demons were a kind of spiritual life-form. If you destroyed the physical body of one, it would self-regenerate over time. Perhaps he knew this, because he held nothing back, showing no mercy to anyone coming his way.

The name of this personification of violence was Diablo.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... It’s been so long since my last visit. Quite a number of chumps have sprung up in the meantime, haven’t they? Assembling a group of these will accomplish nothing. I need to find my old friends.”

His “old friends” were those comparable to him. His mission, during this long journey, was to recruit them.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I am sure they have what it takes to make Sir Rimuru satisfied!”

With those words, Diablo teleported away and disappeared, leaving nothing but the carcasses of those who failed to correctly gauge his might.



My inspections were complete, and I had a grasp of where we currently stood.

I couldn’t even see the end of rail installation work yet. We were considering

three lines for now—from the Dwarven Kingdom to Tempest, from Tempest to the Kingdom of Blumund, and from Blumund to the Kingdom of Farminus. There was also a route that forked south from the line to Dwargon, running past Lake Sisu (stomping grounds of the lizardmen) on its way to Eurazania. In addition, we had to build a highway from the Blumund line to Thalion, which included a tunnel through the Khusha Mountains. A railway along that route would be considered later, but I had to expect it'd come well into the future.

I'd really like to build a railway to the ocean somewhere soon, so we can get seafood for cheaper. Going forward, I also envisioned a trunk line between Blumund and the Kingdom of Englesia—but either way, completing this whole network would take a lot of time, and we still had more trains to develop.

With our test locomotive completed, we were officially over the hump. Now we just had to run that thing to the ground in a trial-and-error test process. We had the exact energy drive I wanted, but development wouldn't end there. It had to be comfortable to ride in, and we had to eliminate noise concerns for the surrounding areas. These were already quieter than normal steam trains, but the speedier these got, the louder they'd be. A research team led by Kaijin was tackling these smaller details, digging deeper into them and working out theoretical solutions. I wanted his team to record all their proceedings, because I figured it'd help us with future developments. Of course, the magic core was the hardest part, and with that completed, I could let Kaijin handle the rest of the locomotive.

When this project got started, I covered all the expenses with our national budget—even giving them a little more money, as much as it made Mjöllmile's chins jiggle. I was now an occasional visitor to the project, giving me more chances to befriend the researchers and have in-depth conversations. They were interested in my otherworlder knowledge, apparently, so they'd ask for my opinions on this and that. Anything very tricky, Raphael handled for me—it worked faster than a quantum supercomputer, so any calculation was completed in an instant. No reason *not* to make use of it.

After work was done, it was time to socialize. Our evening haunts didn't all have to be high-end nightclubs. If people were encountering walls in their research, we'd hit the city, debating among ourselves and forgetting our

problems. I kept up with them late into the night, although I didn't get paid any overtime, oddly enough. (I should note that our generous budget wasn't being entirely devoted to the drink tabs. They really *were* contributing to science and technology, though, so I let it slide a bit.)

By the way, between Veldora, Ramiris, and me, Ramiris was earning the highest salary at the moment. Even subtracting her Dungeon maintenance fees, we were raking in a massive profit from the labyrinth, and she took twenty percent of that. Our initial goal of two gold coins a day now seemed quaint—we were making over twenty on average, the equivalent of at least twenty thousand dollars. Ramiris used her cut to pay Treyni, her sisters, and Beretta, but I reckoned she ended every month up nearly a hundred gold coins.

Veldora and I, meanwhile, were paid equally—one gold coin a day from the national treasury. As master of the labyrinth, Veldora also got an allowance from Ramiris, and since his magicules were a constant boon to us, the treasury sometimes awarded him special payments. Thus, he was definitely making more money than I was. Of course, I had my own hidden revenue streams and business involvements, so I wasn't exactly destitute, either.

Inspired by everyone's suddenly impressive work ethic, I resolved to put in more of an effort. First, it was time to get serious about the physical body vessels I promised Diablo. Ramiris was my assistant; we'd also be working on bodies for Treyni's sisters, and I wanted to get her feedback. She kindly accepted the request, although she was already whining to me about needing more personnel.

"I really need someone to handle all the odd jobs I need, and I have a few other things I wanna ask you for, too. With Treyni and Beretta alone, I can't quite seem to keep up with all my work..."

I thought she just wanted more people to brag about herself to—but recalling how busy Treyni and the others looked, I reconsidered. Plus, Ramiris wasn't just my assistant. She had her own mission: craft a new Elemental Colossus.

Its heart, the core of the whole thing, was complete. I had a skeleton and framework in place, as well as a sample Elemental Colossus to work with. I figured we could just proceed based on that, but modifications always take a lot

of time. Kaijin's hands were full with the trains, and Vester was hard at work by himself, picking up his old armored-soldier project again. He was already lending a hand to Ramiris in his spare time, and I worried he was overworking himself a bit. This was going to be built into the completed magic core, so I want to get some test data—and for that, we'd need as many people as possible.

"What about Veldora?"

"Ahhh yes, what about the master, indeed? Whenever I ask him for some detailed piece of work, he disappears..."

I see. Maybe not worth relying upon, then. It makes sense to me. Veldora is Veldora, always busily running from one spot to the next. I thought he'd be a bother to most people, but he actually wasn't. He was smart, despite his personality, and I suppose he really was helping out a lot. He certainly loved being the center of attention, so instead of asking him to assist Ramiris, I felt it was better to just let him do his own thing.

"All right. I'll round up someone."

"Great. Thanks!"

With that promise, I began pondering who to select.

*

The days then proceeded by, peacefully as ever...until one day, when *they* came along.

Right in my office, atop my desk, was a huge pile of documents requiring my approval.

I couldn't guess how long it'd usually take to process all these, but in my case, I left it to Raphael. It nimbly evaluated all the proposals, rearranging them by priority level. It approved or rejected them, and then I applied my stamp, all in a continuous flow. Maybe it wasn't *that* taxing, but this kind of rote work was always a pain to me. Silently, I stamped away, wishing Diablo were here to handle this.

Time for a break.

Returning to slime mode, I lazed around on my sofa. This always felt great—

the softness of my body and the elasticity of the cushions. Put together, it felt like a ball pit full of feathers. Now that sleeping required a trick or two for me, this was my secret little heaven right here.

Then I heard knocking. I wanted to keep chillaxing for a bit longer, but someone was here. Ah well. Switching to human form, I sat on my chair.

“Come in,” I replied, making sure my pose was just right. The door opened, revealing Shuna. She bowed at me.

“Sir Rimuru, you have a visitor. He gave his name as Deeno, and he says you’d know who he is?”

Just as expected, a visitor was here. But *Deeno*, though? There was only one Deeno I could possibly know of.

“He’s a demon lord, isn’t he? Part of the Octagram. What’s he here for?”

“A demon lord? Should I ask my brother to assemble our troops, just in case?”

“No, that’s all right. If we come to blows, just get me Benimaru and Shion... but I doubt we will. If I had to guess, he’s come to check things out.”

I reassured the concerned Shuna and stood up. There seemed to be little to worry about. I think Deeno *did* say he wanted to stop by during the Walpurgis meeting, didn’t he? I kind of ignored it then, but I guess he was serious.

“...Very well. I will make the arrangements.”

With a nod, Shuna guided me to the room where Deeno was waiting. It’s helpful to have a lot of rooms for occasions like this; then you can choose one for the situation. Merchants and the nobility can have ornate parlors; famed monsters or suspicious people can be shown simple but solidly built rooms, if only because they might cause expensive damage otherwise. Thus, Deeno was waiting in a functional, if not very flashy-looking, chamber.

When I came in with Shuna, I found Deeno looking pretty, well, casual. In fact, he was sprawled out on the sofa, taking full advantage despite being a guest. He certainly didn’t care what people thought about him, for better or (likely) worse.

“Hey. Nice to see ya. Doing well?”

He greeted me from the sofa, showing no sign of getting up. Shuna wrinkled her nose but silently bowed and left the room, no doubt to fetch some tea.

“Great, thanks,” I said as I took a seat facing him. “I got a lot of problems to deal with, so things aren’t exactly chill, but...”

I took a closer look at Deeno. He looked just as blasé and unaffected as the last time I met him, but still his attitude suggested I better keep my guard up. No wonder Shuna was wary of him.

“You got problems? That sucks.”

“Yeah, kind of. I’m still pretty new to demon lord-ing, so nothing’s going easy for me yet. But what brings you here?”

“Oh? Me? Well, I said I’d visit you, so here I am.”

His reply was rather brisk—sounded like a lie to me. We both quickly fell into silence, but just then, Shuna came back with some tea and snacks, navigating the quiet chamber like nothing was amiss. Hastily laying everything out, she bowed again and left the room. She really *is* a professional.

I took a sip of tea and turned my eye toward Deeno. He was the first to relent.

“...Well, to tell you the truth, I got kicked out of Daggrull’s place.”

“Huh?”



"Yeah, y'know, I'm kind of homeless, so I'd been hangin' at Daggrull's joint. I'm also penniless, so..."

Whoa. *This* is a demon lord? He may be honest, but this guy's bad news, isn't he?

"...So I thought about what I oughtta do, and I remembered that Daggrull's sons had nice things to say about their time in your country. So now I'm lookin' for a place here!"

I couldn't show him a single iota of mercy.

"No. You can't."

I immediately turned down the request.

"...What?"

"Hmm?"

The room fell to silence again, Deeno reacting like he never pictured me saying no. If he was really *that* oblivious, that surprised me even more. Yes, I knew him, but I had no obligation to house such a sketchy drifter. Already, I could tell this was the kinda guy who'd never work a day in his life.

"W-wait. I want you to give me a sec, okay? I mean, what do you want me to do? Go die out in the wilderness?"

"No. Get a job."

"Are you crazy?! To me, staying out of the working class is part of my style. I've never *earned* any of my money the past few hundred years, and I've never paid for *any* of my food or drink!"

Well, there you go. You're penniless because you don't work. No wonder you can't pay at restaurants.

"Wow. Impressive. You can leave after you're done eating that, okay?"

The sooner someone like this was out of your hair, the better. Ignoring him, I reached out for the snack in front of me, a fluffy cream puff to go with the tea.

Delicious. Doubt I'll ever grow sick of this.

Deeno looked a bit panicked, but he followed my lead, took a bite—and suddenly, his eyes changed.

“All right. I’ll become a citizen of this country, so let me serve you.”

This nonsense struck me like a lightning bolt.

“What? Look, why are you coming in here, and—?”

“No, I’m serious. If I can eat stuff like this every day, I have no regrets. Rimuru... Um, I mean, let me call you *Sir Rimuru*. Your wish is my command!”

.....

I *told* him I wasn’t gonna hire him.

“Ughhh... I know we’ve met before and all, but it was just that one time, okay? What do you *really* want?”

Finishing my cream puff, I gave Deeno a stern look as I sipped my tea. His eyes darted around—a habit he shared with Ramiris, except he wasn’t nearly as cute. But giving up, he shrugged and dropped the couch surfer act.

“Well, the way Guy puts it, I’m probably best off here in this country. He didn’t tell me why, though—he’s selfish like that. It’s a pain in the ass if you defy him, and I really *did* get kicked out of Daggrull’s place. And I got sick of thinking about it, so I just came over.”

“Guy? That redhead?”

“Yeah. That redhead.”

Hmmm. He didn’t seem to be lying. Guy must’ve actually said that. But why me?

Understood. It is very likely the subject Guy Crimson disliked supporting the subject Deeno and wishes to have you care for him instead.

Dude. Way to be blunt with it. But that *did* seem likely.

“Oh, right, I got a letter from Guy.”

Deeno took it out and handed it to me. Between the seal and the eerie force oozing from it, I could definitely spot Guy Crimson’s mark. The entire contents of the letter: *Take care of Deeno for me.*

Guess I wasn't wrong, then. If Deeno was carrying this around, he must've been mooching off Guy for a while. Apparently, I was having the hot potato thrown in my direction now.

"So...we good?"

No, we're *not* good!

Irritated, I thought matters over. This was a pain in the ass, but antagonizing Guy was ill-advised. He was on a level of his own among demon lords, and I doubted I could beat him now. It'd be safer, certainly, to accommodate Deeno than tangle with Guy.

So do I just grin and bear it? If I do, I'm not gonna let him screw around. I never invited him as a guest, and I didn't want to set a bad precedent. Then I remembered: This guy's subservient to Ramiris, isn't he? And she said she needed more staff. Maybe this is actually perfect timing. I can't let my guard down around Deeno, but (whether he meant it or not) he *did* offer his services, so I may as well reach out and accept them.

Yes. Let's make him Ramiris's assistant. I grinned at him.

"All right. But you're gonna have to *work*!"

"*What* did you say?!"

Quit acting so shocked, dude! You told me seconds ago that my wish was your command! Bottling my frustration, I tried to explain the job in question to Deeno.

"Of course, when I say *work*, it's really simple, actually. I want you to be an assistant to Ramiris."

"Ramiris? She's here, too?"

"She sure is. She's helping with a lot of my work."

"Huh? I thought she was like me, just holed up in her labyrinth all day..."

Looks like Deeno thought Ramiris was a kindred soul. I could see why, but these days, she was actually workin' pretty hard.

"No, she's pitching in around here now, and between you and me, I think

she's having a lot of fun. I want to focus on development, but I have all these other things keeping me busy, so she's really a big help to me."

I'd never tell her that since it'd go to her head, but it was truly how I felt. It stunned Deeno into silence for a bit, but after a few moments, he gingerly spoke up.

"S-so what kinda work would she have me do?"

He sounded *really* against it. I thought about telling him, but maybe not right now. Better to just put him on the job and teach him whatever he needs to know on-site.

"Well, no need to fret about it. Whatever you're able to do is welcome. But let me show you to your workplace first."

"Mmng... All right. Don't expect much from me."

"Hmm? Oh, don't act that way before you even start. I think you'll be just fine. Probably you'll only be following Ramiris's directions, so..."

With a pang of anxiety still fresh in my brain, I decided to take Deeno to our personal laboratory on Floor 100.

*

Taking the direct trip there, we proceeded past Veldora's chambers—the large room he used as his lair for engaging challengers—and his private quarters behind that. He was nowhere to be found, either. I wondered where he went? Probably out goofing around somewhere.

"Dude, why're there so many magicules around?"

"Oh, that's Veldora's room in there. Don't go in, okay? He's pretty selfish, so he gets pissy if anyone touches his stuff."

"Um... Veldora lives *here*?! I've been wondering since the last Walpurgis—How are you two connected, exactly?"

"We're friends, is all."

"Friends? You seemed like more than acquaintances to me, yeah, but... Well..."

Deeno was usually a little droopy-eyed, but now they were opened a bit more, out of surprise.

"So *that's* why Veldora seemed to disappear from my detection. He was hiding in Ramiris's labyrinth!"

"Ah, not exactly. He disappeared because he learned how to control his magicules. He used to let his aura pour out of him, so there were tons of magicules all over the place. If I wanted to invite a bunch of visitors in here, I couldn't really have that, now could I? So I had him practice controlling his aura."

"Huhhh? Veldora, ruler of the Forest of Jura? And now he's holding his aura back so well that not even *I* can detect it? Him?!"

The agitated Deeno must've thought I made it sound too easy. But it was the truth.

"Huh? I mean, he was pretty amenable to it. Otherwise, I'd say the majority of people in this city would be having problems right now."

"Y-yeah, but... I mean, all that magical energy he had... Until the Hero sealed him away, people feared him as this flying disaster, his aura spreading across the world. So why?"

That sounded pretty mean to me, although it was probably the truth. Given his past with Luminus, he must have misbehaved a lot.

"Well, I suppose he's changed a little. Now, if I ask him to do something, he'll actually listen to some extent. He's not *that* selfish any longer."

"Didn't you just say he *was* selfish a moment ago?"

Oh, did I?

Understood. You did.

Oh.

"Yes, but I mean it's never *that* bad. But that aura control, remember..."

In a situation like this, it was best to change the subject as soon as possible. I decided to tell Deeno about what happened when I released Veldora.

"And with his aura, I told him he'd look cooler if he held it back, so he practiced pretty hard. It was tough for me, too, helping him with it."

It was tough but worth it. Not that we had much choice anyway. As he was, I couldn't possibly show him around to others.

"R-really? Wow, Rimuru. You definitely live up to my expectations."

Weren't you just trying to bum free meals from me? You might try to sound all cool right now, but you can't trick me.

"I'm amazed you actually managed to tame Veldora," he continued, still looking impressed. Really, though, Milim's way more selfish than he ever was, and even she couldn't mouth off against Frey. Everyone has people they know better than to mess around with.

"Well, Veldora's hardly the only selfish brat I had to deal with; Milim, too—"

I regaled Deeno with the story of how I met Milim and how intensely unfair she acted toward me. She wasn't here, so I was free to speak my mind, telling him all about her most recent annoying nonsense. I also told him about some of Veldora's terrible exploits as well, figuring I could ask him which one he thought was the worst.

There was a lot I had to talk about, and it seemed to put Deeno in a state of shock, unable to even comprehend half of it after a certain point. I never did find out which was the worst in his mind.

*

In the midst of this, we finally reached my laboratory. Looking inside, I found Veldora himself busily assisting Ramiris—another day of honest work, by the looks of it. Considering how much Ramiris used and abused him, he was proving to be a very loyal dragon.

"V-Veldora...is *working*?!"

"See? I told you."

Even with all his complaints, he was still lending Ramiris a hand. He was awfully kind to her—maybe he liked her habit of calling him Master. He always did what I asked him to, in the end, and it was even easier to keep him in line if

you buttered him up a little. By dragon standards, he was a pushover.

Vester was there, too, despite his responsibilities modifying the Elemental Colossus on Floor 95. I said we were short on people, so maybe he decided to put my job first? Ramiris and Veldora were having fun, flashing evil grins at each other, but Vester looked exhausted and in dire need of a break. I wondered if he was all right.

“Hey, guys. How’s the research going?”

I said hello as I stepped inside. Vester stopped whatever he was writing and stood up.

“Ah, Sir Rimuru...”

“Nah, nah, stay where you are. Hey, you doing okay? You look kinda worn out.”

“I’d like to say I’m okay...but this kind of research is rather taxing on the mind...”

Hmm? Sounds a bit hard to talk about. I considered asking further, but Veldora interrupted.

“Well, well, Rimuru! I am pitching in here, as you can see. I normally wouldn’t, but Ramiris insisted, of course.”

“Thanks. It really *does* look like she could use more help.”

My research was treated as top secret. I couldn’t bring in researchers from Floor 95 for it, so I could only show it to people I could trust. Well, no—I could only show it to people who wouldn’t bitch at me about it, more like. After all, I was preparing a small army of bodies to implant demons into. Research or not, people might see it as a military threat, so it’s better not to let people from other countries know.

“Heya, Rimuru! I’ve been waiting for you! The master’s been helping me in a lot of ways, but I still need to fill up my open spaces fast!”

“I thought you’d say that, so I brought along some help today. You know this guy, right, Ramiris? It’s Deeno, a demon lord like us, and it sounds like he wants to help starting today. If you need anything, ask him, okay?”

I doubted Deeno had any academic knowledge, but anything requiring muscle ought to be up his alley. It's not like an amateur could assist at a research lab anyway. Chances are he'd be doing things like moving stuff around and collecting data—but we needed people to cover the more basic tasks like that, so he could still be useful.

Deeno looked around the room, curious. "Name's Deeno. As you know, I'm a demon lord, more or less. I don't like working, but I've got no other choice, so I'm gonna help out here. Thanks in advance."

A pretty listless way to introduce yourself, but that's all right. At least he was willing to pitch in.

I moved on, discovering why Vester was here and what they were up to. Vester was at my lab on Floor 100 because Ramiris kidnapped him, basically. As expected, there wasn't enough staff on hand, so she placed a temporary halt to his work and put my own project first. Vester didn't have any say in the matter, but I'm not sure what I could've done. We needed someone to fuss over the details of organizing documents and collecting data. Beretta handled the physical labor, while Treyni was taking care of Ramiris and managing her labyrinth. Veldora didn't want to help with any of that, so Vester was the next best option.

"You can afford to ignore the Elemental Colossus for now?"

"Wellll, not *really*, but once we're done with this, Treyni's sisters can have bodies, too, right? I figured we could kick off development from there."

That did seem more rational to me.

"Sorry you got it so rough," I told Vester. He shrugged and gave me a childlike grin.

"Part of me wants to see the armored-soldier project to completion, but *this* research has its gratifying aspects as well..."

I guess he had mixed feelings about it, too. He had a valid complaint, but being involved with this research made him happy, too. I guess, as a scientist, he had his own internal conflicts, and they were helping him rapidly mature. He looked a little surprised to learn Deeno was a demon lord, but he recovered

almost instantly. All the surprises Tempest offered must've given him a protective shell of sorts. As talented as he was, I figured he'd want to devote himself to his own research...but maybe that's not necessarily the case. No, he was just worn out because of *this* research.

"But indeed, I hope to continue with the research here. These base bodies you're trying to create, Sir Rimuru... I'd like to see them completed. There's a new surprise every day. I almost hate to lose time to sleep!"

He didn't try to hide his excitement. I guess his haggard look was just the result of sleep deprivation. There were magically driven ways to refresh oneself, but it wasn't an all-in-one solution. You still needed to take breaks; you couldn't just go on forever. So I decided to order Vester to rest for now. Since Deeno happened to be here, he'd be able to handle any miscellaneous tasks for the time being.

So Vester was now explaining the work to Deeno. Hopefully, they'd get along all right. Dealing with a new demon lord sure didn't faze Vester anyway.

"Now, Sir Deeno, not to hurry things along, but would you mind assisting me?"

"Huh?"

"No, not '*Huh.*' We only have so much time!"

"But I'm a demon lord."

"So?"

"So..."

With a sigh, Vester kept a steady gaze on Deeno.

"Listen, whether you're a demon lord doesn't matter here. Look at how much fun Sir Veldora and Lady Ramiris are having with their work."

"I—I can see that, but..."

"I'm glad you understand. Now, let's begin!"

"...Okay."

Vester's a strong guy. I watched them for a while, but it looked like they'd be

okay. I decided not to worry about them.



Now for our research results.

I know I promised Diablo and everything, but preparing a thousand physical bodies took a ton of effort. One idea was to craft a magisteel doll like Beretta and then make copies of it with Raphael, but this sounded like a slog to me—at the same time, however, painstakingly crafting each one was out of the question. So I came up with another brilliant idea: a facility that could manufacture mass quantities of these bodies.

For this, I prepared a set of reinforced clear-glass capsules, around three and a half feet wide and almost ten feet tall. I called these incubation capsules, and as the name suggested, they were meant for growing monsters and other organic matter inside. Each one was filled with a liquid solution—water from the Sealed Cave’s underground lake, internalized inside my Stomach. This was magic water, infused with a high concentration of magicules, making it useful for diluting or strengthening all kinds of medicinal effects.

Each incubation capsule included a port for magicule injection, letting people add more at any time. We could freely adjust the concentration of the magic water to best suit the monster we were trying to generate inside. If that concentration dipped down too low, our system would automatically inject magicules, keeping the count at a predefined level.

I had a thousand of these capsules ready. Part of me felt that crafting all these was about as much work as just making the damn bodies myself, but I banished the thought. It’s all about the spectacle. It was a blast designing them anyway, so I had no regrets.

So we now had a chamber lined with incubation capsules. It was quite a sight. We also knew from our research that generating monsters required that certain conditions were met. Just filling a capsule with magicules wouldn’t cut it, no matter how much you had. But if some *other* element was included—an element that would enhance and manifest itself in the monster who resulted—the story was different.

Let me explain. Assume I put a snake in an incubation capsule. The magicules

inside would kill it, but its body would melt, mix with the magicules, and become reborn as a tempest serpent. From a common snake, you now had a creature of A-minus rank, which should show just how dangerous one of these capsules was. The monsters these capsules produced were thus guaranteed to be several levels more advanced than what Mother Nature would create. You'd have these powerful, refined bodies, perhaps because we kept the magicule concentrate at just the right level.

However, some monsters born this way would quickly collapse and die. Body stability, as it were, seemed a matter of luck. We had room for improvement, to be sure, but I still wanted to use these capsules' features to produce a thousand demon bodies.

"So how have things been going?"

"Perfectly, Rimuru! And you know, *my* research has been moving along, too!"

"Oh? I look forward to seeing it— Wait, what's *that*?"

What I saw floating in the capsule made me laugh. It was amazing, wholly unlike what I expected. Personally, I thought we'd just make skeletons out of magisteel and toss them in the capsules, producing the base for a bone golem. Its artificial frame would minimize the risk of collapse, and it wouldn't be infused with a soul, either. The magicules in the liquid would just crystallize on the bones, so I thought there was zero chance it'd achieve sentience. There was no need for intricate design work, unlike with Beretta, because the demons occupying them would use their own magicules to customize them to their liking.

...Or so I thought.

Floating inside the thousand capsules here were a thousand bone golem bodies, that much was certain. But each one of them had assorted work done on varying sections. The area around their hearts stood out the most—in the middle, where their hearts would be, a spirit core beat a rhythm instead.

"This..."

"Yeah, it's my idea! With a strong core like that, I'm sure the monsters usin' them will be stronger than ever!"

Ramiris, smiling, seemed to see this as no big deal. Preparing a thousand spirit cores had to be a pain in the ass, though. I didn't need much time for that, but unless you had a real interest and passion for it, it was too rote a process to enjoy very much. That's why I chose the simplest method for making all these bodies, but that wasn't good enough for Ramiris. She put in the hours required to produce a thousand of those, and each one had a pseudo-soul inside it as well. It even featured tech we cribbed from the Thalion homunculi.

Beretta had no problem possessing his body, but Treyni's sisters might have a harder time of it, so adding pseudo-souls was probably a good idea. But that, too, must've taken up so much time... No wonder she constantly complained about needing more staff.

"Lady Ramiris's idea was wonderfully compelling to me," Vester said, gazing into the distance. "One look, and I really just had to help out." I could see his point. With this large of a sample run, you could record all the data you ever wanted.

Each fist-size spirit core looked high quality to me when I sized them up. Fusing them with the skeletons I crafted resulted in changes not imagined in my original plan. My frameworks were magically inscribed so the magicules would form muscle groups over them, too, which made it look like we had an up-close perspective on monster development like never before. Now I understood why Vester barely felt the need to sleep.

"What d'you think? Pretty neat, huh?"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Just seeing that face from you makes this project a fine success!"

Ramiris and Veldora seemed happy with themselves.

"It's pretty interesting, yeah...but was this really your idea, Ramiris?"

"What? Of course it was. What d'you think of *that*!?"

She was almost shouting as she puffed her chest out at me. Yeah, she deserved to be proud. I was sure impressed. Ramiris might seem like an idiot at first glance, but she was actually pretty smart. Her sense for spirit engineering was perfect, and she was studying sorcerous science and paying frequent visits

to Floor 95. As long as she's lived, she's had a full grasp of the laws of physics, and although it astounded me to say it, she had all the qualifications you needed for a researcher. You can't judge her by the externals, I suppose.

"This is really amazing. If this was all handmade, it must've been super-difficult, right?"

"Well, kind of. These frameworks are modeled after people's skeletons—not like with Beretta's ball joints. But with an artificial heart, they really soak in the magicules and gain a lot of magic energy, I think!"

I nodded at her impassioned theory. She was right—this probably *would* enhance their bodily strength beyond what I pictured. By a lot, actually.

Watching these bodies in their incubation capsules, I tried picturing what powers they'd have. If I had to guess, in terms of magicule energy, they'd be positioned on the upper end of the A rank. And we had a thousand of them. I still couldn't believe Ramiris prepared enough spirit cores and pseudo-souls for them all. She really deserved a round of applause.

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Several days passed since Deeno's arrival. Diablo wasn't back yet, but I had a feeling he would be soon. Today, as well, I headed to the lab to get those bodies wrapped up for him.

Things were busy as always over there, Ramiris and Veldora verbally jousting over something.

"I told you, Master, if you want to encourage growth, we need to inject your magicules directly into them!"

"Yeah, but what if that winds up breaking this thing? Then Rimuru will yell at *me*, not you."

They were at it again. It sounded interesting, so I hid myself and watched. I was getting good at concealing my presence lately, so it didn't look like Veldora noticed my arrival.

"It's fine! You know how many we have! And I promise I'll put in a good word when you ask him for your favor. So please?"

Sounded like Ramiris was asking him for some magicule support. But what did Veldora want from me? I couldn't guess.

"Well, all right. You better live up to your word, though."

"Yep, yep! Just trust me!"

They had a deal, so Veldora nodded. Considering how haughty he usually acted, he seemed to be enjoying what was to come quite a bit. It looked like Ramiris put him up to it, by and large, but he was receptive from the beginning.

So Veldora brought a hand up to an incubation capsule, and—with an apparently meaningful "Hah!"—infused it with magicules. The capsule was now swirling with an unusually high concentration of them, and considering the pressure, I could see how the capsule might break apart. Was this going to be okay? I was worried but decided to keep watching silently. If it shattered, we could deal with it—I was more curious about what Ramiris was attempting.

Inside the capsule, the crystallized magicules attached to the magisteel skeleton began transforming into what looked like muscle tissue. Raphael had predicted this much; it was part of the plan. But now, with Veldora directly injecting his own magic force, something unexpected was about to happen. Vast numbers of magicules began to pervade the skeleton, transforming the framework itself.

I could hear Ramiris say "Oh? I didn't expect that." Which, well, that's what experiments are for.

The skeleton material could really no longer be called magisteel. Nor was it orichalc or mithril—not without any gold or silver mixed in. But while its strength wasn't crimson steel yet, it had risen to at least the level of orichalc.

More impressive, however, was how the skeleton seemed to *live*—literally breathe, even—despite being metal.

Understood. It is a type of adamant or bio-magisteel. It has been transformed by the magical waves of the subject Veldora. Theoretically, one could call it dragontite.

I see.

To me, it looked like Ramiris was groping for a way to finish the bodies faster, and in the process, she'd stumbled upon the discovery of a neat new metal. And it wasn't over yet.

"Wh-whoa! Master?! Stop! Stoppppp!!"

"Mm? Oooh. There are cracks in the capsule...?!"

Both of them panicked. I couldn't tell if they were geniuses or dunces right now.

"What are you people doing?"

I decided to finally step in and regain control of the situation.

After repairing the capsule, I called for a coffee and snack break, inviting Vester and Deeno to join. Treyni the dryad was kind enough to serve us.

"*Tch.* Just when we were at a good part..."

"Oh, you didn't want any cake? I'll just let Ramiris have it, then..."

"I'm sorry. I was lying. Well, no, it was true, but um, just a slip of the tongue..."

Deeno was having a snit over his work being interrupted, but he bowed his head and got back in line once I threatened to leave him high and cakeless. Are you sure that's how you want to act, Deeno? Some Sleeping Ruler you are— But he seemed devoted to his work, at least, which was a relief.

Vester and Deeno were working on experiments together, recording data from the thousand incubation capsules and checking out Kurobe's completed slot-compatible swords in their spare time. This was mainly thanks to my bragging. Vester was eager to join in on this, hoping it'd help with the impasse in his Elemental Colossus modification work. Deeno was using the sample cores I gave him, and Vester was diligently recording the results.

As I surmised from his attitude when he came in, Deeno really liked this work. It was work, but just a thin line away from play, really. He may've whined about how much he hated a decent living, but in this environment, he was doing real work whether he realized it or not. If you find your work fun, you never work a day in your life, I suppose.

After spending a few minutes relaxing, I turned to Ramiris and cut to the chase.

"So, Ramiris, why were you in such a hurry to create a complete body?"

"Oh, ummm..."

She seemed hesitant.

Treyni stepped up to defend her. "Wait a minute, Sir Rimuru. Lady Ramiris is devoting her all to helping my sisters and our friends!"

I didn't intend to criticize her, but Treyni must've thought I was angry, because she was already arguing in Ramiris's defense. That's how it always worked. Treyni was just way too lenient with her.

"No, I just want to know the reason. I'm not mad at all. Well, Ramiris?"

I tried to put Treyni's mind at ease before continuing.

"Hmm...looking back, I was probably moving too fast. You know, I have a lot of adoring fans, so I wanted them to have their own bodies ASAP. That'd make them a lot happier and stuff, and I'd have more personnel, and then everybody's good, right?"

Awkward as she seemed, Ramiris did have a point. Even without bodies, the dryads could work and operate within the labyrinth. Treants, on the other hand, couldn't. They could manifest themselves nearby the trees that were their "main" bodies, but they couldn't venture anywhere that tree wasn't in view. Without a body, they'd be discharging magicules like mad, a major drag on them. Even dryads faced a drastic cut in power once they were too far from their "real" bodies—and they were on the upper echelon of A rank, a level above high-end magic-born. The lower-level treants couldn't expect much at all by comparison.

As Ramiris reasoned, the bodies in these incubation capsules would give physical freedom to both the dryads and the treants. Thus, she was surreptitiously completing, and borrowing, a few bodies for herself.

"Well, if *that's* all you wanted, why didn't you ask? Diablo's not back yet, and I don't even know exactly how many demons he's bringing with him. We can

always make more if we need to later, so let's get bodies ready for the dryads first."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am."

"Thank you, Rimuru!!"

She flitted happily in the air, doing a few laps around me. But this suited my purposes as well. We really didn't have enough people. Treyni's sisters and the other dryads were working hard maintaining the labyrinth, which was tough work in itself, so clearly we didn't have much of a safety net. At this rate, we were all bound to burn out and screw something up. The labyrinth was open day and night, after all, and we needed to set up a proper shift system to deal with that soon.

With these bodies, even the treants could be A-ranked creatures, able to hold their own in the labyrinth. If they managed to wreck their physical bodies somehow, they'd be safe—they were just possessing them, is all. This would likely only apply within Ramiris's labyrinth, which was as far as their thoughts could travel, but that was good enough.

The dryads, meanwhile...

"So yeah, I figure we could make Traya, Doreth, and Alpha and the others into Dryas Doll Dryads like you, Treyni—"

"...?!"

"Hmm?"

"Are you sure about that?"

Even before I could finish, Treyni latched on to my proposal with astonishing speed.

"You're sure, Rimuru?"

Ramiris was similarly uneasy, leaving Deeno and the rest in the dark.

"Am I sure about what?"

"Evolving creatures to Dryas Doll Dryads takes a ton of work, doesn't it?"

"Oh, kind of. But I owe them for all their efforts, and I'd like to have them keep helping with the labyrinth, so..."

"Yes, but we've been granted a place to live already... Lady Ramiris has agreed to work with you, Sir Rimuru, and as her servants, we are only carrying out our promise."

Treyni sounded apologetic, but her help around the labyrinth was a massive boon. To pay for that, I wanted anyone evolved to dryad to have the chance at an independent body. It'd involve handcrafting a body for each one, but in a way, making handsome-looking male and female figures was a hobby of mine—and besides, just reusing the bodies I was making for Diablo seemed trite. Dryad bodies really demanded you make them with wood, I thought.

"No, no, you really do help us a lot. I'd like you to keep up the good work, so please don't be afraid to accept them. I'll let each one of them decide whether they'll use one of the bodies here or evolve into a Dryas Doll Dryad with the bodies I carve for them."

Treyni eagerly nodded. Ramiris, next to her, was grumbling along the lines of "Why is he kinder to Treyni than me? I don't like *that*..." but I ignored it.

*

After the break, Vester and the others went back to work.

"This might be beyond my knowledge...but it's fascinating. I have a *job*, and it's time to carry it out. Let's go, Vester."

"All right, Sir Deeno."

Deeno, emphasizing the fact to nobody in particular that he was *working*, took Vester out of the room. I'm not sure he had ever worked before in his life. He was clearly a worthless grifter, but he was making an effort for *me*, so whatever.

I guess I'll go back to my own work—

"Wait. Rimuru, I have a favor to ask. Ramiris, time to fulfill your end of the bargain!"

Great. This was bound to be some insipid, time-consuming favor, so I was

trying to flee before he could say it. Veldora was waiting for just after the break to bring it up, wasn't he?

"Now, to tell you the truth—"

"The master says he wants an assistant! And I'd love to have more people around, so um, if I could be assigned one, too..."

Just as insipid and time-consuming as I thought! Here we go again... We're already aching for people, so I wasn't about to give Veldora another playmate.

"No, look, everyone's busy here, so there's no time to give you someone to mess around with—"

"Wait, wait! Rimuru, you have the wrong idea. Currently, I am assisting Ramiris, guarding the labyrinth, *and* performing a number of other important tasks. I don't see the harm in someone available to help me relax, to soothe me and sing my praises!"

Ramiris was nodding at this heartfelt defense. But considering the conversation I overheard earlier, I think I'd have to disappoint him.

"Well, sad to say—"

"Wait, wait, *wait!!*"

I was interrupted again. Veldora was hell-bent on getting my approval today, wasn't he? Guess he wasn't backing down.

"To be honest with you, ever since I was in your Stomach, I have had someone I feel confident in calling a companion with me. I dearly hope you will deign to grant a body to him as well."

This came out of nowhere. I had no idea who he meant. What kind of acquaintance was this?

Understood. It is believed to be the high-level magic-born Ifrit.

Huh? Why is Veldora friends with Ifrit?

Report. Due to an intervention from the subject Veldora at the time, Ifrit was subjected to the same Predation into isolation.

According to Raphael, when I took Ifrit from Shizu and consumed it, it was

taken to the same space in my Stomach that had been isolating Veldora. Since this presented no obstacle to taking Ifrit's data, Raphael—the Great Sage at the time—let this pass without comment. It wouldn't have bothered me, either; in fact, I never even noticed until now. Thus, I guess Veldora and Ifrit had been fostering a friendship while I wasn't paying attention.

"Oh, so you want to revive Ifrit?"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! How nice of you to understand so quickly, Rimuru!"

Veldora seemed happy about the idea, but me, I had my misgivings. Ifrit did *not* get along with Shizu, to be sure, and besides, he worked for the demon lord Leon. If I resurrected him, would he even try to cozy up to us? The thought prevented me from just deadpanning "Sure" to that.

"Hmm..."

"Y-you don't want to?!"

"Please, Rimuru, let me ask you as well! I want you to make my master's dream come true!"

Veldora was acting all sad, and now Ramiris was joining the fray. Give me a break. I brought a hand to my head—this *was* turning into a pain in the ass.

Honestly, we really did need extra hands. But to me, releasing Ifrit just made me anxious. At the end of the day, he was still much more powerful than your typical high-level magic-born. Maybe *we* could beat him in battle, but if he went on a riot, we'd have a lot of trouble to deal with—and he might always flee back to Leon, too. I didn't want to wake up a sleeping dog here, and I didn't think I could be blamed for that.

"But didn't Ifrit swear his loyalty to the demon lord Leon? Do you even know whether he'll serve you if I revive him?"

"Mm? Hmm... I see, I see. No, that is no concern at all. My passion's rubbed off on him, so he's eager and willing to help."

Um, really? It looked like Veldora was discussing matters with an unseen partner for a moment. That had to be Ifrit, right? So I guess they had some unknown method of speaking to each other.

“Were you talking to him just now?”

“Yes, well, there is nothing I cannot accomplish.”

“The master’s really somethin’, I’ll have you know! Why, he even had Ifrit summon a huge number of flame salamanders for our magic trains! So I really think having him join us would help out a lot, going forward!”

Oh. He did?

Summoning spirits, of course, was easy with Ramiris’s help in the labyrinth. But once we started running magic trains worldwide, we’d likely want a go-to person handling all our salamander needs. Ugghh... In terms of what we stood to gain, I really had no counterargument. And if Veldora was really willing to look after Ifrit and keep him on good behavior... Well, maybe it’d be right to trust in him.

“All right, all right. If you say so, I’ll grant you permission, but you need to take responsibility for this to the end, all right?”

“You got it!”

“Oh, that’s so great, Master!”

I felt like my children were begging me to buy them a puppy.

“In that case...”

“Yes, yes. Rimuru, you still have the empty husk of Charybdis after removing the core from it, right? That is the afterimage of my own magic force, so it will be easy for me to work with. And Ifrit has been exposed to my aura for an extended period of time, so perhaps we could use that as his core?”

As Veldora saw it, this would be better for him than employing a pseudo-soul.

Understood. The subject Veldora’s opinion seems valid.

And if Raphael was agreeing, I had no room to turn him down.

“Okay. So we’ll give this to Ifrit for his body, then?”

I stood in front of the incubation capsule I repaired just before our break. The magisteel skeleton inside had transformed into the unique metal dragontite and was further exposed to Veldora’s excess magicules; your average monster

didn't have a chance of withstanding it. I felt that as a higher-level spirit, Ifrit was up to the challenge.

"Ah, very good. I'm sure he'll be delighted."

With Veldora's agreement, I started the procedure.

Report. Ifrit's afterimage detected. Transferring to the core of Charybdis... Successful. Creating soul vessel... Now fusing with dragontite body.

The whole process wrapped up in an instant. That's Raphael for you. We had it down to a literal science.

And with that, right before our eyes, the body infused with Ifrit's core began to undergo rapid change. The skeleton, now dark silver, seemed to be growing muscles as we watched, blood suddenly flowing through them. The skin protecting them was dark brown, the same as Veldora's. The eyes were gold, the dragon-like pupils shining a deep crimson red.

...Also, this *really* looked like a woman. A pretty one, too.

"Ahhh, Ifrit! How's it feel to come back with a new body?"

So this beautiful girl was Ifrit? Ignoring the question of whether spirits have genders for now, I seemed to recall fighting a muscle-bound, masculine figure. What happened?

"We meet for the first time in the physical realm, Sir Veldora. And Sir Rimuru... I cannot thank you enough for restoring me."

Ignoring my confusion, Ifrit faced me and fell to one knee. I feared his loyalty to Leon would lead to instant aggression, but that didn't seem to be a concern any longer.

"S-sure. Glad you're doing well. I wanted to ask you something..."

"Anything."

I wanted to ask him a lot, actually. But the first thing:

"The last time I saw you, you were, like...more physically geared for combat? Or you looked like you could, um, move around a bit easier..."

Not to dance around the subject too much, but you didn't have such big

breasts, did you? But I was too timid to say it. I mean, how could I? Ifrit was now dressed in some kind of exotic South Asian-style outfit that left almost nothing to the imagination. Ifrit's shoulders, navel, and inner thighs were completely visible, and the allure was just blowing my mind.

"Oh, this form...?" Ifrit sighed for some reason. "I think this is Veldora's fault—er, Veldora's *preferences* taking form."

He was about to call it Veldora's fault, wasn't he? He seemed kind of exasperated about it. The vibe I got indicated he had been through a lot. Maybe his time in my Stomach wasn't all smooth sailing after all. If you think about it, he was alone in there with Veldora the whole time, with no place to run. There must have been some harrowing experiences.

"Mmm. Yes, thanks to me, you have taken on a physical body. I hope you will not forget to appreciate this!"

"...I will not," Ifrit replied, resigned to his fate.

"What does he mean by your '*preferences*,' Veldora?"

"Hmm?"

"Ah well, I am a higher-level flame spirit, but I'm now able to exercise my powers over wind as well. My hair would normally be a deep-red color, but it's taken on a much darker hue. From what I can tell, the impact of Sir Veldora's force has had a profound effect upon me. I believe the fact that Charybdis was a female type may have caused this change to me."

Report. This is correct.

Whoa, so even his sex changed? I guess it wasn't deliberate, though, so I didn't want to comment on it too much.

"Oh... I see. Well, if you're not a fan of that..."

"I have no complaints at all," Ifrit said with a smile. "No matter how it looks, this form is far more powerful than I used to be."

Glad to see he was so adaptable. I suppose getting browbeaten by Veldora all this time must've made him used to things. I kind of liked that—and besides, unlike when I brought Shizu within me, I detected no hostility from him at all.

"You don't, uh, resent me or anything, do you?"

"No, I don't. Inside you, I learned about a great deal of things from Sir Veldora. Looking back, I feel that I, and Shizue Izawa as well, perhaps felt our duties and responsibilities too much. We rejected each other and were unable to interact at all. Now I can't help but think we could've found another way to overcome this."

Sounded like Ifrit wasn't dragging any baggage from the past along. In fact, he seemed to even regret not working things out with Shizu. The mood was thus unexpectedly somber as we decided to all sit down and work out our future.

Ifrit told me about assorted things as well. Life, as I surmised, had been tough on him. I began sensing an affinity among us. Now I was sure there was no better person to leave in Veldora's control.

As he put it, while he still had feelings for the demon lord Leon, he couldn't call those feelings loyalty at all. "Right now," he said, "I see myself as already defeated and killed once by you, Sir Rimuru. I was lucky enough to have Sir Veldora rescue me and keep my consciousness from fading away, but I feel I am a completely different being from before. I do still believe that Sir Leon is a great demon lord, but right now, I only wish to serve Sir Veldora."

That seemed believable to me, and Veldora never doubted Ifrit from the start. I saw no need to fret over it.

"All right. Well, consider yourself officially Veldora's assistant now!"

"Very well. I will stake my life and body on serving him."

He definitely sounded serious. It's not that I had put the affair with Shizu totally behind me, but that was true for both sides. We needed to work past that, and in the meantime, I decided to accept Ifrit.

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"Now, Rimuru, I have one thing to discuss."

There's *more*?! I really didn't want to get involved in anything else, but if I didn't hear him out, I'm sure he'd harangue me about it.

"What is it now, Veldora?"

"Well, I was hoping I could give a name to Ifrit. *Ifrit*, you see, is not his individual name, but that of his spirit type. All upper-level spirits summoned by the Spirit Summon: Ifrit spell are referred to as Ifrit."

Hmm. That was actually a decent suggestion. A name, huh? He might need one of those, yeah. But the naming process in situations like this could be fraught with danger. I had personally screwed it up multiple times, so I knew.

"But if you name Ifrit right now, wouldn't that be kind of dangerous? I know you have a huge magicule store to tap, but get the levels wrong, and you could be in deep trouble."

Too many magicules would be poison to Ifrit and even potentially damage the namer. I managed to survive all my namings more out of luck than anything.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! But you can accurately calculate the exact amount required, can you not? If I am pumping in too much energy, I want you to shut off the soul corridor linking us."

Hmm. That sounded safe enough.

Report. This can be provided for.

Raphael was eager to help, likely because I was in no direct harm.

"All right. I'll help."

"Good! I knew you would say yes!"

So we were now naming Ifrit.

"Ifrit, from this day forward, you shall be known as Charys!!"

With a solemn voice, Veldora gave Ifrit his command. Charys was now the name of Ifrit—a name that was more a contraction of Charybdis than anything resembling Ifrit. I thought something like Iris would be more suitable, but better to keep my mouth shut with things like this.

Now, via the soul corridor between them, I could see Veldora being drained of his magicules. Ifrit, right now, was a Special A in rank, with enough magicules to be deemed a Calamity-level threat. He'd lose out to Shion or Benimaru but was about equal with Soei or Geld. So if he was given a name...

"Yes, my lord. Then by my name as Charys, I solemnly swear to serve my master, the great Sir Veldora!!"

The name was accepted—and at that instant, Raphael shut off the soul corridor and sealed up Veldora's powers. Mission accomplished. Veldora had successfully named Ifrit.

And now Ifrit was evolving.

He had far, far more magical force within him. Now he was demon-lord caliber—a far cry from Treyni and even above people like Carillon or Frey.

Report. The upper-level spirit Ifrit has evolved to Flame Lord.

A Flame Lord? Apparently, this was what happened when spiritual life-forms attain physical bodies and assume something closer to demonic form.

"Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha! How impressive! I'm glad I relied upon you now, Rimuru!"

Veldora couldn't be happier. But one look at Ifrit made me squint. He had undergone major changes—or really, he was back to how I remembered. The hair was still the same extremely dark red as before, but now he was male in structure again, exactly as the time we fought each other. There were some small differences in the details, but now I think I was seeing Ifrit more as how he pictured himself.

"*Pfft!* After I gave you such a fun— Er, after I gave you such wondrous beauty! I was hardly expecting this."

Veldora was already whining about it. I guess he was playing a trick on him the whole time. Ifrit—or I guess I should start calling him Charys—bowed deeply at him.

"Is that the case? I expected as much...but I am glad my own desires won out, in the end. However, I can always return to female form, so if you insist upon it..."

"No, no, I was just poking fun at you regardless. I have no complaint about whatever form you take!"

Veldora's jokes weren't very funny. Things were back to normal now, but

there was a decent chance Charys would've been stuck that way all his life. I better watch how I act around Veldora, too.

"So how's your body feel?"

"It feels excellent, my— Wait, what's this?!"

As he answered my question, he began to notice some kind of change. Carefully, he gauged the powers within himself.

"This much power...?"

He seemed shocked.

"Heh-heh-heh... Well, I should hope so," Veldora said with a satisfied smile. He had been expecting this, it seemed. "It seems you've evolved into a Flame Lord."

"A—a Flame Lord?! I can hardly believe this power..."

Yeah, if I was just resurrected, and all of a sudden I had demon lord-level power, I'd probably react the same way. But even with all that power, you're still mainly just a caretaker for Veldora, all right? In fact, with all that strength on tap, Veldora might wind up trying to take even more advantage of you. I was starting to sympathize with Charys a bit—we had gotten chummy pretty fast, after all.

Regardless, we had a new member of the office. Before long, Charys was just another part of the picture, worked to the bone by Veldora and Ramiris—just as I feared, but nobody seemed to mind. Thanks to him, our work was humming along even faster than before.

"Hey, uh, since when did we have someone like this working for us?"

"He joined while you were all occupied with putting cores together."

"But it's not like you just hired someone on. This is a spirit lord! He's got, like, demon-lord powers!"

"No, he's a Flame Lord, to be exact."

"It doesn't matter! That's not what I'm trying to say!"

Deeno seemed pretty agitated, but everyone else got used to things quickly.

"Well, you know, these things happen, I suppose."

"They...do, Vester?"

"Deeno, if we're going to work with Rimuru and the master here, you can't afford to let things like these throw you."

"I know, but..."

He looked less than convinced but, with the help of everyone else, grudgingly accepted it. Yes, it's best to just adapt. Knowing when to give up is key.

So now I was cutting down more trees and creating more dolls. Before long, I had a number of dryads evolved into Dryas Doll Dryads, capable of tapping their full powers no matter how far they were from their trees. Not one of them refused the offer, so now there were nearly ten of them. They didn't have battle experience and thus weren't as strong as Treyni, but they had a whole labyrinth to learn the ropes in. Looking ahead, I'm sure they'd be great assistants for Ramiris.

I was also just about done with the bodies—or really, the avatars—I'd be lending to the treants. They'd simply be possessing these bodies, not taking them over entirely, so they didn't need to be top-of-the-line. I made sure they were fully compatible with the hundred-odd treants who would now be able to explore and work in the labyrinth. That was a lot of new personnel, and now I regretted not doing this sooner.

Many of the dryad bodies were female in shape, while most of the treant bodies were male. They themselves were genderless, and they told me I didn't need to worry much about this, so I made their bodies with efficiency as the watchword. If they wanted to adjust any details, they could do it themselves once they took possession.

Regardless, I was told they were ready to hop in whenever the bodies were good to go, and before long, my work was complete.

With the new help, we finally had a little free time to work with.

"Thank you very much, Sir Rimuru!"

I jiggled my slime body in response to Treyni's words of gratitude. This was

really no big deal for me. I wanted to repay them for their hard work, and besides, I got a lot out of the bargain.

“Okay, everyone, keep it up! Ramiris, if anything happens, let me know.”

“Roger! I’ll fly right over!”

She’d report back at once if something flared up, I was sure. But we still had work left to do. I was meeting with Rigurd and Mjöllmile daily, and I had a mountain of projects and proposals to approve. My feedback was required for our criminal justice system as well, and I needed to mediate over and resolve any conflicts of opinion in my cabinet. In an ideal world, I’d help all day with this research, but life was getting in the way. What I really wanted was a staff to help me with bureaucratic work—that was my main priority. I had time for my hobbies because I didn’t need to sleep, but even I enjoyed a nap now and again.

I had thought of myself as someone who talked a big show and let everyone else do the actual work, but now I really *was* working hard. I couldn’t help thinking about that as I returned to my office.

*

“Sir Diablo has returned, along with several unfamiliar individuals. They wanted to see you—what would you like me to do with them, Sir Rimuru?”

That message had been waiting for me for quite a while.

If it were Diablo alone, of course I’d welcome him right in. But he had brought strangers along. It was an annoyance, but with all the people I had around me, we needed to go through this procedure. I decided to get this rolling before Benimaru demanded he sit in on matters.

“We’ll meet in the reception room. Bring them right over!”

The attendant briskly bowed at me and left. She seemed to move kind of awkwardly—I guess she was nervous around me. Exasperated, I asked another attendant in the next room over to prepare some tea.

Shuna was busy elsewhere with her own work in the daytime, although she always allotted time in the evening to prepare dinner and the like. Shion, for her part, was training Team Reborn in the labyrinth. They were apparently testing out just how immortal they were, pushing the far edges of their

endurance. I heard they were going down to some pretty deep levels, so I resolved not to call for her unless needed.

In their place right now were two attendants assigned exclusively to me, a pair of evolved goblinas who pretty much looked human, in my opinion. Some Shuna-developed cosmetics had gained popularity as of late, and I felt like all the women around me had been looking prettier. They were first-class attendants, and I'm sure they'd be at ease around the kings and princes of other nations, although I must've been a tad intimidating. I couldn't ask for better.

So I headed to the next reception chamber over—one of the rooms designed for rustic sturdiness. I figured nothing would go wrong, but no need to go in unprepared. I had zero idea what kind of weirdos Diablo would pick for his crew.

The moment I stepped in, the attendant brought our tea. *Very organized*, I thought. Then I sensed someone outside.

"Sir Rimuru! I have returned!"

With a gregarious smile, Diablo entered the room. Not that I'm one to talk, but a smiling Diablo is about the most evil sight I can think of—and if I thought so, I'm sure he was just as sinister a symbol to everyone else. There was just this wicked atmosphere around him, like he was always planning some nefarious deed.

"Today, as promised, I have brought along some people I'd like you to extend an audience to. If you could meet them for me, nothing could make me happier."

He greeted me respectfully as ever. It was needlessly polite, really, but I had gotten used to it. He saw me as his sole superior, approaching me almost like a god, after all.

Behind Diablo were three women. He had talked about people to work under him; were these the ones? They looked young, but I suppose age didn't matter to demons. I had no idea how old Diablo was, but he said he'd be tapping old friends, so they must be decently well aged.

At his behest, the three girls filed in, bowed to me, and sat down on the sofa.

"So these are all your acquaintances?"

They didn't look that powerful to me...

Negative. These are Arch Demons, among the most powerful of demonkind. They are fully suppressing their magicules in order to pose as human.

Raphael quickly stepped up to correct my mistake. I thought I had an eye for this by now, but I still had room for improvement. I tried ratcheting up my Magic Sense a little, but they still seemed like normal people to me.

...Wait. *Arch Demons*!?

Even among those who could summon higher-level demons, calling for an Arch Demon was well on impossible. Just one of them provided a whole column of tactical strength for any army. You had to be willing to make colossal sacrifices to even have a chance at summoning one. If the human race tried it, that'd be a national-level project requiring all kinds of large-scale rituals.

Now I had three of them on my sofa. And wasn't Diablo an Arch Demon as well? If these were his friends, maybe I should've expected this.

"Yes. These are the ones I decided were worthy enough to enjoy a personal audience with you, Sir Rimuru."

"I see. They certainly camouflage themselves well. I can hardly see a difference between them and regular people. I'm not sure even a paladin could tell these were Arch Demons."

Diablo smiled appreciatively. "Keh-heh-heh-heh... Well spotted, Sir Rimuru. I told them to devote their full force to concealing their race, but you saw through the ruse regardless?"

"Yeah, kinda," I said, giving Diablo a cool, collected nod. It was all Raphael, to be honest, but still. "So are there more?"

"Yes, I have seven or so others I *think* would be useful..."

He always had this exaggerated way of talking about his business. I had a thousand bodies ready for him, and now we'll only need, like, one percent of them? Of course, I *did* use a hundred of those bodies for the treants already, so

that worked for me.

“...Beyond that, I have a number of rank and filers, whom I picture as serving under the people you see before you. I hope you will give them the honor of joining Tempest’s forces, Sir Rimuru.”

Oh, there *are* more.

“All right. How many of those did you bring?”

“I will allow them to brief you on that.”

“It is good to meet you, Sir Rimuru. I must regretfully say that I lack a name at the moment, but I look forward to hopefully working with you. I understand that Black adores you, which I honestly found hard to believe...but now I see why.”

“Oh?”

I was greeted by a beautiful woman with snowy-white hair. She stood before me like a noble heiress, remarkably elegant. There was a fetching, fleeting element to her smile. She seemed so kind and gentle that I could hardly believe she was a demon.

“Yes. From the moment I laid eyes upon you, I could not stop my heart from racing. I sincerely hope you will add my two hundred followers and me to your force.”

With a cheerful smile, the white-haired lady pledged her oath. Honestly, it embarrassed me to get complimented like this, but Diablo had already accustommed me to it, so I let it slide.

“Me too—um, I mean, and me as well. I want to offer my two hundred servants and myself to you, Sir Rimuru.”

The energetic young lady who spoke next had purple hair and a ponytail on her side that complemented her naturally cute looks. Despite Diablo’s declaration, I almost doubted whether she was a demon at all.

“No complaints here, either! I’ve brought my own army of two hundred along, and I’m ready to let you have ‘em all!”

The dazzling, pompous blond spoke up last. Diablo, peeved at her act, was

about to stand up before I lifted a hand to stop him. I had the impression she was trying her best to be polite with me. No need to scold her over little things.

That rounded out our greetings. I had three girls here, each arriving with two hundred people. So Diablo wanted to add six hundred people to his personal force? I had to hand it to him—*this* was scary. He was seriously trying to form his own army.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh... Now, each of these people has two trusted assistants with them. In addition, there is one more whom I thought would make an amusing addition. These seven are accompanied by approximately one hundred servants, making for seven hundred in total. I had hoped to assemble a team of a thousand, but regrettably, I am forced to disappoint you on that front. My mishandling of this affair truly pains me.”

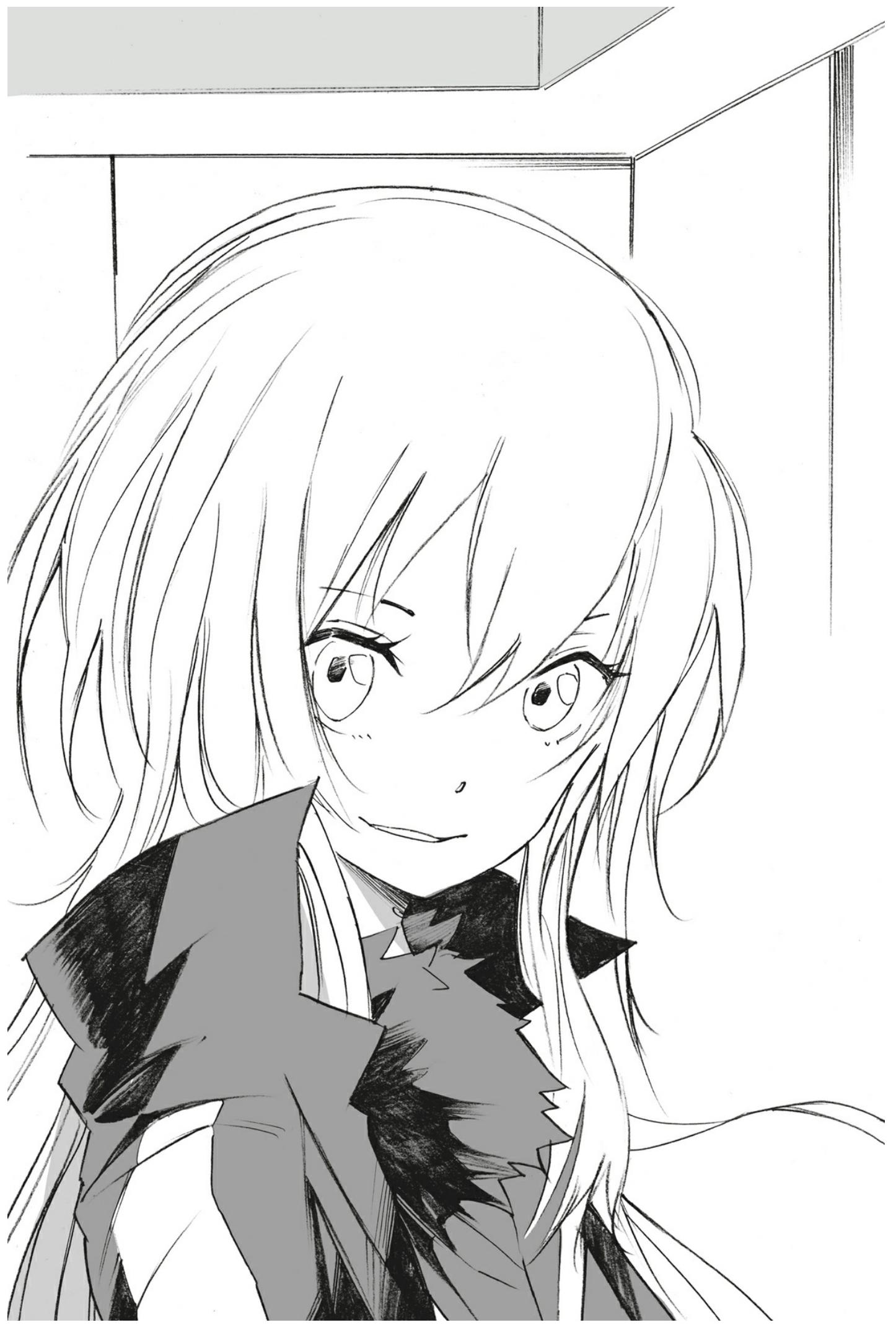
“No, no, no. Don’t worry about it. Let’s go meet them.”

So seven hundred, not six? That was almost *too* much.

“Ah, thank you very much! But before that, I thought I should debrief you in detail on how I came to invite them to my side—”

“Is that gonna take a while?”

“Well, Sir Rimuru, I wish to keep you updated on my activities...”



And so Diablo was already beginning his boastful speech. I needed to stop it at once.

“Okay, I’ll pass on that. I’m sure they’re not here to listen to you brag at me, either, so how about we save that for another opportunity?”

An opportunity I was *pretty* sure would never come, of course.

Diablo froze, giving me a “huh?” look. The three demon girls snickered. I supposed *they* were worried he’d talk about himself for hours, too.

Satisfied I was in the right, I grinned. “I don’t want to keep everyone else waiting, either. Introduce them to me.”

“...I—I understand. In that case, allow us to relocate...”

He looked disappointed, but I couldn’t spoil him. I’ll admit that Diablo was a talent, but giving him preferential treatment in front of the new staff wasn’t a good idea. I’d never wanna be accused of playing favorites, so he’ll just have to put up with it. (Of course, what I *really* feared was him talking my ear off all day, but that goes without saying.)

*

Diablo, of course, recovered quickly. As a spiritual life-form, he had real backbone. You’d think that meant he wouldn’t be swinging between joy and sadness after everything I said, but he did anyway for some reason. Very strange.

“Summoning them in town may cause trouble, so let’s call for them within the labyrinth.”

Regardless, Diablo had now matured enough that he actually cared about people and things around him a little. I was impressed...but I shouldn’t have been.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh... After all, if they appeared within town, they would shatter the barrier over it. You spent a lot of time and trouble on that magic spell, Sir Rimuru, so I must take consideration of that.”

Hearing his slightly askew observation made me realize how wrong I was.

But it reminded me of something else.

Here in Rimuru, the capital of Tempest, we already had a barrier deployed on an experimental basis. This was an enhanced version of the Holy Field, suppressing the magicules that leaked out of monsters. We had a lot of human visitors these days, and this was one measure we took for their safety. It was a bit of a burden for our monster residents, but not enough to affect their daily lives at all. Put up with that, and we could retain the city's magicule counts to a level humans could easily abide by. The barrier also helped enforce our laws against casting certain magic spells in town, and it also kept magical beasts from entering city limits.

If anyone was big and mean enough to break this barrier, they'd have to be A rank and assigned some kind of disaster level—and even *they* couldn't smash it with one hit. If anything happened to the barrier, we'd all know at once, so our sentinels would be able to swing into action. Even an A-ranked beast, of course, was nothing to fear without intelligence. With our well-honed soldiers, we'd be able to calmly take care of matters.

My main concern was whether there were people among these seven hundred who could break down the barrier. It'd be child's play for the three women behind me, but were there any other menaces among them? Diablo tended to be a harsh critic, so if he described seven demons as useful, they had to be extremely dangerous.

Inside the Dungeon:

"I hereby permit you to show yourselves. Manifest!"

With Diablo's order, seven demons appeared, seven hundred more kneeling behind them.

I guess...I should have expected this. Six out of the seven were Arch Demons. Magicule flow was regulated within the labyrinth, so it was easier for them to appear here than up on the surface, hence why all of them were their full, ominous selves in here.

These seven demons who earned Diablo's trust, though... Now *these* guys looked like actual demons. One among them was just a Greater Demon, but a special one apparently, and no doubt pretty strong, too. Strong enough to pick a fight with Diablo and get smashed up in the process, by the sound of it. He

had guts, at least, although clearly he had to be an idiot. Nonetheless, Diablo saw something in this Greater Demon, and if he did, I had no complaint.

But enough about that. My concern was still on the first three. These three Arch Demons each had two Arch Demons of their own, essentially indicating they had some kinda special talent beyond just their magicule count.

Understood. As demons have no life span, the older they are, the more battle experience they build up. In the demon realm, there are classes of nobility they are categorized into based on that. Those in the ruling classes enjoy exclusive levels of authority and power...

Oh?

Raphael told me that demons are limited in how far they can grow, Arch Demon being the very top. However, even under these same conditions, they can polish their battle skills and establish themselves as superior over others. Different demons can have different strengths, even with the same magicule count. That difference can come in knowledge, the drive for victory, the strength of their will... Put it all together, and that's how a demon built their rep.

Plus:

...Arch Demons are further categorized by the era they were born in.

To be exact:

- Legends whose names have been known for over three thousand years are classified as Prehistoric.
- Arch Demons at least a millennium old are Ancient.
- Beings with over four hundred years of accrued knowledge are Medieval.
- Demons who survived past a hundred years are Pre-Modern.
- Those with more than a human life span's worth of study are Modern.
- Newborns are called Contemporary.

And at the far end of time, you had the Origin category, the very first of all

demons.

The strengths of demons are evaluated based on how long they have lived. The ruling classes of demons, the nobility ranked count or higher, are all Ancients.

Thanks for the detailed rundown, Raphael. I appreciated that bullet-point presentation. Now to use this newfound knowledge to examine the demons before me.

The first three were in the ruling classes, and *these* six were their subjects. I suppose this meant that the trio—and Diablo as well—were all very old demons, ranked count or higher. I may have been oblivious at the time, but I befriended some pretty notorious characters, didn’t I? It made me shiver a bit as Diablo smiled.

“This group, I feel, boasts *some* aspects worthy of your attention. When I regaled them with stories of your wondrous deeds, Sir Rimuru, they all broke down and begged for the chance to serve you. Thus, I decided to grant their request and let them join me.”

It sounded like a very moving tale, although I felt like he was making up aspects of it.

I took a closer look at the seven underling demons. Maybe they *had* wept, but I’m not convinced they were begging to serve under me. My evidence for this was how clearly all of them had been beaten up—with the lower-end Greater Demon in particular, I marveled at how he was even alive. Diablo really was making up that story, I thought. All seven of them looked like they had something to say, but none of them spoke in front of their boss. They were very well trained—or I’m sure, Diablo sternly warned them otherwise.

“From this moment, we shall ever be your faithful servants, Sir Rimuru! Please grant us your orders!”

The seven of them all bowed their heads and swore their fealty, the choir of seven hundred behind them doing the same. Seven hundred demons lying prostrate before you is quite a sight, let me tell you. Diablo observed the spectacle, smiling and nodding. He scares me. The fact that he was my ally made me breathe an internal sigh of relief. I’m so glad he’s on my team.

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As spiritual life-forms, demons must acquire physical bodies, or else they have to expend tons of magical force to manifest themselves. I didn't want to subject them to that forever, so it's time to get this party started.

The process was really simple. First, I used Belzebuth to consume the demons. Then I called upon Raphael to Combine each one with the pseudo-soul inside each incubation capsule. It worked great. Before long, all the demons had their bodies, customizing them to their liking. They'd be fully used to them in two or three days.

I did run into some problems with the first three, though. I didn't want to give them the same treatment as all the demons under them. They were apparently longtime friends with Diablo, so I figured they deserved a few perks. Besides, they were beautiful, and I'm nothing if not a patron of fine beauty. If I wanted to have them drop the demon look and appear more human without affecting their appearance, that much was a snap for me. So I offered my services.

"Would you like me to work on your outer appearance?"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"In that case, by all means."

The white-haired beauty smiled and accepted the offer, the other two following her lead. With their consent, it was time to get started.

It's tough to change someone's appearance without adjusting their internal bone structure. My fingers were more than nimble enough for the effort, and Raphael's calculations were perfect. Forming and adjusting their looks was a cinch for me—and once their structures were set up, some magicule-flow fine-tuning should perfectly re-create their looks.

I also gave them a little extra, mixing gold into their magisteel skeletons to make them orichalc. If they're friends of Diablo's, they deserved *that* much. In this world, gold was kind of an all-purpose metal, keenly compatible with magicules and providing durability and capabilities that far surpassed magisteel.

They were literally beautiful down to the bone—and very appreciative.

“““Thank you very much, Sir Rimuru!“““

And if they were happy, I was just as happy.

Mission accomplished. Now we just had to wait for everyone to wake up. Oh, and it'll be an annoyance if they don't have names...

“Whoa, whoa, what are you doing in here?”

“Hey, hey, Rimuru! Did Diablo bring his underlings back? I wanna say hi to them— Whoa, look at *this*!”

Deeno, Ramiris, and Veldora had invited themselves in.

“Yep,” I explained to the ignorant Deeno, “Ramiris is right. Diablo's brought his team over. They're all demons, so I have a set of bodies for them.”

“No, I knew that, but...”

If he did, why was he acting so surprised?

“Well after all, if he's gathered *this* many demons together, Diablo must be quite formidable, indeed.”

Oh, the numbers, huh? Yeah, there's a lot. Veldora seemed to have a point. If I wasn't forewarned, I probably would've been just as shocked.

“And not just that. *I'm* a little surprised, too. The three leaders over there... Is it me, or are they really, *really* old?”

Ramiris looked kind of put off. Deeno nodded his agreement.

“Yeah,” I said, “they're Ancients in the ruling class, so they've supposedly been alive at least a thousand years.”

“Huh...?”

“It's gotta be more than that, isn't it?”

Was it? Raphael couldn't have made a mistake.

...Negative. It is a difference of interpretation. With no way of knowing an exact age, estimates given are strictly estimates. If they have lived over a millennium, then it is not out of the question for them to be over 30,000 years old as well.

I supposed that was true. Being over a thousand could potentially make you three, four, even ten thousand years old. Raphael wasn't wrong, but it didn't necessarily have the right estimate, either.

"Yeah, but it's hard to ask a woman for her age..."

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! I have learned that well. It leads to unwanted anger, to be sure."

"Well, one's age isn't all that important anyway. If I've got a trio of ruling-class demons on my side, I'm not gonna ask questions."

"If *you're* fine with that, Rimuru, then so am I."

"Funny way to think about it. *I* sure couldn't do that."

"Heh-heh-heh-heh... Well stated, Sir Rimuru. It is not the years in your life, but the life in your years, am I right?"

Um, maybe?!

Diablo seemed eager to close the book on the subject. As embarrassing as it was for me, I followed his lead.

Deeno and the gang had almost made me forget what I was here for, so I decided to focus on what I'd name these demons. I figured I might as well keep it simple and stick with the exotic-car theme I started with Diablo. It's not like fighting power should be measured like the price tags of cars, but with the Ancient demons in front of me like this, I think they deserved names like that.

"Okay," I boastfully stated at the three body frames in the capsules, "from now on, you three can call yourselves Testarossa, Ultima, and Carrera."

The first among them had beautiful, shimmering white hair, snow-like skin, and—floating amid all that blinding white—elegant, vibrant eyes and soft red lips, which reminded me of the classic Ferrari Testarossa.

Ultima was the perky lady with purple hair and a bubbly personality, and I thought the name perfectly suited her image. Carrera, meanwhile, was every bit a Porsche—blond locks, a cutting stare, a real leader of the pack.

"Wh-whoa! You can't just name them like it's nothing..."

Only Deeno voiced any concern. But the warning already came too late, so there was no point panicking about it now. Look at Ramiris and Veldora. *They* didn't freak out about every little thing I did.

"Par for the course for him, I'd say."

"Yeah! As if Rimuru would act any other way!"

There you had it.

As the three Arch Demons listened on, I worked them through the final stages of the body-claiming process. Muscle covered their golden frames, and in an instant, they were naked personifications of beauty. The magicules kept flowing into them, clothing their bodies. The incubation capsules shattered, unable to withstand their mystical auras. I could see why—thanks to me naming them—they had now evolved into Demon Peers, nothing like they were before. Their power was overwhelming, upgraded to a dimension beyond all common sense.

"Wow," muttered Deeno. "Not even old-era demon lords like Carillon could take those guys. I couldn't even guess how deep they go down, man. Good thing I'm not on hostile terms with Rimuru."

Nobody reacted to him. Only Vester, who showed up later than the others, could be found in the corner whispering "I see nothing, ha-ha-ha, nothing. I know nothing; I'm not involved in this..." The way he was slapping himself on the head and talking incoherently made me feel a little sorry for the guy, but let's just pretend I didn't see that.

This wrapped up my work for the day. I didn't want to drain my magicules all at once, so I proceeded with caution, giving names only when I was confident I had the wherewithal for it. Three a day seemed like a good limit.

Thus, the next few days were spent on a naming spree. I gave out the following names, in order of strength:

- Moss
- Veyron
- Agera
- Esprit

- Zonda
- Cien
- Venom

Testarossa's underlings were Moss and Cien, Ultima had Veyron and Zonda, and Agera and Esprit worked for Carrera. Venom, meanwhile, was Diablo's wild card favorite. Even with Testarossa and the other two alone, I held command over three Demon Peers, which was an insane amount of force. But that was only the start of it.

All seven evolved immediately after I named them, stepping out of their incubation capsules like everything was normal. Two of them had become Demon Peers; four others remained as Arch Demons but seemed a little different—I can't explain how too well, but it's like the blinders had been taken off. Venom also evolved into an Arch Demon, greatly boosting his own fighting power.

To me, it was so much of a surprise that my brain just shut off. I mean, Demon Peers aren't beings you see just pop up all the time. They were legendary figures, more powerful than your average demon lord, and (counting Diablo) I currently had six of them within my borders. Now they weren't seeming so rare to me. What was I even gonna *do* with all this force? I wanted to procure people strong in things like politics and economics. Could they handle that stuff? I sincerely doubted it, but I guessed we'd have to try it out...

As I pondered this, I started thinking up names for the remaining seven hundred. This was my promise to Diablo, and I wanted to see it through to the end. I had, as it turned out, made some miscalculations—Raphael informed me that the magicules that had already built up in the incubation capsules would be enough to name them with. That was good news. Just the motivation I needed, in fact, because I whipped through the whole naming process in just two days.

Now these seven hundred were prostrating themselves before me. Most of them were Lesser Demons to start with, but with a name and a physical body, they had evolved into Greater Demons. As expected, they had all gained enough magicules to be firmly A-ranked territory, and now I had seven hundred of them at my beck and call.

Not that I'm one to talk, but something about this screamed "stat inflation" to me. Some of them even looked for all the world like Arch Demons. Did I just have another *oops* moment? It was simply astonishing. I mean, the first three alone—Testarossa, Ultima, and Carrera—were more than enough already. But it was too late to turn back now. Let's pretend that I didn't notice anything. That was probably the best way to preserve my sanity.

"Sir Rimuru, I cannot contain my joy upon receiving such a wonderful name. And all this force! Please allow me to continue granting you my absolute loyalty!"

Testarossa spoke for everyone there when she addressed me. I nodded my approval. Sure, have a blast, guys.

Thinking about it, this was all Diablo's fault, wasn't it? All I did was keep my promise. *I'm sure he'll educate them for me and stuff.* As irresponsible as it was, that's what I wanted to think.



As Rimuru was attempting to escape reality...

"Black— Er, Diablo, I think I understand why you are so enamored of Sir Rimuru."

"Yes! Amazing, isn't he?"

"He saw us for what we really were, and he concluded that we were not a threat worth considering. Even that old demon lord Deeno turned white as a sheet when he saw us..."

Testarossa and the other two demon leaders were talking among themselves. Rimuru had no way of knowing, but this group had zero intention at all of swearing loyalty to him when they had first showed up. Their old friend Diablo had only convinced them to lend him their powers for a little while.

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They had lived a long time, becoming the strongest their world had to offer—

as were the demons who served them. Two of them were even defined as Prehistoric by humankind—and over all those years, neither of those demons had tasted defeat even once.

This was Moss and Veyron. Moss—an archduke in the demon realms, second in power only to the Origin, a spotless battle record for tens of thousands of years. Veyron—an old, crafty marquis-class noble whose life spanned over four thousand years. He had been defeated by Moss several times before, reincarnating himself each time.

The other servants were no pushovers, either. Agera, a viscount and a Pre-Modern demon. Esprit, also a viscount, who boasted a streak of victories dating back over the past five hundred years. Zonda, a baron who'd been undefeated for three hundred years. Cien, another baron with a similarly long record.

Agera was a special case, a demon who'd been undefeated for three centuries after bowing to the force of Carrera. He preferred fighting with a sword over magic, a rarity among demons. Meanwhile, Esprit, Zonda, and Cien had (like Veyron) repeatedly resurrected themselves. They all got their starts long ago, very close to the Origin's own family tree. Venom was another special case, a demon born with a unique skill; he hadn't lived very long, but his growth and maturation were noteworthy.

Diablo had rounded up this band of standout demons for his plan—and Rimuru, oblivious to all this, just casually gave them names after a moment's thought, an incredibly reckless move. As a result, every demon reborn here had obtained power beyond the natural ways of the world. They were now an unimaginable force, a great assemblage of demons feared by all. Despite numbering less than a thousand, they were an army all by themselves.

They would later come to be known as the Black Corps, Tempest's most powerful military and a horrifying symbol of fear. And the Black Corps was born the moment they were unleashed from their capsules.

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There was a slight blush to Testarossa's lily-white cheeks as she spoke in a low voice.

"Yes, it's so fascinating. It's far more exciting to look at him instead of going through this cycle of destroying nations or jostling for territory with both of you."

Ultima nodded. "Yeah, something tells me it'll be a lot more entertaining working in this country instead of the old grind of torturing out-of-line demons."

"You're right," said Carrera. "Like you said, Sir Rimuru is an amazing figure. He just brushed away the Coercion I threw at him, like I was a naughty kitten! Accepting him as my lord was a truly tempting proposal—and now that I've accepted his name, he's got every bit of my loyalty."

"I almost killed you when you tried that, you know."

Diablo was looking serious but let it slide without major comment, perhaps realizing Carrera wasn't lying.

"Oh, right," interjected Testarossa. "Diablo, I need to thank you. When you spoke to me, I really did think about killing you."

"I'm aware. You always *were* that type of woman. But why did you accept my request at all? I thought you would keep challenging me until I convinced you..."

The Original White that Diablo knew had had an intense personality. She never accepted what anyone said at face value. Battles between demons tended to focus on the knowledge and technical levels of the fighters involved, and even as a Demon Peer, Diablo wasn't completely sure he could defeat the Original White in battle. That's why he found her behavior so fascinating.

"Well, we *are* strong, as you know. Did you think there was anyone in this world stronger than us demons?"

"No," Diablo replied with a smile. It made Testarossa smile even wider.

"Right? Of course not. And that's why, Diablo. I've taken an interest in this master you cherish so much, someone capable of charming one of my cohorts in strength and power. If he proved a trifle, I would have considered killing

him.”

“As would I.”

“Heh. I’m not exactly itching to any longer, but I was planning to pick a fight with him first thing.”

Diablo rolled his eyes, a touch irritated. “I appreciate you not causing an embarrassing scene in front of Sir Rimuru for me, but if you were actually intent on trying that...”

“Don’t worry, Diablo. You take pride in your name, and just like you, I am tremendously proud of the name Testarossa that Sir Rimuru gave me. By that name, I swear my loyalty to him, and I am sure Ultima and Carrera feel the same way.”

“Yeah!”

“Yes, as I said before.”

The three girls nodded in unison. Diablo shook his head, giving them a “What *will* I do with you?” look.

“Of course, I doubt the other rank and filers besides you three will be of much use to Sir Rimuru...but so be it. I don’t want you to cause me any more trouble, so I *will* expect you to follow Sir Rimuru’s and my orders.”

“So be it, indeed! I must repay you for introducing me to Sir Rimuru.”

“Oh, uh, I’m in agreement, too!”

“If I can help out Sir Rimuru and dispense of *you* as well, all the better. Until then, I *will* allow you to command me.”

Diablo still felt irritated, but if Testarossa and the others promised to heed his orders, he felt no further need to remain. There existed in the world only a small number of people Diablo was willing to put up with, and the girls’ being a part of this list demonstrated just how unique they were.

And so unbeknownst to Rimuru, the chain of command was set in stone.



...This is the sort of conversation Diablo reportedly had, or didn’t have, or

whatever, as he gave me his report. I was trying to enjoy a little peace for a change, but ah well.

"...And that is how we worked matters out. They are now under my command, but there's still no telling what kind of nonsense they might pull. I'm sure you have little to worry about from them, Sir Rimuru, but regardless, stay on your guard!"

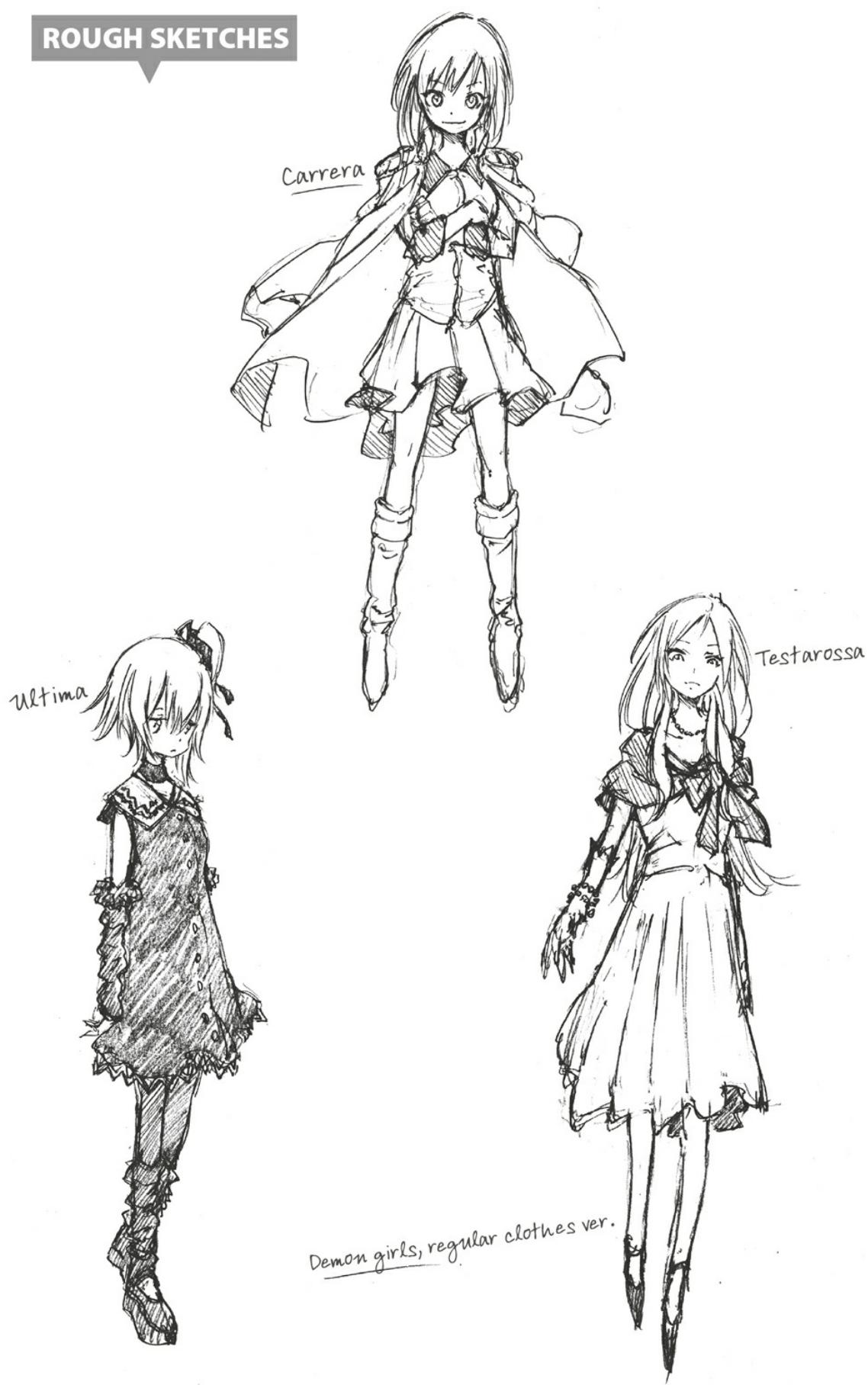
"Um, all right..."

What was he going on about? *He's* the one who brought them over here! But it was too late to rant and rave about it. I just wanted one day of peace and harmony in my life, and now it looks like I had more problems. And here I thought we had more allies now...

Of course, I didn't have the slightest idea how true any of this was, and if they're under Diablo's command, they're all his responsibility anyway. What? What about the guy who appointed him? Gee, I dunno, who *was* that?

So I decided to just toss the problem completely aside.

ROUGH SKETCHES



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
3

A DISTURBING PRESENCE

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A DISTURBING PRESENCE

I had a rather unexpected boost to my military, and really, having more friends was something to celebrate. I decided to promptly meet with Diablo to discuss how to put these demons to work, and I'd have Testarossa and the other top demons join us as representatives to get their feedback.

"So there are three posts I'd like to assign as soon as possible. I need a diplomatic attaché to make decisions abroad on my behalf, a chief prosecutor to investigate the evils unfolding within Tempest, and a chief judiciary official to provide fair and balanced judgment over disputes. I just happen to have you three here, so what do you think about taking those jobs?"

I kept my tone casual, knowing full well just how insane this was. None of these jobs were particularly easy, and my cabinet may object to these appointments anyway, although it'd be Diablo's job to shut them up. Besides, these posts emphasized fairness; I didn't want people trying to curry favor with them, so I thought naming people as close to me as possible was the best bet. If any of them tried anything rebellious or illegal as part of their posts, I could just call upon Diablo to purge them. It made things easier for me, in a way.

"I would be honored to serve as a diplomatic officer."

"Wow, evils even bigger than me? That sounds exciting!"

"My judgments are always fair. I will do everything I can to live up to your expectations!"

Whoa. They accepted them without even listening to the job descriptions.

"Are you sure? I think they're pretty tough jobs..."

"I am eager to begin, my lord."

"Yeah! I'm good at investigations and stuff!"

“I will provide equal measures of death to all.”

Um, I don’t think that’s how the jobs work, exactly! Now I was even more nervous. I glanced at Diablo. He had a smug smile, telling me all I needed to know about his thoughts. Here was a man thinking *Thank god I palmed this trouble off on someone else.* Yeah, he’d never agree to being a diplomat.

“Listen to me. Being a diplomatic attaché means speaking for me as a member of the Council of the West. Once we deploy our military across the West, you’ll also be responsible for commanding them all. It’s an important job, you understand.”

“Yes, I do understand.”

Testarossa softly smiled at me.

“Testa is a wise woman, you know. I guarantee you that she’ll never do anything to harm your position.”

No, Diablo, you just don’t wanna do the job, do you? Diablo’s guarantees weren’t worth much in my mind, but maybe Testarossa *did* have a lot of wisdom.

“Well, with the laws we’re writing for our nation as well, she’ll need to understand and explain them to other nations...”

“Do not fear, Sir Rimuru. I have memorized them all.”

Testarossa then began reciting the in-progress version of the laws of Tempest, stuff we were still trial-and-erroring our way through. She even pointed out some of the flaws in the current version.

“Okay, you’re hired! I got no complaints now, that’s for sure. It’s gonna be easy for you to lose your temper in the Council, but remember—you have our nation’s good name on your shoulders. Whatever you do, do not let anger get the best of you. Okay?”

“I am ready to serve, Sir Rimuru. And should push come to shove, I will leave no evidence of my involvement.”

No, um, that’s not the *problem*, exactly... But there was no denying Testarossa’s talent. Nobody else was as qualified, and given my antics at the

earlier Council meeting, I wasn't exactly a good role model. Let's see how this shakes out anyway.

So I had now appointed Testarossa as my councillor, but the other two had their own talents.

"Okay, me next!"

Ultima immediately began rattling off the parts of the legal code we were in the midst of enacting. She was every bit Testarossa's match in intelligence.

"My lord," Carrera continued, "we are a race that respects our contracts. We are gifted in finding loopholes in regulations, and I guarantee we will never miss anything a common person could discover. We will also never be swayed by bribes. Anyone who wishes to subjugate us must do so by force, and only a small handful of demon lords stands a chance at that."

She couldn't possibly lose to anyone, huh? The fact that she didn't say that outright indicated that some demon lords really *were* more powerful than her. I could name one off the top of my head easily—that redhead—but that's her problem, not mine. What mattered was that Carrera seemed dedicated to judging all criminals fairly.

"Okay, you're hired. I'll be expecting big things from all three of you!"

"""Yes, my lord!"""

Thus, I had three Demon Peers assigned to three important posts. Luckily, it was a smart move on my part. Soon, Tempest would become a constitutional state like few others, its systems and procedures providing an example that spread across the land.

These laws apply to me as well, by the way. I'll have to be careful not to get arrested for giving or taking bribes.

*

So now we had a constitution, part of the elite club of nations that made one. It was still in the testing stages, but our government was divided into three sections and functioning. Ultima and Carrera were dedicated to their work—and I have to add, they had some talented people working under them as well. They organized their respective departments in the blink of an eye, exercising

the full extent of their powers.

Ultima had also taken a shine to Rogurd, calling him Rog and following all his instructions. Rogurd even reciprocated, calling her M'lady and treating her almost as nicely as his own daughter. Rogurd, in fact, had no idea who Ultima really was. He was a bold, courageous man, but if he found out she was such a powerful demon, even *he* might start acting all sensitive around her. In consideration of that, I only told him that she was "scouted" by Diablo. It's her work that counts anyway, so I saw this as harmless.

Carrera, our new chief justice, was also doing well. Rugurd, our attorney general, was back in our administrative office; our department of justice was now its own organization, so it'd no longer be affiliated with that branch. That didn't mean it could do whatever it wanted, though. The administrative, legislative, and judiciary branches of the government all kept an eye on one another now.

Rugurd, in his role, was observing and supporting Carrera, my appointee. From what I heard, despite any eccentricities in her personal behavior, she was a talented worker. She'd never fall to bribery or violence, so I suppose Rugurd accepted her. Good to see. There's no such thing as a perfect political system, so we just need to solve problems as they come up.

Now we had to provide the Council with draft copies of our relevant legal codes.

"So, Testarossa, are you all ready?"

"Yes, Sir Rimuru. Moss has made all the necessary arrangements."

Testarossa, that living beauty, was elegantly relaxing in front of me. She poured out some tea, offering it to me. It was good. Shuna's tea was always first-class and Shion's was up there as well, but Testarossa's was surprisingly delightful. The aroma had depth to it, the taste thick and rich. There was no bitterness, and even though I took it without sugar, there was a hint of refreshing sweetness to it.

"I did not know you brewed your own tea, Testa. Color me surprised."

I felt Diablo's eyes open wide behind me.

"Hee-hee! Well, this is a special gift for you, Sir Rimuru. None for *you*, you understand."

"...That is fine. As long as you understand that my post is above yours, you may live your private life as you like."

Diablo prepared his own tea as he said this. I wasn't sure whether they were bitter rivals or just bickering friends. It didn't *seem* very strained between them, but I wouldn't call them good buddies, either.

"It's interesting, though, isn't it? The way other nations are reacting to us. Some are trying to curry favor, and some are trying to use us to their advantage. I'd say less than half are openly welcoming us; the majority are still rather suspicious."

Such was Testarossa's sudden evaluation of the scene. It was almost like she was there to see it, which was odd.

"Where'd you get that info from?"

"Oh, my pardons, Sir Rimuru. I enlisted Moss to investigate for me, so I may better serve you."

Moss again, huh? Pretty talented dude. One of the guys who evolved into a Demon Peer; stronger than Veyron and second in power only to the trio of ladies here. He was good at intelligence gathering, too?

"How accurate was the info he got you?"

Was it acquired via magic, or did he ask around more directly? If it was trustworthy, then fine, but if not, it'd just get in the way. I decided to check with Testarossa.

"Well, Moss has a special ability where he can deploy a large number of small, discrete Replicants across a wide range. To Moss, collecting and analyzing information across the world, all at once, is like child's play."

That's...pretty amazing. I gave myself a mental pat on the back. He was a nice pickup.

"Ah. Sounds reassuring, then. I'll introduce him to Soei sometime soon, and then maybe they can work together on intel. Together, I'm sure they can make

up for each other's deficits, you know? That'd be good to see."

"My! All those complimentary words... I think I'm going to be jealous of Moss."

Testarossa smiled.

"Ah, enough joking..."

Now a figure I hadn't noticed before was standing behind Testarossa, breaking into a cold sweat. He didn't really stand out much, but this must be Moss. Veyron cut a very gentlemanly figure with his handlebar mustache, but Moss looked like the kind of cute-as-a-button kid you'd see anywhere. By appearances, he'd seem to be in the fifth or sixth grade (?) maybe. *Strong* would never be how you'd describe him. Was he really that much of a talent?

"Hey, um, about the information you picked up— Can we trust it? I mean, we just got done kicking out a bunch of councillors plotting against us. I can accept it if people are wary, but are there still nations out there seeking to take advantage of us?"

Not to brag or anything, but I think our nation was kind of badass by this point. Trying to hoodwink a nation as badass as ours made me wonder about the mental skills of the leaders running them. Honestly, I'd be far more likely to believe Moss had it wrong here.

"Moss, can you explain the situation to Sir Rimuru?"

Surprisingly, it was Diablo ordering Moss, not Testarossa.

"Y-yes, sir. The region south of Tempest, focused on the Kingdom of Blumund, is generally friendly to us. However, our intelligence does not extend far into the north, and with many of the nobles there, it is unclear just how much we know about them is true. As for the councillors pushed out recently, it seems that even if they told the truth to their benefactors, their stories were not widely believed. This is speculation based on rumors, so I cannot attest to its accuracy very much, but I *can* state that certain members of royalty from several nations are plotting against us."

Moss's power involved being able to listen in on conversations, so it was up to him, and us, to judge how accurate those conversations are. It was still really

helpful, though.

"If we can pick up on suspicions before they spread, that can help us take countermeasures fast."

"Yes, my lord."

"Testarossa, can I leave this matter to you?"

"Of course, Sir Rimuru. Are we in agreement that the relevant nations need to be thrown into ruin?"

No, we are not.

"That's going too far! Just force their rulers to take responsibility for it."

"I understand."

"And try to avoid bloodshed while you're at it, please?"

"As you wish. I will not do anything that gives Tempest a bad reputation, at least."

Despite her flowery smile, Testarossa was really giving me the creeps. I worried a little over whether assigning her this was the right idea, but you need to test out these things. Still, if we acted *too* nice to our rivals, it could send our whole nation crashing down. Being seen as a pushover will just lead to more needless damage in the future.

"All right, then! Proceed so our nation retains its current dignity, but don't be afraid to show them the full brunt of Tempest's gravitas!"

And so Testarossa was my new Council representative.

*

That took care of the biggest problems. Those had been giving me headaches for the past few months, but starting today, my mind would be much more at ease.

Huh? Was I retreating the lab to do a lot of whizbang research? Well, you know, I need to at least *look* like I'm trying down there, or I'll come off like a charlatan dropping in for fun.

Being a grown-up is knowing how to balance social responsibilities like that. In

a way, you want to avoid making a one hundred percent effort in the workplace, because then that'll be expected of you every time. A *real* performer knows how to execute a “full effort” they can provide on a regular basis. Work’s supposed to be fun anyway.

...Of course, I can try to sound like I know it all here, but that’s still just an ideal. And I guess that if I’m satisfied with myself right now and have an environment like that to work in, I must be truly happy.

Anyway, today I decided to check out our new school building, which we recently completed construction on. The children I brought in from Englesia will study here, together with our own. Like I said to Yuuki, the best way to prepare children for adulthood is to get them interacting with one another—and in a school with nothing but monster children, I worried my kids would have trouble adjusting to human society later.

With *this* school, there’d be no worries. We now had a lot of adventurers and other people coming here for work, many of whom brought their entire families, children included. In many low-income families, children were obliged to work as well, but I prohibited that by law. A child’s job is to play—and to examine and study whatever they were interested in. I wanted to have humans and monsters learning together, in the same classrooms, and in the future I wanted to see this grow into races and species *working* together. That was the theory behind this setup.

Plus, we didn’t *only* have children learning in this school. Grown adults were mastering the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic here, too. They were highly motivated, given how these skills were rapidly becoming necessary in Tempestian life. Remaining illiterate would narrow their work options and potentially lead to errors that’d cause trouble for their coworkers—and adults understood that, which is why so many were studying now. One common refrain you hear in the classroom is “Am I ever gonna *use* this stuff in the future?” Not here, though. The sight of grown-ups studying so hard actually seemed to inspire the children watching them; they didn’t want to get left behind.

Addition and subtraction were one thing, mind you, but literacy is another. Those classes were difficult even for me, and it seemed like Masayuki was in the

same boat. We were fluent in conversation and could read just fine, but writing was a challenge. In my case, I could set Raphael to autopilot and cover for that, but without its aid, I wasn't sure I could pass even a basic literacy exam here. I had been shamelessly putting off addressing this—if I'm good *now*, why bother?—but for this, at least, I felt like I was cheating a little.

My kids, of course, were doing great. I gave them some manga translated into this world's language to motivate them, and that wound up being a huge success. They were carrying it around with them all the time, and it was getting popular even with students outside the reading classes. Kenya and the others, being the first kids to possess this manga, were uber-popular in class. Between those comics and his natural talent for winning fights, Kenya was already kind of the boss of the schoolyard.

"Come on, boys! Quit playing around and help me clean the classroom!"

Oops. Now Alice was mad. She had comfortably settled into the class-president role, I see.

"Huh? Why do we have to do *that* stuff?"

"Whoa, Ken, you don't want to make Alice angry!"

"Aw, shut up, Ryota! Today I'm gonna whup Alice and become the *real* boss around here!"

Eesh. What are you, *children*? ...Oh, I guess you are.

Apparently, Alice was the true boss of this clique—maybe that was why Kenya kept flaring up at her. I suppose it's like a lovestruck boy wheedling a girl in order to get her attention. It usually has little effect...or typically, the opposite effect. You need to be nice to the people you're trying to court, and if Kenya doesn't get that yet, he has a lot to learn. All he's doing right now, at least, is pissing her off.

"I told you, y'know! I told you I'll show you just how scary I can be!"

Alice, for her part, was acting less than her supposedly mature self. But she's only eleven, of course, and I wouldn't expect anything else from a sixth grader. Plus, everyone was already used to her act.

"Hey, who do you think will win this time?"

"Oh, it's gotta be the Empress."

"Yeah. She's the youngest and the strongest out of us all. Kenya's pretty good, too, but he's a bad matchup against the Empress."

"Like, he's in love with her! No way he could ever beat her."

Pretty cruel.

"Hey, Gail! Quit sayin' all that crap over there!"

"Yeah! No way Kenya has a thing for me. Are you crazy or what?"

Gail had no qualms about revealing Kenya's secret. But despite Kenya's objections, Alice just laughed the whole thing off. Hmm... Maybe they were still a little too young for love. Or maybe they were just fine, actually. The children, monster and human alike, all looked on with big smiles; they must've understood there was no bad blood involved. Gail, being the oldest, kind of took a leadership role with the others anyway, so I assumed he'd put a stop to matters before they developed into problems.

I could've just kept my mouth shut and watched them, but not today. Hinata was due in later. "Okay, kids, that's enough!" I said as I entered the room. "No horseplay in the classroom, all right?"

"Mr. Tempest!"

Chloe all but tackled me from the side as I entered. I never saw it coming; she must've improved her skills as of late. In fact, she must've noticed my presence long before I came in.

"M-Mr. Tempest?! No fair, Chloe!"

Alice was almost as quick to respond, hugging me with just as much force as Chloe. Good. They're still at that "cute" stage.

Then someone else dog-piled on me from the rear.

"It's great to see you again, Mr. Tempest!"

A charming little girl with a bowl cut leaped in front of me. She wore an elegant kimono and seemed about as young as Alice—but what really made her

unique were her fox ears.

Hmm, I don't remember meeting a girl like this before...but I feel like I ought to know her. Could it be...?

"Are you...Kumara?"

"That's right!" came her peppy reply.

Oh, right. Kumara was an upper-level monster who evolved after I named her, and I guess transforming into a human was among her new skills. I'm pretty sure I granted custody of her to Hinata, alongside Kenya and the rest. They were attending school regularly now that the building was completed, but I figured Kumara was manning the labyrinth or something in the meantime. In fact, she joined the others at school, and it looked like she had friends as well, so it appeared that things turned out fine.



"Whoa, Mr. Tempest is here?"

Now Kenya and Ryota noticed me, lagging a little behind the girls. They were drowned out by the other children.

"W-wowwww! Mr. Tempest!!"

"It's really him! Whoaaaa!"

"Wait'll I tell Dad back home!"

It was a big event, causing such a clamor that now the other teachers were coming in to see what was up.

"M-My lord?! You should have let me know in advance! I would have guided you around!"

"Are you kidding me?! I'm the vice-principal! If anyone's giving Sir Rimuru a tour, it's me!"

"Nonsense! Sir Rimuru named *me* the principal, and this is *one* responsibility I'll never palm off on my staff!"

Another big furor.

These teachers were mainly retired adventurers, along with a few merchants Mjöllmile recruited from Blumund; we paid them a monthly salary. Our principal was one of the elders from the goblin villages. He was no good as a teacher, but he was great at settling disputes fast, and I wanted him to keep an eye on the kids and ensure the monster students weren't being ostracized. The rest of the staff was all human, including a paladin we brought on as a special lecturer, and Hinata stopped in to look after Kenya and the others when she was free.

It all seemed to be going well, really. The paladin looked out of his comfort zone at first, but now he was instructing our monster and human students as equals, with no prejudice involved. That was a huge help.

"Yeah, um, call today a kind of stealth meeting. I had some business with Kenya's class."

"Oh, is that the case? Well, I hope you'll be interested in sitting in on a class

next time!"

"Indeed. Just let us know a date and time, and we'll show you a perfect class!"

The teachers and students all nodded at one another. But hang on. What did he mean, a perfect class? I didn't need them putting on an act for me. What was the point?

"Whoa, whoa, don't put Sir Rimuru on the spot!"

This chaos would've continued awhile longer were it not for Fritz, the paladin in charge of my class today. Having a captain of the Crusaders preside over a class is pretty amazing in itself, I thought.

"You're teaching today, Captain Fritz?"

"Aw, Sir Rimuru, no need for that captain stuff. Just Fritz is fine."

"Oh? Then you can drop the sir stuff with me, Fritz."

"I could hardly do *that*. Humor me with that much, if you wouldn't mind. I might get dirty looks."

Fritz smiled at me. He struck me as the last person to care about honorifics like that, but not even he could get *that* informal. And neither could I, really. Calling the heads of other states by their first names would be pretty stupid unless I was a real big shot.

"Ah yeah. If we were alone, sure, but not in a place like this, huh?"

"Thanks for understanding," Fritz said with a wink and a smile. Getting winked at by a man wasn't all that gratifying to me, but I did like his approach.

"But anyway, thanks for helping around this school."

"Oh, stop! Compared with Lady Hinata's harsh training, it's like heaven around here. There's free food; the children respect me... People in our group are fighting for this job, lemme tell you."

I see. Not sure I really wanted to know about that. I appreciated how Fritz was being upfront with me, but I didn't want to adopt his knack for creating awkward scenes...especially given that my Magic Sense had just picked up something.

"Oh? Well, *that's* good, Fritz. My harsh training, huh? With *your* talents, I thought I was going easy, but maybe I shouldn't have bothered."

The cold voice was pointed straight at Fritz as Hinata appeared. A wave of anxiety coursed across the room, as both the children and the grown-ups stood up straight and froze. Even the faculty did, which I didn't know whether to laugh at or be concerned about. Fritz, of course, had it the worst.

"G-gehh... L-Lady Hinata?! That, um, you misunderstand me! It was just a figure of speech, you could say..."

He tried to defend himself—in vain, I thought. *This* is exactly why situational awareness was so important. I prayed for his future happiness as I promptly hightailed it out of there.

*

We moved into the labyrinth. Hinata was here now, so I also took along the five kids and Kumara. Fritz—well, let's not talk about him.

"I've been expecting you, Sir Rimuru...and you as well, Lady Hinata."

"Ah, it's the elder himself! Glad to see you're well."

We were greeted by Hakuro, who apparently had kindled a friendship with Hinata at some point. They were both smiling as they greeted each other.

"Sorry to make you take time out of your busy schedule."

"Oh, it's perfectly fine. We've taken care of all our major problems for the moment."

"You did? Did you figure out who you'll send to the Council?"

"Yes, Diablo attracted some new talent to our group. She's been named Testarossa, and I'll be glad to introduce you next time."

"...She's '*been named*'? There's a lot I want to say about that, but we don't have any time to waste, so I'll hold my tongue."

"Um... Sorry?"

"It's fine. I already know how much you're lacking in common sense. Asking for more details will just give me another headache."

She may've been whining a little, but pretending not to hear what Hakuro just said was probably the best thing for her, yes.

"Anyway, I'm here today because I wanted to show you how these kids were progressing. I've been teaching them alongside Sir Hakuro, but I want *you* to see what they're capable of, too."

Hmm... Not sure how I felt about that, but let's play along.

"If you're phrasing it like that, I guess they've kind of grown?"

"*Kind of*" is one way to put it. Once you see them in action, you'll get it. This labyrinth is *so* useful, isn't it? You can fight at full blast without worrying about dying."

Hinata grinned, projecting as scary an image as always. She always had this streak of intimidation that bordered on the sadistic.

"All right. How about I summon some Replicants to take them on?"

With some choice jiggles, I spat a body out of me. This was a human-shaped clone, me remaining in my original slime self.

"All right! It's been ages since we fought Mr. Tempest!"

"This is so great. Now he can see just how much I've grown!"

Kenya and Alice, the two main fighters of the crew, gleefully took positions in the front row. Next to them, the more taciturn Gail was doing a few quick stretches while Ryota, despite his usual reluctance, was looking just as excited—if he wasn't trying to run away, he must've had *some* confidence, at least.

And as for Chloe and Kumara, the last two:

"I'll head out front first!"

"Huhhhh? But I wanna fight Mr. Tempest, too!"

They were just as enthusiastic.

"All rarin' to go, huh? I can take you all on at once, but how about we try some one-on-one battles?"

Everyone smiled at me, excited to battle—and I certainly didn't mind humoring them now and then. With that ill-advised optimism in mind, we

began the mock fight.

.....

.....

...

One hour later:

"Y-you've gotten *way* too strong, guys!"

My shocked voice echoed across the labyrinth.

Kenya was clearly stronger than a rank-and-file paladin. He formed a perfect combination with the light elemental spirit inside him, unleashing a litany of sword moves from his weird, manga-like stance. Ryota wasn't as good as Kenya with a blade, but with his mix of water and wind spirit magic, he demonstrated a nimble skill with battle. Gail was a steady presence in the fight, focused on defense and careful movement, and he handled his sword and shield well. He also had good control over earth-based spirit magic, making him a bit like fighting an iron wall.

Thus, the boys were surprising enough, but the girls were even more amazing. Now I could see why Alice was nicknamed the Empress. I don't know where she was taking them out from, but she now had several dolls of magisteel that resembled Beretta and seemed almost alive as they lunged at me. She was every bit the Golem Master she was, and she wasn't messing around with toy dolls today. If she faced anyone besides me, they'd be in real trouble.

But in addition to that, Alice had a finisher move where she willed a huge number of swords into the air and doggedly sent them flying my way. *That* was a surprise. Their paths were irregular and hard to predict; without my Predict Future Attack skill, I might've been run through several times. Another few years, and she could probably be an even match for a paladin captain.

As for Kumara:

"Okay, guys, time to show Sir Rimuru what we're made of!"

With that shout, she released her full force, nine tails shimmering behind her cutesy figure. The next moment, each tail transformed into a magical beast. I

kind of anticipated this, but still, having eight beasts to deal with at once was a surprise. Even two of those beasts boasted a lot of strength—I could see why Clayman treated them as a kind of last resort. And now there were eight of them.

The ninth one was apparently associated with Kumara herself, while the other eight were all magical beasts. Each one was over A in rank, so not even your average paladin stood a chance, and they all shared in one another's battle experience, so they worked well as a team. At this point, I think they could possibly beat Fritz, making Kumara a little girl with the power of one of the Ten Great Saints. It'd be hilarious, except for the fact that it was all true. If those beasts gained any more experience, the strength level would just be incomprehensible. A worthy guardian for Floor 90 of the labyrinth, no doubt about that.

So that brings us to Chloe.

"Heee-yah!!"

It was a cute little shout, coming from her, but there was nothing cute about how she held a sword. She was faster than Kenya—or really, it wasn't even something worth talking about on that level. I fought against six adversaries today, but Chloe was the only one I had to get *real* serious about. Or maybe I'm thinking about it the other way around. If I *didn't* get serious, then Chloe was now strong enough to be a danger to me. I wouldn't *die* if I went easy on her, mind you, but I didn't want to look uncool in front of all the kids. As a responsible grown-up, I couldn't embarrass myself around them. So that's why. Don't call it immature, all right? I'll throw all generosity aside if it means protecting what little pride I have.

"I can see why you did that."

"As can I. It is only with the young Chloe that I get serious in our mock battles, after all."

Really...? So Chloe was now tough enough to challenge Hinata and Hakuro, both above me in skill? It shocked me to the core. This innocent little girl was now making me shudder.



"No, dude, that was really great!"

"Right? Hearing Mr. Tempest say that gets me all pumped up!"

"Yeah, but Chloe totally stole the show today. I mean, you call me the Empress, but I still can't beat her in combat."

"Ah, Chloe's on another level. She looks all meek at first glance, but rile her and she's a menace. *You're* not scary at all when you're mad, Alice, but with Chloe, I'm cryin' uncle pretty much immediately."

Ryota and Gail nodded next to the indignant Alice. The boys all seemed in agreement.

"Kenya's real good, too, though. It's just that his stance doesn't really match his skill set. If he worked on his stuff a little more, I think he'd be able to string some good combos together."

It was a very manga-like stance, but it wasn't inherently a bad one. It was just a poor fit for traditional swordplay, forcing him to take extra steps throughout his approach. If he could get rid of that, I think he could be stronger.

"That's the thing. No matter how much I instruct him, he's still sticking with that..."

Hinata must have noticed as well. She dejectedly sighed.

"So what? I learned this stance directly from Masayuki!"

Huh? Did that fool give Kenya a little uninvited advice? I mean, the stance *looked* cool and was effective in its own way...but as someone who knows just how powerful he really is, it just seemed so wrong for him. No *wonder* it looked like something from a fighting manga—Masayuki probably lifted it directly from one series or another.

"Well, I suppose just telling him won't work. Let's teach him so he gets rid of his bad habits and polishes up his combo strikes some more."

Unlike Hinata, Hakuro wasn't hung up about doing things the standard way. He had a few off-book moves of his own, so if Kenya found this approach effective, Hakuro didn't mind going with that. It wasn't absolutely the wrong thing for him, either, so I'll let Hakuro work that out over time.

More importantly:

"Chloe, your sword moves are exactly like Hinata's, aren't they? Very pretty. A good example for everyone."

She smiled brightly at the compliment. "Yeah! It's the same as what Shizu used, so I tried to copy them!"

"They're not the easiest things in the world to copy, you know. I'm still reliant on skills for them, but you learned them entirely based on your own talents. I think you should be proud of that."

"Indeed! I've instructed a great many students, but I've never seen so much raw talent from one person. It's nothing short of ominous, in fact!"

Hinata and Hakuro were both tough teachers, and they had nothing but praise for Chloe. I guess it really *was* talent. She was still young, but I couldn't even guess what would happen as she matured. I wasn't sure if I was fearing it or looking forward to it.

It turned out, however, that Hinata had some other business today.

"I called you here in part so you could see how these children were progressing. They all have talent, but they're still young. I wanted you to have an accurate gauge of how they are right now, to ensure we don't guide them down the wrong path."

That was always a consideration for me, of course, but I accepted the word of caution. Shizu had watched these kids, after all, so to Hinata, I suppose they were kind of like her own siblings.

"All right. We have a lot of people in town who can guide them, Hakuro included. Me too, for that matter. We'll make sure they don't go down any wayward paths."

"Hee-hee! I thought you'd say that...but just in case, you know."

She was *such* a worrywart. I loved how kind she really was, despite that cold facade she always put up.

"So did you have some other reason to be here today?" I asked her as the kids all play-fought against Hakuro.

"Yes. In fact, it's the main reason."

She stopped there, eyes turned toward the children. Even Hakuro had trouble dealing with five of those kids at once. He could keep up with their moves, yes, but if he delayed his reactions for even an instant, he'd suffer a lethal blow. In terms of pure physical talent, someone like Kenya was easily above him. He couldn't let his guard down for a moment.

Kumara, by the way, wasn't participating in this. If she *really* wanted to fight, she'd overwhelm Hakuro with pure numbers. But even without her, Chloe gave the kids a decisive advantage, so I thought this was a good pairing. It was, in a way, a grand demonstration of fighting skills, one boundlessly entertaining to watch.

"Isn't that amazing?" Hinata softly said. "Especially at her age."

She was looking at Chloe. The other four—Kenya, Ryota, Gail, and Alice—were all impressive enough in their own right, but Chloe was simply extraordinary. Without her, Hakuro could easily wrap up this battle without breaking a sweat.

The mock battle came to an end, all the children panting as Hakuro started giving them advice. If they were fighting *this* hard every session, I could see why they were advancing so fast.

Hinata then moved on to the main topic at hand. "Sorry," she said, focusing on me again. "I just got caught up watching them. But Lady Luminus, you know, she's pestering me about when we'll hold the music-exchange program. I figured she was interested in the idea, but she's even more enthusiastic about it than I thought. So I thought I'd let you know."

That was unexpected...or to be exact, I had been busy with so many other things that I kind of procrastinated on that proposal.

"Ohhh, right, she really liked our recital, didn't she? Well, Baton and the orchestra are still practicing regularly. They've been expanding their repertoire."

"Honestly, I'm amazed you remembered all those songs. I can't read sheet music or anything, so writing down the songs in my head just seems impossible

to me."

Wow, so Hinata actually admits to being bad at something? She didn't seem too enthused about the concert, either. Maybe she was tone deaf. A feeling of superiority washed over me, even though I was wholly reliant on Raphael for that stuff.

"Well, maybe we ought to stop by soon, then."

"Yeah. Transporting your musicians might be a pain, though. We could send over a few paladins and transport them via a Warp Portal, a few people at a time."

"I'd appreciate that, thank you. It's a big orchestra, and they have a lot of bulky instruments with them. A wagon caravan didn't seem practical to me."

Lubelius, if I recall, was protected by a large Barrier that prevented anyone from teleporting directly in. We'd need some other kind of rapid transport. A train system would instantly solve this problem, but that was for the future—no point pining for it right now. Plus, of course, this wasn't just about transporting the musicians. They all had their own instruments, which really complicated matters. If we used horse-drawn carriages, they'd have to traverse a highway that's not even completed yet, and traveling down unfinished roads could lead to bumpy patches and broken gear, so I'd like to avoid that if I could.

I was really starting to envy the dragon airships the emperor of Thalion used. A train trip would be fun enough, but if you *really* wanted to cut down travel times, air was the only way to go. Land and sea were your best bet for transporting goods, but for recreational and other travel, a plane flight was always the fastest and easiest way.

Thus, I appreciated Hinata's offer. I'd be helping as well, of course, so we began to make plans for the big travel day. As we went over all the details, the resting children gathered around us.

"Are you going somewhere with Miss Hinata, Mr. Tempest?"

I explained to Chloe that we were holding a music concert in Lubelius.

"I wanna go, too!"

"Me too!"

"I'd probably fall asleep during it, but if Chloe and Alice are coming, so am I!"

"And me!"

"Guess I'll join you, then. If I let them go alone, no telling *what* they'll do."

Chloe led the fray as they all clamored to come along. Hmm... What to do? I supposed it'd help broaden their horizons and all that, but I couldn't guarantee that it'd be completely safe.

Kumara looked up at me as I pondered this.

"I—I want to go, too..."

Being the guardian of Floor 90, she had a job to attend to, but she just looked so forlorn to me as she asked. Maybe the logical part of her brain told her this wasn't doable. But it's totally natural for a kid to want to join her friends on a trip, and I wasn't in the habit of turning that down.

"Aw, there's no need to be so hesitant. Don't be afraid to say what you want. I'll indulge you at least a little bit."

I didn't want her turning out like Milim, but it wouldn't do for her to lose her childlike charms, either. I patted Kumara on the head as I spoke. It felt just as soft and fuzzy as she was in fox-cub form. I suppose the kind of warmth it gave you was something that transcended boundaries between monsters and people...although Kumara was in human form here, so maybe I'm just thinking nonsense.

"Whoo-hoo! And no school while we're on the road, too!"

"Why do you want out of school so bad, Ken? You have fun in there."

"What are you, stupid? School's fun, yeah, but getting to play around while everyone else is in class... It makes you feel special, y'know?"

"I get what you mean. I don't want people to think I'm like *you*, but I'm kinda excited, too."

"Right? That sort of thing!"

I had yet to say yes to anyone, but the kids were already mentally packing

their bags and openly talking about cutting school. I get it. I really do, but I never tried doing that when I was a kid...

"Ah, fine. But you'll have extra homework to do while you're out, all right?"

"Huh?! Aw, c'mon, Mr. Tempest!"

I ignored Kenya's protests. He needed to learn early on that you can't always get *everything* you want. Life can often be unfair, so this was my way of toughening him up. Call it a rare parental gesture from me. I wasn't harassing or punishing them at all, so hopefully they would understand.

"I'm just happy being with you, Mr. Tempest," said Chloe, the original instigator, with a grin. Well, whatever. It'll make for some good memories.

"You're so easy on them."

"Oh, are you against it, Hinata?" I asked, frowning my disapproval at her.

"*Pfft.* I didn't say *that*."

She looked peeved but put up no more opposition. We're good, then. So now we had our basic plan ready—a tandem music concert in Lubelius, a team of musicians headed over there, and a bunch of kids joining the fray.

*

And here we were—the Holy Empire of Lubelius.

Already, the kids were agape at the exotic sight of Lubelius's city streets. Baton and the musicians, meanwhile, were tensed up, unable to stay at ease. Diablo was with me as my secretary, as well as Shion—I had her stay home during my last trip, so she got to come along this time. Instead, Veldora was watching over things in Tempest; I reminded him of his vital position as labyrinth master, which kept him from getting any funny ideas. Really, Veldora could go to pretty much any nation *besides* this one—he and Luminus in the same place was just far too dangerous.

Report. The chances of a problem occurring are one hundred percent.

You couldn't spell it out more clearly than that. If there's a big mine in the ground in front of you, you're not gonna march straight for it.

Hinata was our guide here. "Welcome to Lubelius," she casually told us. "The

Holy Emperor himself will be greeting you shortly.”

She was talking about Louis, and I had insider knowledge, of course, that he was only playing the role of Lubelius’s leader. Baton and the others, however, didn’t—it was classified information, and I told the kids to keep mum about it around the orchestra.

“So tonight there’s going to be a dinner party to formally greet all of you. Tomorrow, we’ll be tuning things at the concert hall, and we’re slated to begin rehearsals the day after that. The show’s scheduled for three days from now. Does all of that sound good to you?”

“What do you think, Baton?”

“Y-yes, Sir Rimuru! I think that will be fine. Everything’s been magically transported here already, and I believe it all made the trip safely. We’ll need to adjust our setup for the concert hall’s size, but I understand they have an orchestra of their own, so I don’t anticipate any issues.”

Sounds good to me.

“You sure, though? You’re only getting one day for rehearsals.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Here in Lubelius, yes, but we’ve never missed a day preparing for an event like this back at home. We’ll all work as one to answer the call!”

Great, then! If he was that confident about this, I was sure their extended efforts would pay off. Talent really *can* beat hard work sometimes, but then again, hard work is never gonna betray you. It connects to confidence, giving you the internal strength you need to express your full skills in any situation. Keep up a regular effort, and you’ll truly start believing in yourself. I internally gave Baton’s response an A-plus as I nodded at him; if he was that confident, I felt safe expecting big things from them.

That night, his orchestra received the royal treatment from the nobility. For the most part, it made them more nervous and awkward than ever.

“Um, Sir Rimuru, we’re just regular citizens of Tempest, you know. Is it really all right to be afforded rooms like these?”

We were traveling with over a hundred people, and they were all given their

own room to stay in, each with a maid on standby in an adjacent chamber so you could call them in at any time. There was even a salon on the level of a four-star hotel spa, available completely for free. Baton and his musicians hardly knew what to do with themselves.

The dinner party was just as swank, featuring a cavalcade of bite-size courses served on top of a small spoon—a feast for the eyes and the palate. Each course was small but carefully seasoned and designed to keep your attention. Everyone loved them. Kenya and the kids acted like it wouldn't be enough for them at first, but by the end of the banquet, they were all rubbing their full bellies. As a slime, I had a de facto bottomless stomach, but *theirs* were beholden to the laws of physics. Stack up enough tiny courses like this, and you'd still have trouble eating them all.

Unlike these innocent kids, though, our orchestra had mixed feelings. Tempest was full of culinary delights of its own, but you weren't going to see intricate masterpieces meant for kings and princes like this. They've never had anything like it, and they certainly had not enjoyed this level of service before. I could tell them not to be nervous, but it was an impossible ask.

"Ah, don't worry about it. It just shows how much they're looking forward to your performance, I'm sure."

At times like this, I took solace in the fact that I wasn't doing the performing. I didn't need to go up there and sing, as it were, for my supper. If I were in the same position as Baton, I'd probably be too anxious to eat anything—talk about a wasted opportunity. So I encouraged our band to enjoy themselves more as the dinner party went on.

After it ended, everyone retired to their rooms. The kids were already asleep by now, overstimulated and exhausted from the day's events. With everyone else resting, I was all alone. My newfound ability to take naps helped for such occasions, but it looked like I wouldn't have to rely on that. There was a knock on the door.

"My apologies for interrupting you late at night. Our leader has invited you to visit her, Sir Rimuru—would you happen to be available?"

I had been silently approached by Luminus's personal maid, an overcomer.

She seemed like quite an elegant talent, unlike the ones who populated our research lab. I had thought Luminus was going to snub us today, but it looked like she wanted to see me after all. There was no need to turn her down, so I roused Shion and Diablo, and we followed the maid down the hall.

“Good to see you again, Rimuru,” Luminus offered me in greeting. “I admire the restraint you show, not bringing that evil dragon along.”

She was talking about Veldora, right? I couldn’t blame her, given what he had done, but it still seemed kind of mean. But that was none of my business.

“Yeah, good to see you, too. And he’s a troublemaker, you know? If I brought him to something like this, it’d be more of a headache for me than anyone.”

“Hee-hee-hee! You know him well, then.”

It was a short exchange, but I felt a real connection to Luminus now. Veldora’s helping me in unexpected ways.

Waiting for us in that ornate chamber were three people, Luminus included. Gunther, her elderly butler, was stationed to her left, and Louis, the man serving as emperor, was standing to her right. With the passing of her standin Roy, this meant all the surviving members of Luminus’s Three Servants were on hand.

I wasn’t sure why Hinata was missing, though.

“But you didn’t call for Hinata?”

“No,” Gunther replied. “She may have advanced from Enlightened to Saint, but she’s still a former human being. Whether she no longer requires sleep or not, she has still not shed her human habits.”

“I did reach out to her,” added Louis, “but she told me some nonsense about sleep deprivation being bad for her skin...”

It was indeed past midnight, so they didn’t force Hinata up. That made sense to me, but then Luminus gave me a light smile.

“It’s odd, though. Her body’s structure has transformed to something closer to a spiritual life-form, so skin deterioration should be the least of her worries. But it’s true—Hinata actually *does* require sleep. Even as a Saint, her body’s still

as it was during her human years. It will take many more years for it to undergo the full evolution. A lot of people have the wrong idea about this, but there's nothing superhuman about Hinata at the moment."

She had a little laugh at this.

Unlike monsters, humans cannot undergo sudden, explosive physical transformations. That means Hinata still retained some of her human characteristics—which, if looked at from a certain angle, could be seen as a weakness. This was something I subconsciously suspected, but it just showed how ridiculous monster transformations could be.

I, of course, did not require sleep, and neither did Diablo. Shion did, more or less, but three hours per session was enough, and she could stay continually active for seven days or more without rest. Benimaru and Soei were apparently the same way, which showed just how well monsters adapted to their environments.

But regardless, if Hinata wasn't here, it wasn't my job as Luminus's invitee to care.

"Right, well, here's a souvenir for you. It's a collaboration between Shuna and Mr. Yoshida—an apple-brandy pound cake."

I thought Hinata would complain about serving this while she was absent, but late-night snacks are a beauty no-no, I'm sure. She liked this kind of thing, but if she didn't know about it, she wouldn't have to agonize over taking a slice or not. It's an act of kindness, really.

"What a feat! How thoughtful of you."

Luminus was certainly complimentary. I must thank Shuna for letting me have this. My two self-styled secretaries would never demonstrate that kind of good sense. Diablo was always extremely considerate of me, but that didn't apply to anyone else. They both have a screw loose, really. But anyway.

"So what did you want to see me for?"

"Yes, well, I wasn't entirely sure whether to inform you, but I've decided I should. It seems that Granville is up to his tricks again. I am very much looking forward to our concert in three days, and I don't want anything to get in the

way of it. So I thought I would ask for your assistance.”

A rather casual way, I thought, to give some unpleasant news. I wanted to tell her that it was no topic to discuss over cake. Shion was nodding at this, but I don’t think she understood the portent of it. Diablo, meanwhile, looked like he couldn’t care less. If an enemy came along, he’d eliminate it—those were his thoughts, no doubt. But this *was* a pain to me. I was on foreign soil, not my own country. I could summon the demons, as well as the forces Soei deployed across the land, but I didn’t want to go overboard.

Besides...

“If it’s that big of a deal, shouldn’t you really be telling Hinata?”

Yeah, this kind of thing was right up her alley. She was far more qualified to patrol this nation than visitors like us. But Luminus shook her head.

“Hmph! Do *not* underrate us, please! No matter what kind of rabble attacks us, Lubelius’s defenses are ironclad. We’ve thoroughly enhanced our defensive measures to prepare for that evil dragon, after all. But we are not flawless. There is a possibility they may sneak in undetected through some previously unknown opening.”

The way she was talking, no invading army could manage to shake her steadfast confidence. I mean, if they were planning for war against Veldora, your typical army of ten thousand was no sweat. But that wasn’t Luminus’s concern.

“Some previously unknown opening? Ah, right, Granville Rozzo headed the Seven Days Clergy...”

“Exactly,” chimed in Louis. “Given his secret maneuvering around Lubelius across many years, I am positive he has at least one or two hidden routes he can take advantage of. Humans are gifted at sneaky tricks like that.”

“And as irksome as the thought is,” said a seething Gunther, “he once fought against Lady Luminus as the Hero of Light. With that experience, he could conceal himself entirely, and we’d have no idea he was there.”

That *did* sound dangerous. Kind of an inside job, then? Nobody would know the terrain better, certainly, and there was no doubting his strength. They say

he's more powerful than the late demon lord Clayman, so you didn't want to let your guard down here...or so I thought.

"Ridiculous. I wish you wouldn't disturb Sir Rimuru with such trifling matters."

Then Diablo suddenly spoke up, sounding as brash as always. And here I thought he'd been behaving rather well—now the bomb was going off. I really wish he'd learn when to keep his mouth shut.

Louis and Gunther looked put off for a moment, but Luminus's smile kept them in line.

"Hee-hee-hee... Well, Noir, I see Rimuru's certainly tamed you, hasn't he? Even seeing it in person, I can hardly believe it."

I wasn't sure why Luminus was smiling in a situation like this. But it kept things from getting awkward.

"I wish you wouldn't call me that. I have a wonderful name granted to me by Sir Rimuru—"

"Enough, Diablo. I'm on friendly terms with Luminus, and I'd like to keep it that way."

I gave him a warning that, hopefully, worked as an apology.

"My pardons."

Refraining from addressing her any further, Diablo heeded my request and quieted down. He even bowed his head a little to Luminus and her servants, and while I'm sure he had no remorse whatsoever, I was willing to accept that. Luminus, after all, was asking a favor of her guests, so I didn't want to aggravate matters.

"No, I'd say Diablo there is correct. Perhaps it is wrong of us to make this request at all. But there is a good reason why I decided to share this with you."

Very considerate of her, calling Diablo by name...even if it was a nickname. She chose not to sweat the details and quietly began explaining why she'd summoned us here.

"As I mentioned when I discussed how Hinata still needs sleep, humans cannot quickly adapt their bodies after an evolution. It is something they must

settle into, through many years..."

An Enlightened figure, one qualified enough to be a demon lord, can evolve into a Saint, equivalent to an awakened demon lord. However, given the time it takes for this evolution to finish, you could say that a newborn Saint is not *that* much of a threat. They may have swells of energy flowing within them, but if they don't know how to wrangle them, it's pointless. Hinata could control her energies down to pretty exacting rates, but that was dependent on her own personal skills. It didn't come as naturally to her as breathing, so the resulting burden had a physical and mental effect upon her.

But why would Luminus bring this up while she wasn't there? ...Actually, maybe it's the opposite. She waited for her to be absent *before* she brought it up. And if human beings took a while to evolve, then...

"Now, going back to Granville for a moment, he is not currently a Saint. He is someone who has hatched out of a Hero's egg, if you will—grown and flown away from the nest. Not even I can guess how powerful he has become."

So he's a true Hero, then?

Of course, this world had many types of Hero—some self-styled, others true Heroes in training as recognized by the world itself. Some were even "real" enough to do things like seal Veldora away for years. Just as seed demon lords could portray themselves as the real thing, those bearing hero eggs could be recognized as fully Heroic, and the difference in strength was roughly proportionate between the two. Heroes and demon lords really *were* united by fate that way—and in Granville's case, we were safe in assuming he had the strength of an awakened demon lord.

"...You think he's stronger than Hinata, maybe?"

"When I first heard Gren was killed by the likes of Nicolaus, I doubted my own ears. A Disintegration spell is among the most powerful magics of all, but Gren wasn't enough of a fool to leave himself completely exposed to it. But back to your question..."

Luminus looked me straight in the eyes. So *this* is why she didn't invite Hinata.

"...Yes. You're right. I had hoped to tame that man for myself. Having fought

him once, I know for a fact he's stronger than the demon lords of old."

She sounded completely confident, surprising not just me but her servants Louis and Gunther. They were both silent now, perhaps not realizing how misinformed their judgment of him was.

"Indeed, we never directly fought Gren, so..."

"But you would rate him that highly?"

"I would. I gave Gren free rein because I wanted to keep him in my personal sandbox. We both shared common goals, so I forged an agreement with him because I thought it would be fun. As head of the Seven Days Clergy, he was granted all kinds of political power. In a way, I kept him as my personal ace in the hole."

That ace wound up betraying her before she could play it, going over to the other side and wrapping his hands around her neck. It was an error in judgment, I suppose, but I felt like I was a part of the cause, a little bit. Not that I was to blame, but...

"Well, Maribel's dead now, after all. The cherished child of the Rozzo family."

If the notoriously careful Granville was on the move now, that had to be his motivation.

"Ah yes, the child I caught sight of at your festival. I wasn't aware at the time, but she was quite a foe, wasn't she? If Granville treated her with so much respect, she might have been the key to all his ambitions."

Maribel *was* a handful. If she stayed away from the spotlight, letting her conspiracies naturally play out, we'd have a maelstrom of evil to deal with. The enemy in front of you is never as potentially lethal as the one seething from far away.

Still, though...

"So what does Granville want? He can't be taking action at this point out of some twisted desire to avenge Maribel."

"That is probably... No. Never mind."

Luminus stopped herself from saying something. She shut her eyes for a few

seconds, deep in thought, before quietly continuing.

“Even long ago, his one hope was to spread peace across the world. He fought against countless slavering monsters and vicious magic beasts, defeating them in his quest to protect the human regions of the world. I fought that stubborn old man many times, until he understood that I wanted to live alongside humankind instead of eradicate them. Once we forged an agreement with each other, that was when peace finally spread across the West. Legions banded together to form small nations, which prospered and grew into larger ones over time. And it was Gren himself who appealed to them behind the scenes to create the Council of the West.”

Hearing the story like this, Granville—or the Hero Gren—really did seem like a legendary figure. He was now part of the shady Five Elders, but it was still all in the name of protecting humankind. No matter the motivations behind it, if you looked at the results he put up, Granville basically gave the human race a thousand years of peace, didn’t he...?

“The ancient elves who rule over Thalion have no territorial interests. We in Lubelius serve as a shield against the tyranny of Earthquake Daggrull and the Storm Dragon Veldora. The demons to the north keep attempting to intervene from their ice-shrouded world, but it’s more for entertainment than anything. If Guy were serious about it, he would have brought the world to its knees long ago, after all. That just leaves humankind’s other great outpost on this planet, and Granville has worked alongside the dwarves to combat it and hired merchants to prod its innards. He’s been doing all this by himself for ages.”

Put it that way, and Granville really seemed amazing.

...No. No, now’s not the time to commiserate with him.

“All right. So if he’s done all those noble things, what does he want?”

“Hee-hee... Don’t hurry me, now. I’d like to say that Gren has no reason to confront me, but I can think of one thing. I can think of it, but I have no intention of telling you.”

Oh. I figured as much, given that pause earlier.

“But I did receive some concerning news about his motives. Do you know

Yuuki Kagurazaka?"

"Sure. You said he gave off bad vibes or something, didn't you? He's the mastermind who incited Farmus to fight and set Clayman against me."

"Oh, you picked up on that? That saves me some time, then, but you should know that Yuuki has contacts with Gren. There is some kind of business going on between them, and it seems they've forged a pact of their own."

Yuuki again? I'm really getting sick of him playing around with us. Without Raphael, I'm sure he would've easily pulled the wool over my eyes. If we kept letting him run around free, I'm sure we'd be constantly encountering the same problems. Maybe it's about time to settle matters.

"So Yuuki's motivations are lurking around behind Granville's moves?"

"That they are. And I think one of his targets is all of you."

I see. And with me outside of Tempest, now was the best time to attack?

"Interesting. So that child Yuuki wants this Gren character to fight against Sir Rimuru?"

Now it was Shion speaking up out of nowhere. I gave her a surprised look. Knowing her, I assumed she was spacing out on the conversation by now, but she actually had a full grasp of it.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh... Perhaps they think they enjoy an edge now that a few of us have left the country, but they had best think again. We have not one, but two members of the Big Four guarding you. No scheme of theirs could possibly cause any harm."

Diablo, meanwhile, was the same as always. I really wish he wouldn't bring up the Big Four right now. It's so embarrassing.

"Well, remain on your guard. Once three days pass, it will be none of your business anyway. As I said at first, all I care about is enjoying a nice concert."

Luminus never wavered. She called Gren a threat, but to her, the entertainment came first. And as we concluded this private midnight talk, I began thinking I could learn from the way she compartmentalized things.

*

So was Granville really going to do something? And was Yuuki going to take advantage? With those worries in mind, I greeted the second day of our stay in Lubelius.

Today we'd be bringing in and setting up all our equipment in the concert hall. We were guided to a grand cathedral, one of the nation's main buildings. It was large enough to hold crowds of parishioners while also serving as a defensive post for the road that lay beyond.

I had nothing in particular to do. Best to let the professionals handle their own instruments. Instead, as I planned, I'd be taking the kids out for some on-site social studies instruction.

Of course, after listening to Luminus, I exercised the cards I had in hand. First, I called for Venom, who answered directly to Diablo, and ordered him to go on security duty. I'm sure this sudden invitation confused him.

"Diablo, I want you to watch over Baton and the rest as they prepare—"

"Sir Rimuru," he interrupted, "one moment, if you please. I thought we may run into some trouble here, so I made some arrangements overnight. The orchestra will be safe."

Great. Diablo must've foreseen and addressed anything that'd make him leave my side. This is exactly why he assembled so many troops, I'm sure, so I didn't mind that at all. But apparently he told Venom to come here *in ten minutes or less*. Venom actually did it, which was funny enough, but if that's the kind of order Diablo gave without a second thought, he really *was* heartless. Which he was, of course. He's a demon. I marveled at his talents all the time, but at that moment, I couldn't imagine how hard it was to work under him.

So the next thing I knew, Venom already had a hundred demons helping the orchestra. These were all above A in rank, and I couldn't imagine any security issues from Luminus's side, either. The band was nothing if not very well guarded.

Thus, guided by Hinata, the children and I observed the goings-on around Lubelius. My personal take? It's the exact opposite of Tempest but not always in a bad way. Here, you were guaranteed a happy society at the expense of personal freedom. There was no competition, really. You just followed your

assigned instructions to carry out your work, and then you did it a million more times.

That could break you down mentally, maybe, but you'd never be beleaguered by starvation or pain. Anyone who couldn't live in this environment left long ago, I'm sure, and besides, if this is all you knew from the day you were born, it wouldn't occur to you to complain about it. You can't envy what you don't know about. If you never felt inferior to anyone else, you'd never be inspired by those feelings to try to improve yourself. That's all it took to craft a society free of conflict.

"Sounds kinda boring," whispered Alice.

"Yeah." Kenya nodded. "I mean, people our age are working and stuff. Is there no school or anything?"

The other children didn't comment, looking confused at the unfamiliar landscape.

"No, there's no school here. It's a nation managed from the top down, with everyone living peacefully as equals under the name of our god."

Hinata sounded proud of it, but did she really think it was right? She and her forces got to enjoy a luxurious life, but didn't she feel bad about having a monopoly on that? Of course, it didn't feel right to tell some hapless commoner about what they were missing out on, but...

"After all, some things you just can't have, no matter how hard you try. You can't yearn for something if you don't even know it exists in the first place."

"I guess not, but..."

Kenya was no fool, either. He understood what I was getting at.

"...In this managed society," Hinata continued, "the population enjoys high levels of happiness across the board. That's all the more reason why we need to go through the Western Holy Church to build relations with other countries."

Yeah, I'll bet. You couldn't expose this oblivious populace to stimuli from other nations without warning.

"Makes them sound kinda sheltered."

"But if they're happy, I don't think it's really our place to comment."

"Yeah. Happiness doesn't come from material possessions, after all. If it's emotional happiness you're after, then a society like this works."

Not that I could ever stomach it. Now that I knew better, I'd always be pursuing more abundance as my mission. Way back in the past, when I spent my afternoons playing tag with my school friends, maybe I could have accepted something like this. Everyone has their own idea of what happiness is, after all; it's not the sort of idea that you could point at someone and say they're wrong about it. You had to think for yourself and act accordingly—that's the best way, I figured. It was food for thought, but...

"...But none of these people can survive on their own, right? They can't keep this up unless they've got someone protecting them."

Chloe was speaking my thoughts out loud. Never underestimate a child's knack for observation.

Hinata blinked a little at this. I guess she must've picked up on that as well—just how warped this society really was. If everyone was oblivious, they'd be unable to do anything without someone managing them. Having no freedom meant that someone else had life-or-death power over you. It wasn't much different from being livestock.

"...Yes. And that's why we're working to avoid that."

"Hmm... Well, okay. But I think it'd be better if this was a group effort, Miss Hinata. That way, everyone could pitch in instead of you having to do everything!"

That was one ideal, yes. But someone always had to suffer eventually, because it never really worked out that way. We're all born with different levels of talent, and everyone produces work at their own pace. Words like *equal* sound nice, but there's always going to be a cruel, unequal reality attached. Ideals and reality—a contradiction that could never be fully buried. Prop something up here, and something else has to sag over there. There's no correct answer. You just have to keep rushing down the path you believe in—and that's what makes life interesting.

I think today gave the kids a lot to ponder; it's also reminded me that material possessions aren't enough to make you happy. I knew that, but I just couldn't stop. That was the conclusion I made, but I still didn't think today was a waste for me. My approach was, in a way, just one of many correct answers.

The diversity I enjoyed was the very potential that drove people's lives, I thought. But I wanted to reconsider my life one more time, carefully. No need to decide what's correct or not. I was stabbed in my previous life, and then I got reborn as a slime. Nobody could tell you what's coming next for me...and if that's how it was, I'd be missing out if I didn't enjoy the present.

That's what today made me think. And even now, the gears of fate were turning...



"Jaune has disappeared?"

"Yes. It is hard to believe, but I detected a massive amount of magic force... and then the demons sleeping there seemed to vanish..."

"...Unfathomable."

Leon thought he misheard Arlos's report at first.

In Leon's domain was an area shared with the demon realms, the spiritual world that demons call home. It was a land covered in thick miasma and magicules, one where a demon with untold powers could occasionally manifest itself. Your typical demon, bereft of a physical body, could be handled by Leon's knight corps, even if they were an Arch Demon. However, they had discovered an older demon in this land, one that's such an absolute threat that not even Leon could ignore it. This was Jaune, the Original Yellow.

She had yet to obtain a physical body, which limited where she had access to. However, her presence was still enough to keep Leon from moving an inch from where he stood. Anyone else would have been helpless against the carnage she wrought.

"She's an insane demon, the sort who'd throw nuclear-level magic spells around for fun. She would be impossible to live alongside, and she has no interest in negotiating. Without your backup, Sir Leon, she would even threaten

my life. And now you say she's gone?"

"Yes, Claude. I couldn't believe it myself, so I went to see...and the region that normally overlaps with the demon realm has been dimensionally repaired. I can only assume that someone has blocked the Gates of Hell."

"Impossible..."

Claude, the Black Knight widely considered the strongest fighter in all of El Dorado, was snapping at Arlos, the Silver Knight and his comrade-in-arms.

Everyone who lived here, not just Leon, was tormented by the demons. If Jaune, the original source of all their woes, had disappeared, it was such good news that nobody would dare believe it. In fact, the missing Gates of Hell seemed to portend even more ominous events for the future.

The Gates were a kind of door that overlapped between the physical and spiritual worlds. Its presence allowed bodiless demons to appear and interact with "normal" space for a limited time. Many knights had been deployed to close this door, but the demons stopped them. Ever since Leon built his nation here, there had been continual skirmishes on regular occasions. What made this so difficult for the knights was that spiritual life-forms could resurrect themselves as long as you didn't kill them at the root. Even worse, a demon just killing some time could easily cause massive damage to Leon's forces.

To Leon, who ruled over an otherwise bountiful realm, only the demons kept him up at night. If he truly wanted to, perhaps he could sweep them all up by himself—but one false move, and it could lead to Jaune awakening. And even then, Leon could probably beat her, although it'd require the fight of both of their respective lives. That's why he had avoided that so far.

What could have happened? Jaune is just... She's not like Mizeri and Raine, the way Guy describes them. She just doesn't listen to reason.

After carefully weighing his interests, Leon decided to maintain the status quo, even if it meant taking some losses. And now, out of nowhere, that threat was gone. He and all his forces agreed about one thing: No way had it just *happened* to turn out like this.

Now more news was reaching Leon's nervous ears.

"Report, my lord! There are currently five children being kept under wraps in Tempest. We've confirmed our intelligence with their former academy in Englesia, and we're almost done assessing it. It would appear the demon lord Rimuru is forging a secret pact to sell the children to the demon lord Luminus."

"What?"

"Lubelius and Tempest have signed a peace treaty; both demon lords are on good terms with each other. Our guess is that Rimuru has deceived Yuuki Kagurazaka and is using the magicule-rich children for his own business dealings!"

They had just received a magic call from a member of the Azure Knights currently investigating Tempest. The news gave Leon pause. The Rimuru he met at the Walpurgis meeting didn't strike him as the sort to pull a move like that.

"Have them observe this agent of ours closely. He may have a good contact... or he may be under someone's control."

"You don't think..."

"The demon lord Rimuru, perhaps?"

"No. I just don't see any reason why Rimuru would get rid of the children."

"So why, then?"

"Someone's trying to make us fight. Someone who stands to profit from it. There's a chance the demon lord Luminus is being dragged into this as well. For all we know, Luminus may be behind it all."

"...?!"

"What in...?"

Leon thought for a moment—gauging the situation in the Western Nations, figuring out who'd be the prime suspect. The conclusion was as obvious as it was unnerving.

"...The Cerberus society?"

Only that shady pack of merchants knew Leon was collecting otherworlder children. Well, not just them. The people he tapped for their knowledge of

summoning spells knew, too.

Perhaps the Rozzos have discovered our summoning program...

Yes, maybe those merchants joined forces with them in a real, palpable way. If he started to doubt them, there'd be no end to it for his troubled mind. Besides, that report was suspicious on its face. Leon wouldn't have any motive to take action over just five children—or so he thought. Normally, demon lords avoided interfering with one another as much as they could. Butting into a conflict between demon lords that he had no personal stake in would be the height of folly; it could give him two enemies where there used to be none.

It was best to ignore these events. Luminus might be scheming at something, but it'd all be pointed at Rimuru, not Leon. There was, by Leon's reasoning, no point in making a move. This time, however, he could feel his judgment wavering. Perhaps detecting this, Leon's advisers began debating the matter.

"I see... So there are people out there trying to take advantage of Sir Leon?"

"Should we quash them?"

Leon stopped them. "No. Cerberus has major clout in the Eastern Empire. It'd be unwise to make enemies of them without any evidence. They're no doubt fanning the flames here, but the Rozzo family might not be so faithful themselves. And besides that..."

He was taking the situation coolly, providing suitable instructions for his forces, but there was still a pang of anxiety in Leon's mind. That name, Scoey Colbert. Could that be...?

...No, there was no reason to make a move. In fact, any moves would mean falling for the bait. Leon understood that, but he still had trouble resisting the impulse.

If Jaune was alive and well somewhere, he couldn't do something ill-advised that could affect the very land he stood on. The scales in his mind remained stationary, pointing out the correct choice.

And yet...

Strange. I just feel like I have to act right now...

He had fallen silent, his adviser looking up at him.

"My lord, we are all your faithful knights. We will gladly follow any orders you give us."

"Yes! No matter how selfish you may be, we will never chide you for it. Grant us your orders, and I promise we will make them come true!"

"You..."

Arlos, Claude, and all the other knights were unquestionably loyal to him.

"...Either Jaune's disappearance is an extraordinary stroke of luck, or..."



Leon closed his eyes. When he opened them again, there was a fearless smile on his lips.

"I accept your loyalty. I must go myself. Guard this land in my stead."

""Yes, sir!"""

Here, in the Golden Land of El Dorado, great forces were now in motion. Leon Cromwell, the Platinum Saber, was about to reach for his sword and end his long silence.



"Ah, the demon lord Leon's on the move, huh? Just as I thought—it's not just *any* child he's looking for. So maybe Chloe really *is* the one..."

It meant that Leon's true desire wasn't the children, but a certain person who came from another world. By the laws of cause and effect, this made it seem quite likely that Chloe was what Leon wanted.

"But, Sir Yuuki, Leon's not necessarily going to do what we want, will he? He's probably headed for Lubelius, but I doubt he's accepted the info we've given him at face value. In fact, I'm sure he doubts it."

"I'm sure he does. But it still let us narrow down his motivations. That's good enough."

Yuuki was satisfied, but Kagali and the others didn't see things his way. They seemed concerned, unsure about his thoughts.

"I agree that Chloe merits attention, but don't we lack concrete proof that she's the central figure? Relying on uncertain odds like that strikes me as out of character for you, Sir Yuuki."

"Yeah, right? And here we are, leakin' sensitive information to him. It's all but askin' him to doubt us, y'know? So what was the purpose of all that?"

"I'd like to know, too, Boss. I don't think you made a mistake, but now Leon's gonna have it in for Cerberus, won't he? It's basically ended our relationship. I don't see how we've gained anything at all."

Laplace and Teare weren't hiding their concerns now. Footman didn't join

them, and the ever-wise Kagali felt it proper to keep her mouth shut.

"I can understand if the clowns here are confused," Misha said with a bewitching smile. "It's true—we didn't stand to gain anything from this. We did it for just one reason, and that's because the boss has decided we can't deal with the demon lord Leon any longer."

That set off a light bulb in Kagali's mind.

"I see. So that's how it was? Not that we *won't* deal with him, but we *can't...?*"

"Huh?"

"Wh-what do you mean, Lady Kagali?"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Not like we'd understand her if she told us. All we have to do is follow the orders, and—"

"Quiet one second, Footman. Whether I can understand it or not, I want to hear it!"

Footman scowled a bit at Teare's interruption. They usually got along well, so it stung a bit. The way he saw it, they didn't need to get mired in complex reasoning—just do what Yuuki and Kagali and the others said, and everything would work out fine. He truly believed that, but now it seemed he was the only one. The others trusted Yuuki and Kagali, but they wanted to know what they were working for.

Yuuki looked at them and smiled. *In terms of being easy to use, Footman sure is a helpful guy...but if you want a better chance at success, people like Laplace are leagues better. Of course, it's not like we had some grand reasoning behind this...*

As he thought over this, he began to venture an explanation.

"Well, the fact that Leon's taking action now is all the reason we needed. You know how we had you guys deliver one final shipment of classified goods to him? I only did that because we were planning to shut off business with Leon, and I wanted you to have a chance to see your hated nemesis in person once."

"Huh? So you really wouldn't have cared if we started kickin' ass in there?"

"You're exactly right. Assuming you escaped alive once you were done, that is."

Yuuki grinned, a smile brimming with confidence as he attempted to calm his minions down.

"Children or not, collecting otherworlders takes a lot of hard work. We know Leon did it to boost his fighting power, but we kept helping him anyway. You know why, right?"

"Yeah, 'cause we wanted to keep that connection with him?"

"Right. So what did we need to keep that relationship going?"

"The classified goods, right? The otherworlder children?"

"Mm-hmm. And now we can't get any more of them. Why?"

"Well, because the Rozzos we had been countin' on to summon them for us are... Oh. *Ohh.*"

"What? What is it?"

"You see, Teare? This way, we can pin the blame for cutting things off on the Rozzos. If we can't get any new supply in, we certainly can't keep our business going. We can't go around looking for kids that just happened to wander into this world, but we *can* pretend we are and sell them that way. So this way, we're seizing the initiative. Even if we cut Leon off for now, we can still make contact with him later if we need him."

"But that's still no reason to deliberately make him suspect us," a confused Teare said.

"Nah," groaned Laplace, the truth dawning on him. "You see, they're tryin' to make the Rozzo family out to be the *real* bad guys. I tell you, Boss, you're a mean one, that's for sure."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Thanks for the compliment. Yes, like you said, Laplace, I'm intending to shunt all the blame on old man Granville."

"It annoys me to say this," Kagali added, "but Leon's a very careful individual. We're the only ones he's suspecting right now...but at the same time, I'm sure he thought, *There's no way Cerberus would do something so immature.* He'd

eliminate Rimuru or Luminus as suspects, and in his eyes, there's nobody else who could be scheming against him. The Rozzos are probably the least of his worries."

"Leon's careful, yeah, but he's also got a lot of self-confidence. He's not gonna let himself get hurt by some human he wanted to take advantage of. He didn't even try to *learn* about the Rozzos. I don't think he could even guess that the *real* threat was lurking among their ranks."

"I can imagine. The Five Elders were nobody too big, after all, except for *those* two."

"Two? But if Maribel's gone, that just leaves Granville, don't it?"

"Well, you didn't know, but there were actually three people in the Rozzo family we needed to be careful with."

Maribel was dead, but two still remained—such was the information Cerberus gave them.

"Of course, to be exact, it's not one of the Elders. It's this one guy who worked for Cidre, that frontier margrave, and he's apparently *real* bad news."

With a grin, Yuuki told the room what he knew.

Cidre was the aristocrat responsible for protecting the peace in northern Englesia. In this region was a family of protectors who guarded the land from generation to generation. The current one, a man decked out in a full mask and armor with no skin visible, had been serving Granville all this time despite nobody knowing where he came from. He wasn't part of the Five Great Elders, but anyone aware of him knew better than to ignore him. Yuuki heard about him from Damrada.

"And you know, Damrada himself told me '*I have no idea who'd win between us unless I actually fight him.*' So no way he's weak. The only *other* person he's described in terms like that is Hinata."

As far as Yuuki knew, Damrada kept a close eye out for only three people in the Western Nations—Hinata, Maribel, and this man. To him, the man was even more of a menace than the head elder, Granville himself. And if Damrada the Money—one of Cerberus's leaders and a man who enjoyed Yuuki's full trust—

rated him like that, there was no way Yuuki could afford to ignore him.

“So what’s he like?”

“That I don’t know. I’ve never met him. But he pretty much single-handedly keeps the peace up in the north, you know? Damrada said he happened to see him in combat once, and he himself was fightin’ against a bunch of demons from the north.”

This statement was like dropping a bomb in the room. Kagali and Misha were already aware of it, but even they seemed to have trouble accepting it. That’s how much of a revelation it was.

“The man’s name is Razul, apparently. Granville personally named him.”

“Granville...?”

“He *named* him?”

“Wait, so you mean...?”

“You weren’t aware of that, Lady Kagali?” asked Misha. “Well, it’s true. Damrada told me that Razul isn’t human.”

“Yeah,” Yuuki added. “He doesn’t wear all that armor just to protect himself. It’s also so nobody finds out what he is, according to Damrada.”

To Laplace and the others, however, that was just a small detail.

“Ah, that doesn’t matter. Lemme get this straight. By ‘*demons from the north*,’ d’you mean from the lands of that demon lord?”

“R-right! If the Lord of Darkness is taking action, the West would’ve been a heap of ash long ago...”

Nobody, not even Yuuki, could smile at the normally composed Laplace and Kagali acting so out of sorts.

“Please, calm down. You guys are pretty scared of the demon lord Guy Crimson, huh? Well, we’re fine for now. Regarding your question, yes, the northern demons were people working under Guy. It looks like Guy’s tolerating it when his forces decide to attack human settlements for fun. It’s just a game for the demons, but the victims sure don’t see it that way, of course. So it was

Razul stopping them before they could cross into his territory.”

Just one man, protecting human society from all those demons? The thought stunned everyone except Yuuki into silence.

“I hardly believe it, but I’m convinced. If Guy isn’t serious about this, that explains why the Western Nations are still safe. This Razul person sounds like quite a threat, but...”

“This is just crazy. Not even I could pull a stunt like that.”

“B-but...I know he’s strong and all, but what’s he have to do with Leon? Are we trying to have Leon travel north and fight against him?”

As everyone regained their composure, Yuuki found himself smiling at Teare’s question.

“Right, let’s go back to the main topic. Like I said, the Rozzos have this Razul as kind of a last resort. He’s there to fend off the demons who might attack at any time, so they couldn’t afford to move him away from the north.”

That was why not even Maribel factored Razul into his calculations. Why not? Because as a champion working directly under Granville Rozzo, not even Maribel had the clout to order him around.

Yuuki had been aware of Razul for some time now. He hadn’t used him in his strategizing so far because he simply didn’t have the chance. Any false move with him, and Guy’s forces were capable of laying waste to the West. He didn’t want that, and thus the northern regions were hands-off to him. Now, however, things had changed.

“I’m going to level with all of you. A while back, I had a conference with Granville where we worked out an agreement—an agreement I’ve already briefed you about.”

The smile disappeared from Yuuki’s face. Everyone else nodded.

“Right,” said Kagali. “The god worshipped by the Western Holy Church was exactly who we expected it to be. And out of sadness for losing Maribel, Granville decided to join forces with you, Sir Yuuki.”

“Stupid old man.”

"Silence, Laplace. So along those lines, Granville asked for your help with something. Are the preparations for that going along well, Sir Yuuki?"

Yuuki and Granville's secret meeting. In the midst of it...

.....

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...

Yuuki was the one who informed Granville of Maribel's death. She had challenged the demon lord Rimuru to battle and lost. Left with no other option, she set off a magical control reactor, got caught in the resulting explosion, and died. It was the same story Yuuki told Rimuru earlier. Yuuki had considered giving Granville another lie but opted against it—now that Rimuru's suspicions of him were gone, he didn't want to be needlessly inconsistent.

Although he couldn't say how Granville would react, Yuuki wasn't at all afraid of him alone. Even if he was part of the Seven Days Clergy, those protectors of humankind, Yuuki saw him as just a poor elderly man possessed by a mad, greedy desire for power. He wasn't about to let his guard down, but he viewed Granville as a beatable opponent.

The old man had several of his guards with him at the conference, including a couple of otherworlders. It'd be a bad idea to make enemies out of all of them, but Yuuki still felt at ease. With Maribel gone, all he really needed to watch out for was this Razul guy. Thus, he faced up against Granville, not bothering to hide his true nature.

"I see... So Maribel is dead..."

"Mm-hmm. And lemme tell you, it was hard for me as well—her controlling me, making me fight against Rimuru... I know the Free Guild's built under the Council and gets their operating budget from them, but this is *really* a breach of contract, isn't it? I had my free will taken from me, and I *really* think I deserve some compensation."

"So what happened with the demon lord Rimuru?" Granville asked, pushing Yuuki's demand aside. Yuuki expected that to some extent, shrugging without showing any real disappointment.

"What happened? Nothing, really. He may have doubted you before, perhaps, but now I think he believes all of this was Maribel's scheme. That's the way I framed it with him, besides, and I hope you won't think ill of me for it."

"Mmm..."

Granville's expression hinted at severe exhaustion, something Yuuki didn't anticipate. He shut his eyes tightly, remaining silent for a moment.

"...I see. So Maribel is gone. Now all hope is lost for the Rozzo family. And if it is, we must use the secret treasure she hid away for our revenge."

"She? And a secret treasure, you say? I'm not sure what you're talking about, but I'd like to stay out of it, if you don't mind."

"Heh-heh-heh... Ah, don't say that, Yuuki. You know already, don't you? You're no fool."

"...Know what?"

"Hmph! That the god of Luminism is none other than the demon lord Luminus herself."

"Oh..."

Yuuki had assumed as much, but it surprised him to hear it from Granville's own lips. At the same time, he wondered why he'd reveal such a vital secret to him.

"Well, if you're telling me that, then what are you scheming?"

"Scheming? Oh, don't call it that. I've accepted you, you know. With Maribel gone, you're the only person I could entrust the future of the Western Nations to—or really, the human race itself."

Granville rose from his sofa, speaking to Yuuki in exaggerated tones. Yuuki wasn't obedient enough to believe him.

"Ah, come on. I don't need to be some savior—Rimuru's probably gonna step up to do that anyway. He really *does* want to live alongside humankind, you know."

Yuuki snickered a little. He assumed all talks were off now. But Granville

wasn't done yet.

"You're still young, Yuuki, very young. Maribel could see into the future, but it appears that you cannot. That demon lord, Rimuru... We cannot ever permit his continued existence. Lady Luminus had no interest in the human world, and that's exactly why she and they could coexist. But not Rimuru. He's going to corrupt humanity and spread chaos worldwide, I'm sure of it. There will be seas of blood."

"Oh? Wow. What's your basis for saying that?"

"My sixth sense."

"Huh? That's kind of irrational—"

"My sixth sense as a former Hero. It is pleading with me to slay the demon lord Rimuru."

This made Yuuki pause. He squinted at Granville. He may have called himself a former Hero, but to Yuuki, he looked like a shriveled old man. He had fancy clothes, sharp eyes, and the charisma and drive of a leader and ruler...but Yuuki just couldn't see the kind of "strength" that would put Granville above Maribel.

"A Hero? You're joking."

"*Pfft!* You can choose to believe me or not. But I want to know whether you'll assist me in defeating the demon lord Rimuru."

"Ha-ha! Assist you? Why would I ever agree to something so hazardous? I want to keep my current relationship with him—"

"Enough nonsense, you fool! Maribel is dead! Now's not the time for us to be playing mind games with each other! We *could* leave everything to the Empire, but there's too many question marks in their government. And who knows how much we can trust the merchants you're connected to?"

"Mmm..."

Who's talking nonsense now? Yuuki thought, chiding Granville in his mind. Unlike Granville, he didn't take a humans-first approach to life. No matter what happens to humankind, it was all good to him—as long as he had full control of it in the end. But this talk of a secret treasure still concerned him. By the sound

of it, Granville felt this would be enough to defeat Rimuru, and Yuuki wanted to find out what it was.

Granville, meanwhile, paid Yuuki's thoughts no mind.

"I won't ask you to believe me. I simply want us to join forces, just once."

"...Again, how does that benefit me?"

"I will grant you Lady Luminus's hidden treasure."

"And that is...?"

"The ultimate weapon—the one that sealed Veldora away."

"...?!"

This sudden bombshell was impossible for Yuuki to ignore.

"The greatest Hero of all time. I have not met her personally, but Lady Luminus is protecting her in a special ark."

"A demon lord protecting a Hero? What kind of joke is that...?"

"Ha-ha-ha! None of that, now. I was just as confused at first. But in the great battles that unfold in this world every few hundred years, I *have* seen this Hero in action. Truly, she is the supreme figure among her kind, capable of annihilating any form of evil."

"Stronger than you in your prime?"

"I would not even compare."

Those words sounded honest to Yuuki, and he was pretty confident in his lie-detection skills. Granville was telling the truth. And if he was, Yuuki had an idea why this Hero disappeared and left Shizue Izawa to herself.

...There must be some limit to this Hero's career. Her life span? Well, regardless of the reason, if we can seize that ark or whatever Luminus is guarding, we can get the strongest pawn of all for ourselves, and then...?

So this "ultimate weapon" was in the custody of Luminus, likely under some sort of spell. If Yuuki and his friends could figure out what kind of spell it was...

"That's quite fascinating. But I'm not enough of a mark to believe you at face

value.”

“I’m sure you’re not. So here’s a suggestion. I will attack and cause a scene at their main cathedral. It’ll no doubt lead to confusion and chaos at Lady Luminus’s castle, and in the midst of that, you can fly in and steal the ark.”

It was an attractive suggestion—so advantageous to Yuuki, in fact, that he doubted it all the more.

“What do *you* gain from this? Isn’t the demon lord Luminus your master? You’re so bent on getting revenge for Maribel that you’ll defy Luminus herself?”

Granville greeted this question with disgust. “Of course I am. I was once on good terms with Lady Luminus, but she’s already disposed of me. Our relationship hinged on the promise that she wouldn’t oppose the human race. Now that she’s joined hands with the demon lord Rimuru, Lady Luminus...or rather, the demon lord Luminus is my enemy—and nothing more.”

The malice was clear in his words. Yuuki picked up on it, astonished by its sheer force. *Wow... I thought he was a used-up old man, but he can still cut it on the front lines, can't he? Maybe this isn't such a bad offer after all...*

He began to seriously consider it. On one hand, he’d insist upon Granville rising up first. That reduced the chances of a betrayal and gave him an opportunity to size up his powers before putting his own skin in the game. In the worst case, he could claim Granville tricked him with his lies into joining in—but he could judge how serious he was once battle began. If he couldn’t gauge whether Granville intended to actually fight this out, there was no point joining in.

“Interesting... Very interesting. I still have a few doubts, but considering what I stand to gain from it, maybe giving it a venture isn’t such a bad idea.”

“Ha-ha! I thought you would say that. It will be a temporary alliance for us, but there will be no better way to cap off our friendship. Can I count on you for this?”

“Well, if you’re willing to set the table *that* much for me, I might as well trust you a little, huh? So how are we gonna make this a success?”

"Yes, well..."

The two of them began going over the finer details—and at the end of it, the mastermind in full control of the Western Nations shook hands over it with the magic-born scheming to conquer the world.

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...

First, the Rozzo family would exercise their full resources in an attack on the cathedral. All the agents from the Selt Foreign Information Bureau would be there, as well as the survivors from Blood Shadow and some otherworlders summoned by the Rozzos. Even Razul himself, guardian of the Western Nation's northern boundary, would be present.

"I'm curious to see the full measure of the Rozzos' strength," muttered Kagali, grinning evilly—and she spoke for everyone in the room.

"So, Sir Yuuki, do you have a read on where this ark is hidden?"

"Granville gave me all the details. We'll have to proceed carefully, though, just in case he's tricking me."

"And that's *my* job, eh?" said Laplace. "I'm a little anxious about sneakin' in by myself, so I'm takin' Teare and Footman along, okay?"

"I'd like to say yes, but I have another job for Teare."

"Oh? Well, just Footman, then. But what're ya gonna do with her?"

"She's taking the most important job of all. But back to you for a moment. I want you guys to avoid combat as much as you can. Just focus on completing your mission."

"Always consider the possibility of a trap," advised Kagali. "If you sense any danger, don't hesitate to retreat."

"I ain't a kid, y'know. You don't have to remind me."

Laplace exuded confidence, Footman silently nodding his approval.

"Good," said Kagali. "Remember that Luminus was the master of Valentine, a

demon lord as powerful as I was. I don't need to remind you how strong she is. She could easily defeat me in my prime. Do I make myself clear, Laplace? Your first priority isn't to steal the ark. It's to get as much info as you can without pushing your luck and come back home safely, all right?"

"Fine, fine. I ain't got no obligation to old man Granville. This ain't a Moderate Jesters job anyway, so I'll do my best for you guys, okay?"

"Yeah." Yuuki nodded. "So for this job, I'm gonna be supporting you. If that ark's every bit the decisive weapon Granville claims it is..."

"Support? What, don't you trust me? That hurts..."

"It's not that. We need to firm up our defense. There's bound to be a trap or two, so we can't be too careful."

Yuuki trusted Laplace and his cohorts well enough. This time, though, not even he could predict what would happen. No matter what, he couldn't afford to have them go easy and risk messing up the whole thing.

"I'll be following you all in secret," he continued. "It'll be up to you guys to carry out your end of it."

"Ooh, so we're gonna be a diversion for ya, huh? That *would* be smarter."

"And if things fall apart, use the confusion to bail out safely. I'll take our prize in the midst of that."

He grinned. The plan was perfect, and after several rounds of planning with Granville, Yuuki realized he was dead serious about it. This was definitely going to be the best shot he'd get. The chances of another opportunity like this were slim to none. Regardless of how things shook out, Yuuki thought, he absolutely had to get his hands on that ark.

"Okay, but is this ark *really* everything yer sayin' it is?"

"It is. He said it houses the Hero who sealed away Veldora himself. Supposedly this Hero answers to Luminus, but my plan's to undo whatever spell's been put on her and make her mine instead."

"Huh?"

"Seriously? Are you kidding me?!"

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh..."

"Talk about priceless, wouldn't you agree? The East is ready to accept this ark at any time. We'll figure out how to gain control of the ultimate Hero; trust me."

The whole room was surprised to hear Yuuki's casual revelation. Now the ark was more valuable than any of them could imagine, and it was hard for anyone to hide their excitement. Even Misha, who was ordered to prepare for this ark in advance, couldn't hide her blushing cheeks. How could she? They were attempting to gain control over the figure who defeated the True Dragon, the most powerful presence in the world. World conquest, as envisioned by Yuuki and Cerberus, was no pipe dream now.

"I can see why yer bein' so careful, then, Boss."

"Yes, if *that's* how things are, I'd gladly volunteer to join in the research."

"Ha-ha! Not so fast, Kagali. It's too dangerous to accept Granville's story at face value...but I *do* think it's pretty plausible. So we can't mess this up."

"I'm sure Sir Yuuki's presence puts all our minds at ease, but we can't afford to have any of you drag us down, am I clear?"

"Roger that."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Understood!"

Learning the gravity of their mission enthused Laplace and Footman all the more. Yuuki gave them both satisfied looks, then turned to Teare.

"Now, Teare... We're actually going to have the demon lord Leon's support for this operation. It'd be rude if we didn't give him a warm welcome."

With Leon on the move, Yuuki's team now had a mission. If he chose to stay put, they would've likely done the same, maybe providing a little help on the sidelines—but now even Leon was on his way to Lubelius's holy lands.

No doubt about it. The battlefield was going to be chaotic.

"If Leon's been lured here," Kagali said, "we should make him think Cerberus

is being used by the Rozzos, too. That way, he'll mistakenly believe that he can trust us."

"And then we can tell Rimuru that Leon's ruthlessly after those little kids, right?"

"Right. And to make that more convincing, we need some of the kids we were planning to give Leon."

"Oh! And that's where I come in?"

"You got it, Teare. It'll mean showing your face in public, but knowing you, it's not gonna blow your cover, is it?"

"Not at all! With my acting skills, duping Rimuru is no problem!"

She was ready for the job, but Yuuki still cruelly shook his head.

"Well, I have high hopes for that, but it's not gonna be enough. The demon lord Rimuru's an incredibly cautious leader, and he's got a real sharp eye for trouble. He might realize we're up to something, so we're gonna need to confer with Granville first..."

In hushed tones, he gave his orders to Teare. The evil thoughts of the magic-born began to swell past all limits. The fated day was soon, very soon.



Deep inside a darkened room:

"Of course we will strike the demon lord Rimuru. And the demon lord Leon. And...Lady Luminus as well."

Granville's eyes were twin wells of bottomless hatred as he muttered the words.

For more than a thousand years, he had devoted himself to humankind. Perhaps his goals had shifted over time toward absolute rule and administration with an elite secret cadre, but there was no doubting his ultimate goal of peace across human society. It presented him with one hardship after another—an endless string of betrayals, accompanied by the deaths of the companions who supported him. Still, with his indomitable spirit, Granville had overcome all his hardship, guarding the people of this world up to now. The demon lord Luminus

assisted him, but his own efforts were just as extraordinary.

Those long-gone days when he discussed his ideals with his friends. The promises he forged with those who died before him. They all led up to the birth of Maribel, a great hope that brought his plans one step away from fruition. But now that hope was gone. His ultimate dream was to merge West with East, creating a united front to face the demon lords. Otherwise, keeping human society going seemed impossibly difficult. Now that the Octagram had been formed, their power was simply too great.

They were two down from their days as the Ten Great Demon Lords, but their authority was more dominant than ever before. Guy Crimson, the Lord of Darkness, was letting his demons treat the northern lands as their personal playground. Earthquake Daggrull's interests in territorial expansion were drawing his attention toward human lands. He hadn't acted yet, out of concern over clashes with the Queen of Nightmares, but he couldn't restrain himself forever. And now even the Eastern Empire was showing signs of a figure among them beyond humankind. Granville had also thought the Sleeping Ruler might attempt something, but he was so far unable to confirm his intentions.

These were the giants he had protected humankind from so far. But now...

"Look at these upstarts and their petty ambitions. Well, if they feel up to it, let them try. I'm too tired for it now..."

Not even Granville knew how much longer he had to live. With Maribel dead, no one was left to be a worthy successor to him. And without anyone to arbitrate over the proceedings to come, humankind would quickly meet its doom. It was simply a species far too ready to lay bare its greed and start infighting.

Long ago, his wife—a woman who resembled Maribel in many ways—was killed by such people. Granville had kept living, bottling up his sadness out of concern for the children she left behind, but that was in the past now.

"All this world has done is take from me. It deserves to fall."

His true feelings dribbled out from his lips. As far as he was concerned, this was the plain, honest truth. He had already given up his body to the madness... and that was exactly why he had such firm resolve now. The madness had

reached his mind.



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
4

UPHEAVAL IN THE WEST

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UPHEAVAL IN THE WEST

The demon lord Leon was in an audience with someone he had trouble dealing with—a woman with long silvery hair and uniquely long ears. She was sunk deep into an ornate chair, like a dazzling portrait come to life. It was Elmesia El-Ru Thalion, emperor of the land of Thalion, and the two of them were seated facing each other in a gazebo overlooking an elegant garden.

A bit of steam wafted out from the kettle on the table, the lady attendant serving them making sure to replace the water before it cooled. A sweet-smelling aroma filled the air, creating a relaxed atmosphere. The two of them watched each other for a moment, but it was Elmesia who spoke first.

“Taciturn as always, Leon? You have come to see me for the first time in ages, and you’re *that* bored already?”

Her tone of voice was kind—as it should be. Elmesia and Leon knew each other, not just as the leaders of two important trading partners but as close personal acquaintances. One could tell this from the simple fact she granted Leon this kind of audience. They had known each other since before Leon was a demon lord—back in his Hero days, when his exploits took him to Thalion. They had been friends ever since.

“I’m afraid now is not the time for idle laughter.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever seen you laugh a great deal.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter very much, does it? Time is of the essence right now, so let’s get down to business—”

“Ahhh, yes, yes. I have some pastries from Mr. Yoshida’s boutique. Would you care for a bite or two?”

Elmesia’s interruption stirred the attendant into action. She pushed a cart up

to the table, cutting a couple slices of cake.

“I don’t have much of a sweet tooth.”

“Oh? It’s good, you know. Ah, but these cookies are made with tea leaves baked in, so they aren’t quite so sweet. Matcha cookies, I believe they’re called.”

“...I’ll have that, then.”

From past experience, Leon knew there was no talking over her. It was the same way with the demon lord Ramiris—everyone he had trouble with shared the common trait of never really listening to him in conversation. He calmed himself, already resigned to not having his way here, as he reached for a cookie.

“Too sweet...”

“Oh, you can’t even take that?”

“No. It’s not bad.”

“Hmm. You never *were* very honest with your feelings, were you? Ah well. So what brought you here today, if I may ask? Are you about to ask whether I’ve seen the children in the demon lord Rimuru’s nation?”

Leon sighed. *I can never relax around her. She’s already picked up on matters?* In that case, he felt, at least this would save him some time. He mentally switched gears.

“That’s right. I believe Rimuru has it out for me. One of my previous underlings made contact with him, filling his mind with all sorts of ideas.”

“Yes, Shizue Izawa, right? The Conqueror of Flames, was it? She’s a household name in this empire as well.”

“Why do *you* know her? Our relationship was supposed to be a well-kept secret—”

“Ah, how about we continue with the conversation? Time was of the essence for you, wasn’t it?”

Leon was growing irritated. He wanted to raise his voice, shouting “Who do you think is wasting *my* valuable time right now?!” but he suppressed the urge.

"Yes... Well, I was thinking about extending an invitation to Rimuru sooner or later. I had wanted to clear up our misunderstandings, and I find him too dangerous as an enemy anyway."

Letting himself be toyed with by someone was not an experience Leon relished very much. Even dealing with Guy, he could maintain his own pace well enough, but Elmesia was simply too much for him.

"Oh? Don't you think you could beat Rimuru?"

Elmesia seemed to take an interest. But Leon wasn't going to accept the challenge.

"Whether I can beat him isn't the issue. There's no point in antagonizing him. I gain nothing from it and stand to lose a great deal, don't I?"

Leon's eyes said it all. *You made the same conclusion, didn't you?* And Elmesia agreed.

"Indeed, indeed. And if you build a friendship, you could gain a lot from it. A change of heart in Rimuru could have some very disquieting results, but any leap forward comes with risk."

That made sense to Leon, who all but assumed Elmesia shared his thoughts.

"Exactly. Personally, I'd welcome any demon lord who's open to reason. I think Rimuru was smart to join hands with the demon—er, ex-demon lords Carillon and Frey. The only problem with that is—"

"Is the way you've been acting?"

"..."

He wanted to deny it but was in no position to. The whole reason Leon and Rimuru weren't on good terms came down to Leon's mishandling of Shizu.

"But very well. I will make some overtures along those lines for you shortly. If Tempest and El Dorado start taking potshots at each other, it would be highly annoying for us as well. But ah yes, the children. I *did* see them, actually. They seemed to enjoy the festival very much."

"They did? So—"

"Now, now, not so fast. Ah, this cake is *so* lovely!"

Leon was normally the epitome of calmness, but he was reaching the end of his rope. *This, he bitterly thought, was exactly why I didn't want to come here.* But now was no time for complaints.

"Among those children, was there a little girl by the name of Chloe?"

Asking so directly like this came with risks. There was no guarantee Elmesia wouldn't try to deceive him, and Leon always endeavored to keep Chloe herself away from danger. But he accepted Elmesia as a friend, and in these urgent times, he didn't want to withhold secrets from her. It was with all that in mind that Leon decided to come out with it.

"Ah, so you finally see fit to believe me? Very well, demon lord Leon. If you trust in me, I won't hesitate to cooperate with you."

Elmesia was signaling a change in atmosphere. She turned toward Leon. Now they were both ready to compare notes. The demon lord Rimuru was in custody of five children—Kenya Misaki, Ryota Sekiguchi, Gail Gibson, Alice Rondo, and... Chloe Aubert. The name of the girl Leon had spent his whole life searching for.

"...Did you know that from the start?"

"You know, you are far too silent for your own good. You don't care if people misunderstand you, you never reveal your true feelings to anyone, and you try to handle everything by yourself. That is precisely why the champion Shizue Izawa never trusted you. Isn't it, ex-Hero?"

If Leon had ever spoken honestly with Shizu, maybe their relationship could have turned out differently. Elmesia was teasing him about that. She knew Leon was a nice person, deep down—and that was why she couldn't put up with him being reviled and feared as a demon lord now.

"Hmph," he replied. "Enough with your silly suspicions. I... I've sacrificed a great many things. I'm willing to do anything to rescue her. No matter how bad a reputation it gives me, I'll gladly accept it all."

This was the truth. As a former Hero and protector of humankind, he realized one day that strictly doing good wouldn't be enough to reach his goals. Ever since then, he never recoiled from getting his hands dirty as he dauntlessly

pursued his desires. It was too late to pretend otherwise. He wouldn't attempt to justify his actions. That was the rule, and the faith, that he lived by.

"Ah, you always *were* rather inflexible. Do you want Chloe to hate your guts as well?"

"Silence. So Rimuru is taking good care of these children, is he? Then he must be trying to lure me into some scheme of his."

"You have so far failed to eliminate the Rozzos, or Cerberus, or even the demon lord Luminus. And it's troubling you, isn't it, Leon?"

"You really know everything, don't you?" he whispered, the strength drained from his body. It was a reminder of how extensive Elmesia's intelligence network was and how right he was to enlist her assistance. At the same time, it also struck him with fear. He was afraid of her—not militarily, but politically—and that certainly didn't make it any easier to deal with her.

"Right, well, enough picking on you for now, Leon. Based on our investigation, Tempest and Lubelius are in the clear. The demon lord Luminus truly intends to stick to her treaty with the demon lord Rimuru. That much, you know, is obvious enough from the actions of Hinata, their paladin captain. As for Cerberus, it's a bit harder to judge them. Much about them remains a mystery, and their bosses do a poor job of working with each other—perhaps on purpose, it seems. So there's only so much we can learn about their internals from the outside. Let me move on to the Rozzos for now. *They* are bad news. They're doing away with all their protections in the north in order to attack Lubelius, according to my sources. Every agent in the Selt Foreign Information Bureau is being deployed, apparently, and it's currently quite a mess over there."

The northern nations to the East were lightly guarded, and battle was about to erupt in Lubelius. The news presented a serious problem to Leon.

"Then Guy must be making a move."

And this was it. To be exact, the demon lord Guy wouldn't lift a finger—but the demons under him were bound to kick up some dirt. If Guy himself decided to join in, nobody could stop the world from being destroyed then. Even Elmesia understood that, but that didn't make the situation any less dangerous

for humankind. Certain demons in Guy's stable—Vert and Bleu—made certain of that.

"Yes, that's what I'm afraid of. It'd present a serious problem for us all. Unless someone stops his underlings, that might spell the end of the Western Nations..."

Elmesia glanced at Leon, who appeared genuinely concerned.

"D-don't look at me like that! I'm just—!!"

"You're starting to sound like your old self again, Leon."

"N-no, I..."

"No need to torture yourself. You don't need to put on airs around me. It *is* cute, but now is no time to play with you."

Even in an emergency like this, Elmesia never changed. It honestly impressed Leon.

"Well," he replied, "I'm sorry, but I'm going to work toward my own goals. I'd like to make some overtures with Guy, but he's such a contrarian. Negotiating poorly with him would have the opposite effect."

"Oh, I'm quite aware of that. We need to show we're making an honest effort, or that demon lord might lose all interest in the human race. If the Crusaders aren't able to move right now, our only choice might be to deploy the Magus to the northern regions. I'll organize a dragon transport to take you partway there."

"...Are you sure?"

"I told you, there's no need for panic. But time is of the essence, isn't it? You'd better get going soon."

Events were proceeding faster than Leon thought. Not even he could teleport someplace he hadn't been before—and Lubelius was protected by a barrier anyway. If he was headed there now, air travel was the fastest way. He appreciated Elmesia's offer a great deal.

"Thank you, then."

"I wish you'd be that thankful more often. Oh, and I'm sure this goes without saying, but Cerberus absolutely wants to ensnare you. It's a blatant trap; do you understand me?"

"I know," came the terse reply.

"I'm sure you do," she said with a slightly sad smile. Leon had always been that way—never showing any external sign of weakness, never giving up on his mission, no matter the danger. He never lost heart that way; a boy living like a true Hero. Even as demon lord, that still held true.

But he's still as clumsy as always. He hasn't changed a bit from back then...

It made Elmesia happy and sad in equal measures.

A little while later, as he boarded the dragon ship, Leon suddenly turned back toward Elmesia, as if remembering something.

"To repay you for your advice, I should probably tell you that Jaune has disappeared. You should be careful, too."

"What?!"

She reared back in genuine surprise. It made Leon chuckle a bit.

"Intelligence is practically your hobby, and you didn't know that? Glad I could help, then."

Then he turned back around and left, the thrill of victory echoing in his heart.

After he was gone:

"You're kidding me. *Three* of the Primal Demons, while I have half of the Magus deployed? What kind of sick joke is this...? But I suppose it would require that much to make Leon take action, wouldn't it? I misread him again..."

Thus, Elmesia was left behind, hand on her forehead, muttering about all these people selfishly ruining her plans.



We had a clear sky from daybreak, a pleasant breeze heralding the start of a wonderful day. That, at least, was my expectation...

"R-reporting in! A group has penetrated the cathedral grounds! There's talk of battle on the site!"

...but the paladin apprentice who came storming in told me just how wrong I was.

"Calm down. What's their size and how much damage is there?"

Hinata, enjoying breakfast with me, kept a cool head. Again, whenever I see her like that, I feel so glad I'm not her enemy.

"Their numbers are unknown, my lord, but we've confirmed close to a hundred hostiles. Their strength is at least B-plus in rank, and they're demonstrating a knowledge of our nation's internal layout."

Nearly a hundred B-plus fighters made for a pretty formidable force. And if they knew the city's layout, I'd have to assume they were with Granville.

"...As of now, our apprentice knights have suffered extensive casualties. We have several members of the Master Rooks downed in action as well. Fortunately, no civilians have been harmed."

The messenger was giving us the news straight, and it wasn't rosy. I'd normally be losing my temper right about now, but I was a guest here, so I resisted the urge to butt in and just sat there quietly. Maybe that sounds cruel of me, but this just isn't my turf.

"I see. Then I will assume our enemy is Gren, leader of the Seven Days Clergy, and the Rozzo family under him. They're no doubt packing more force than they're letting on right now. Send out the deployment order for all garrisoned Crusaders!"

It sounded like the enemy had taken even more casualties than our side, but Hinata wasn't going to let up. I knew she wouldn't. But something still worried me.

"By the way, this isn't the same cathedral that we left our instruments in yesterday, is it?"

If so, that was trouble. Baton and the rest of the orchestra installed their kit there for an acoustics check. I doubted there were that many cathedrals in this

nation, so I had a very bad feeling about this. And whenever I had a feeling like that...

"That's the only cathedral in the country."

...Yes, it usually turned out to be right. In fact, it had yet to be wrong.

Already dreading what was to come, I turned toward Diablo.

He just smiled back and said "Not a problem." Apparently, he opened up a Thought Communication with Venom the moment the messenger arrived—capable as always, I see. And Venom's response was just as commendable. Baton and the orchestra were already in the cathedral for the day, but he made sure they were kept under careful guard, not letting anyone suspicious come near them. They were still making final instrument adjustments, even.

"They're still at it with an army advancing on them? Man, oh man."

"Heh-heh-heh-heh... Of course they are. If Venom couldn't handle this much of a crisis, I would never have brought him in to assist."

I could learn from that confidence.

"Well, we can't sit around, either. Let's go."

Trying to hide my feelings of inadequacy, I used Dominate Space to open a portal to the cathedral. I had begun to master this a little more; even within Lubelius, protected by its holy barrier, I had no problem launching it. I suppose that barrier didn't interfere with internal teleportation or the like.

"...Phew. I can't even give you snide comments about that anymore. I'll join you through there."

Hinata looked a tad fatigued. I was about to ask why she wasn't looking so hot this morning but stopped myself, not wanting it to be misconstrued. See? I can learn from my mistakes. I don't want anyone calling me inconsiderate again.

We were also joined by a man named Nicolaus. I thought he was a servant since he brought us breakfast, but it turns out he was a cardinal and chief counsel for the Western Holy Church. He had a fancy theologian's robe on beneath his apron, so I guess he wasn't lying, but why was someone that high up tending to Hinata's meals? The plot thickens, I suppose...but that didn't

matter right now.

Our kids were in the cathedral as well. They were all up bright and early, so I sent them over a little while ago. Diablo said they were under full protection, but you never knew what could happen in this world. Taking a deep breath, I quickly transported myself over to the cathedral.



Once I was inside, I could hear the sounds of intense battle beyond the walls. Baton and the rest were there, looking understandably frightened, but then I heard Shion's booming voice.

"Do not lose your composure! Have you forgotten what Sir Rimuru said? He himself told you to concentrate on your music, for you are guaranteed to be safe. So why have you stopped practicing?!"

Um... *That's kind of an insane thing to say, isn't it? We're in the middle of a battlefield, Shion. Ordering noncombatants not to be frightened right now was really a big ask*, I thought...

"My apologies, Lady Shion. I think we were all just a little caught in the moment."

...Huh? Did Shion's scolding actually restore the focus to Baton's eyes? And now here he was, turning back toward the performers and lifting his arms up high. They must've noticed me by this point, because I could feel their eyes on me. I don't know if that was the cause, but now everyone seemed more relaxed, their tension draining. They were even smiling.

"Let's continue our rehearsal!"

Nobody voiced any dissent. Baton, seemingly taking the orchestra's agreement as a given, began conducting—and beautiful music filled the room, not a single note out of place. It almost seemed powerful enough to drown out the war going on outside. Listening on, I couldn't help but be proud of everyone I brought along.

Having this battle gain a sudden musical accompaniment made it almost seem like a stage show—but of course, this was no production.

In another moment, I found the kids and ordered them to stay where they

were. “But I wanna—” began Kumara before I shut her down. Right now, she was by herself—only one tail—and just like the other children, she was too young for actual battle yet. Calling Shion over, I ordered her to protect them with Diablo.

“What are you going to do, Sir Rimuru?”

“Me? I’m gonna squish these roaches. Whoever’s facing off against Hinata’s forces is the cause of this, and it’s time to kick ’em outta here.”

Normally, it’d be ill-advised for a guest like me to step into the fray. But watching Baton’s orchestra give their all like this, I wanted to do whatever I could to make tomorrow’s concert a success.

“...Very well,” Diablo said.

“Hmm? What’s the matter, Vice Secretary? It’s rare for you to actually accept an order from Sir Rimuru.”

Shion gave Diablo a surprised look. Yeah, I was kind of floored by that, too. I all but assumed Diablo would volunteer to join me, but if I wanted to keep this scene from growing any bigger, this was probably best.

“All right. The chamber is yours!”

“Best of luck to you.”

“Ah...”

Shion seemed to have her concerns, but given what she just told Diablo, she was in no position to protest now. That suited me just fine, so I flung myself outside and into battle.

*

Enemies and allies were scattered across the cathedral entrance. The main door was battered down, not a trace of it left, and over a hundred people were currently engaged in battle.

Among the standouts, certainly, was the figure Hinata was up against. He was an old man, but his back was straight as a fence post, his moves nimble and artistic. He was dressed in a fancy-looking suit, and his sharpened eyes indicated he was no one to be trifled with. He wasn’t a monster but likely not

human, either—and looking at the aura around him, I could tell he was packing a formidable amount of force.

“Who’s that?”

“Granville Rozzo. Leader of the Five Elders and head of the Rozzo family.”

“Him...?”

That made sense to me.

“Maria,” the man said, “find Lady Luminus and bring her here. If she resists, kill her if you must.”

At his summons, a woman stepped in front of me. Her features reminded me of Maribel, but she was a young adult in age. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were blood relatives, but I couldn’t say if she was Maribel’s mother.

Understood. Failed to confirm blood relation with genetic evidence.

Whoa, you can tell just by visuals? Cool, I guess.

So if it was no coincidence that Maria looked like Maribel, that made me wonder what her strength was like. She sure didn’t *look* like she’d hold her own against Luminus. Was Granville seriously ordering her to seize that woman—a demon lord?

“Very well. I will begin immediately.”

The woman called Maria walked off, never looking my way. It was all so mechanical—all I could say was that it wasn’t like any regular human being. I couldn’t gauge her strength, but I guessed Luminus would before too much longer.

Me, I needed to get Granville out of here. If we could talk this over, then great. If not, I was prepared to end this quickly.

“Nice to meet you, Granville. I’m the demon lord Rimuru.”

Any decent conversation needed to begin with a greeting. I had a hunch our relationship wasn’t going to be too friendly, but we might as well start on the right foot, at least.

“You’re Rimuru? How dare you take my Maribel from me...”

"Whoa, whoa, she started it—"

Yeahhhh, I guess he's got it in for me.

But Maribel's death was an accident. It seemed unreasonable to blame me for it. I know telling him "I didn't mean to kill her" would be a dumb excuse...but really, if Maribel didn't start gunning for me, none of that would've happened. Not that I expected Granville to accept it. Yuuki said he'd try reasoning with him, but now that I no longer trusted Yuuki, I could kind of imagine what he had said about me. I doubted this was something we could iron out with words any longer.

Report. Regardless of what was said, you would likely have been in conflict with him.

Yeah, I was sure. Something told me it would be just as hard to coexist with Granville as it was with Maribel. In which case, I'd just have to overpower him.

"...But I guess it's pointless to say that, isn't it? Then let's prove to each other who's in the right."

"Heh-heh-heh... Say what you will. You think a demon lord upstart like you could defeat me? I'll fight you later, so just stay there and watch as your allies are picked off, one by one."

A demon lord upstart like me? Given that he used to be Luminus's servant, this guy sure seemed to like his chances. I mean, yeah, the power of a monster depended a great deal on how old they were...but any demon lord, no matter how young, should've at least given him pause.

Guess this guy's more confident than I thought. But now someone else was here to challenge him.

"There is no need for Lady Hinata or Sir Rimuru to step up. Gren of the Seven Days Clergy, your fight begins with us!"

It was Nicolaus who shouted this. Isn't he way too up there in the hierarchy for this stuff? Then I remembered—Cardinal Nicolaus was the guy who set a trap and cast Disintegration on Granville. Gutsy move, definitely. He was currently accompanied by three Crusader captains—the subleader Renard, along with Arnaud and Litus. Fritz and Bacchus would've been training at the

labyrinth right now, so they weren't here. If *this* was gonna happen... But again, that's not for me to judge.

"Behold, Lady Hinata! Watch us in action!"

At Nicolaus's orders, Renard propelled himself forward. Not just him, actually—Arnaud and Litus as well, all rushing Granville at the same time. These three captains were attempting to buy enough time for Nicolaus to cast Disintegration again, I figured. A pretty grandiose strategy, but that must be how wary Nicolaus was of his foe.

Renard used his magnificent sword moves to keep his foe at bay. Arnaud's keen perception let him match every move of Renard's, as Litus provided handy backup for them both. Normally, an attack from this trio would end the battle right then—but it was well within Granville's capabilities. Like a picture from a textbook, he engaged all three of them at once, wholly ignoring Nicolaus's spellcasting. That creeped me out a bit, as did the serene look on his face, not a single bead of sweat on his forehead. He, I felt, was simply on a different tier from them.

Nicolaus had only one verse left in the spell. Its effects would summon a layered magical circle, with Granville standing in the middle of its light-infused dungeon. Once the Disintegration was complete, there was no way to block its dazzling rays, as it dismantled the soul of its target at the speed of light.

That's what should have happened. But now, all common sense was thrown out the window.

"Mm... A fine spell, there. No better way to read the flow of your magic."

Granville's voice sounded frightfully cold as he spoke, like a teacher commanding his student from high above. Hinata, hearing it, muttered a soft "No..." as the blood drained from her face. She must've noticed something, but there was no time to inform Nicolaus.

"Time to die! Disintegration!!"

The rays of light were cast, heading straight for Granville—and suddenly, they switched paths and were sucked straight into the sword in his hand. It happened in an instant. Even with my perception accelerated a million times

over, it was difficult to pinpoint. But I recognized exactly what happened—because I had witnessed it before. It was Overblade: Meltslash, the most powerful of sword skills, just like what I saw from Hinata.

“...Spread out!”

Renard and the others instantly heeded Hinata’s order. They worked fast, true to their military precision, but not fast enough. Once Granville threw out his Meltslash, it immediately generated a fan-shaped shock wave—and in that single moment, Hinata pushed forward, came in front of Nicolaus, and stopped Granville’s sword.

The frontal force of the Meltslash sent Hinata flying. She bashed against Nicolaus—which kept her safe, but I’m sure Nicolaus was out of the battle. If she wasn’t wielding the Legend-class Moonlight right now, they’d both be a pile of ash. That—and even the secondary shock wave blew Renard and the other captains away. They were all on the ground, knocked out by that single blast.

“A-are you all right?!”

Nobody answered.

I could detect a twinge of panic in Hinata’s face as she glared at Granville. Even someone as cold as her didn’t expect this level of force—and now it was Granville doing the talking.

“Mmm, I couldn’t kill a single one of you? I must be getting rusty. You have that demon lord over there to thank.”

“Huh? What do you...?”

Hinata took a glance at me, growing calmer. Now she seemed to understand.

“Oh. You saved them? Thanks, Rimuru.”

You’re welcome.

I gave Hinata a light nod. Yes, Renard and the others were merely knocked out because I lent them a hand. The moment I realized this was trouble, I launched Absolute Defense—otherwise, they’d have vanished without a trace.

The wall that skill built was perfect, I thought, but I guess I expected too much from it. Absolute Defense—part of the ultimate skill Uriel, Lord of Vows—could

block any sort of attack. There were some exceptions, such as Yuuki's Anti-Skill, so I couldn't rely *too* much on it, but it was always a helpful arrow in my quiver.

However, although it was perfect for self-defense, trying to deploy it on someone else (multiple targets, even) blunted its effects. Even if a little force got through, I could always count on Infinite Regeneration to wipe up any problems—that's why it so perfectly defended me. But not the paladin captains. The little bit of the shock wave that penetrated the Absolute Defense pushed them to the brink of death. They really escaped disaster by a hair's breadth.

"I had no idea someone besides me learned Meltslash. Color me just a little bit surprised."

"Mmm... An arrogant thought, Hinata. With all the years that have passed, *some* have reached your level, you know."

Yeah. I mean, *I* could use it, so... (Although, admittedly, that was just Raphael doing its usual Analyze and Assess job on it.)

Still, to completely leverage Meltslash, you needed full, intimate knowledge of how Disintegration worked. If there was a handful of people wielding that now, I guess the human race was a lot more capable than I thought. It *did* make sense, though—a human Hero once sealed Veldora away, so at least *some* of them had to be that strong. Even being a demon lord, I really couldn't rest on my laurels.

But look at me. My mind was wandering, and I really couldn't afford that.

"So what is *this* I see? High officers in the paladins, almost killed by something of *this* level? How worthlessly pathetic. You couldn't even begin to compare with the sword masters of the past, to say nothing of myself."

Granville seemed to believe his own claims. He honestly didn't think Hinata would pose a challenge.

"That's a funny thing to say. Care to test that out?"

Hinata flashed a cold smile. She was just as serious, it seemed, and I had no room to interfere...

Then a sudden thundering explosion by the cathedral told me how incorrect I

was.

"Ah, Razul? I ordered him to destroy the cathedral, and it seems he's doing a thorough job."

"What did you...?"

The kids and the orchestra were still in there. Shion and Diablo were charged with protecting them, but if all-out war was erupting, they were bound to be caught in it. I was hoping to make short work of Granville, but at this point, maybe it was best to eliminate this uninvited guest first.

With that in mind, I attempted to teleport myself to the cathedral. But Granville stopped me.

"Demon lord Rimuru, I will let this group entertain you. Enjoy! You *may* even find some of your own kind among them!"

Several people stepped up at his order. Immediately, I understood what he meant. The group consisted of many races and many ages, no real theme to them, but they each had something in common—more magicules than any regular person would possess.

"Otherworlders? Ah. Yeah, maybe there's one or two Japanese people in here."

Now was not the time to act all casual about this. I had ten or so otherworlders attacking me at once. Like Glenda from the past, they seemed to be under the effects of a locking curse, robbed of their freedom of movement—and unlocking that curse wouldn't stop them, by the looks of it.

Still...

"Heh-heh-heh. You intend to fight? You realize they're only doing this because I've enthralled them, do you not?"

How treacherous of him. I'm sure he said that to make me hesitate...and I hate to admit it, but it worked.

"I heard how soft and weak-minded you were. Can you kill innocent human beings? Can you tell yourself this is war and step up to defend yourself? Not that I mind either way, of course."

Granville only saw the summoned otherworlders as weapons, nothing more. To him, they only had value as throwaway pawns. And he was right—killing them *shouldn't* make any difference to me. He really *was* a menace. Clearly, he had done his research. If Diablo or Shion were taking these guys on, they'd show absolutely no mercy, I'm sure. But did that make it okay, or *not* okay, for me...?

"Ah, dammit! What a pain in the ass!"

I had no time to agonize over this. The children were in danger if I didn't do something fast, and now the damage was just gonna get worse. At this point, there was just one option to take. As annoying as it was, I'd have to unlock the curses of every one of these guys and knock them out nonlethally.

Thus, I was now an active participant in this battle.

*

My fellow humans were closing in on me. For all I knew, maybe they were from some other planet (or dimension) besides Earth—but now my mind was wandering again. Guess I was back in my element.

Otherworlders were blessed with extraordinary physical skills, as well as a variety of special skills that were impossible to predict. That made them dangerous, of course, but they weren't a threat to me. Not even Glenda could hurt me, whether I put up a defense or not. That's how all-powerful the combo of Absolute Defense and Infinite Regeneration was.

These foes were still a handful, but not much more than that. With enough time, I could safely neutralize all of them. I wasn't about to go easy on them, but that was my honest assessment. Besides, I had Raphael, which meant that going easy wasn't an option to start with.

So I used part of my vast computational skills to begin surveying the situation.

First, I looked at Hinata, fighting right next to me. Granville, who had mercifully shut up for me, was gracefully clashing swords with her, both of them equipped with nothing but their rapiers. They held them in their right hands, their left kept behind their backs for magic-casting purposes.

"Tch! So when you posed as Gren, you were hiding your full powers? I recall

that you specialize in bare-handed close-range combat, but you're rather handy with a sword as well."

"Heh-heh! I have experience with all weapons. I just never needed to use it before now."

"Oh, no? Then let me strip you of your mistaken confidence."

Hinata was leaving nothing on the table. That much was clear from how she used Moonlight, her sword. What I wondered about was Granville's blade. If he could use it to keep Hinata's at bay, it couldn't have been any normal weapon.

Understood. Unable to determine weapon class due to interference. It is believed to be classed at Legend or higher.

Hmm. A surprising appraisal. Raphael hadn't made any mistakes as of late, but here you go. Perhaps I underestimated Granville quite a bit.

I doubted it, but was Hinata in, you know, big trouble here? I mean, I didn't think she'd lose or anything...but I couldn't dismiss the possibility, and that unnerved me. Not even Raphael had a bead on his skill level.

So Hinata and Granville's duel piqued my interest, but I had even bigger fish to fry—namely, the intense battle I was sensing from the direction of the cathedral. I honed the accuracy of my Magic Sense, turning my eyes toward the fray.

There, I saw a man in a suit of dark armor. Amazingly, he was fighting against Shion and Diablo at once—and not giving an inch of ground. I suppose he wouldn't. His magicule level was higher than both of them combined.

"Damn, you're kidding me. You were hiding someone with power beyond a demon lord's?"

"Of course. When facing the demon lords or other monsters who threaten humankind, you can never have too many aces up your sleeve."

Granville must've picked up on my muttering if he replied to it. He was in the middle of fighting Hinata and still had the time to answer me. Wow. But hey, if he was open to chatting, we'd get some more info from him—and if it distracted him along the way, that was two birds with one stone.

"He has to outclass Roy, right? That demon lord standin? Maybe stronger than you?"

I worked a bit of a taunt into my question.

"His name is Razul. My friend for the past millennium."

Glad he was nice enough to reply. Hinata was still silent; I suppose she understood my aims and chose not to interfere. So I continued.

"Your friend, huh? But Razul doesn't seem human to me."

"What of it?"

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. I just wanted to find out what he really was. Now I knew he wasn't human, at least, and that was a step forward, but...

"Well, nothing..."

I felt talked down to a bit, which was annoying.

"He comes from a long-lived race, you see. My partner during my glory years. Given how he's got far more power than a paladin captain, I'm sure your underlings must feel overwhelmed right now."

Granville was right. Shion and Diablo were having a hard time of it. I thought having Diablo around kept us safe, but maybe that was too optimistic?

...Hang on. Actually, *here* was something weird. It was like Diablo's having trouble focusing or something.

Report. Unusual rifts in space detected. It is a sign of someone using Spatial Transport to appear.

The warning from Raphael came all too suddenly. It almost never gave me alerts like that unless things were really serious, so I had to treat it as an emergency. No need to go easy any longer. Diablo must've been picking up on this anomaly, and it was keeping him from concentrating.

(Ranga, you there?)

(Yes, my master!)

Ah, good! He was usually curled up in my shadow these days.

(Back up Shion, but keep yourself concealed!)

(Right away!)

At once, he used Shadow Motion to dive into Shion's shadow. When I saw he was ready, I gave out my next order.

(Diablo, is something bothering you?)

(My pardons, Sir Rimuru. I know my difficulties in this battle are unforgivable, but the fact is that this adversary is more powerful than I anticipated. He is a highly evolved example of the uncommon insectoid race, and to demons, they are a kind of natural enemy.)

Diablo described insectoids as cross-dimensional magic beasts with elemental powers. They appeared now and then in this world, but it was extremely uncommon for them to evolve into humanoid creatures. I figured Diablo could still win against him, but he wasn't. Something far worse was troubling him—and now that this something was incoming, I wanted Diablo to address it first.

(Shion, you heard him. If Diablo's making excuses, it must be something really serious.)

The moment I said that, I could practically feel Diablo's discomfort from over here. He'd never resort to excuses like this usually, so I immediately knew he was hiding something. And if I wanted him to retain full freedom in this battle, I needed Shion's and Ranga's help.

(Shion, I just planted Ranga in your shadow. Both of you work together to defeat Razul, that insectoid.)

(No need to order us!)

(I will live up to your expectations, Master!)

Looks like Shion picked up on Diablo's difficulties as well. I'm sure she would've taken measures even without an order. But if she did, it would've been Shion alone against the mighty Razul, which would only be more dangerous. Not that I didn't trust her, but I wanted our plans to remain as safe as possible. Maybe setting two allies against him was a cowardly move, but in an actual battle like this, guaranteed victory was always your final goal.

(Diablo, go take care of whatever's bothering you. Also, try to trust and rely on your allies more.)

(...!! Keh-heh-heh-heh... Very well. I suppose I thought a little too much of myself today. Allow me to take care of this problem at once!)

Not just a “*little*,” I’d say. But at least he sounded a bit more like himself again.

(Right, everyone... Begin!)

((Yes, my lord!))

I wasn’t used to giving out orders like these, but all three gladly accepted them. Now I just had to hope for the best, as I brought my full focus back to neutralizing the otherworlders.



“Keh-heh-heh-heh... Sir Rimuru sees everything, I suppose. I would be a fool to think otherwise.”

“Of course he does, Vice Secretary. Just go and deal with your problem already!”

“You don’t have to remind me. As I think you’ve noticed, Razul is more powerful than you. Are you sure you’ll be fine, Secretary?”

“Hee-hee-hee! I never thought you’d worry for me, Vice Secretary...or Diablo, I should say. You’re strong, I’ll admit. Stronger than me, even. So go defeat that foe so Sir Rimuru has nothing to worry about! That’s your job, isn’t it?”

“...!! Keh...heh-heh-heh. You called me by name...”

“Just go! Leave this fight to me!”

“I believe in you, Lady Shion. Not because Sir Rimuru ordered me to—the feeling is genuine.”

“Just *Shion* is fine. It’s weird, you showing me proper respect. There’s no heart in it.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh... Best of luck to you, Shion.”

"You too, Diablo."

In that short conversation, conducted without any eye contact, Shion and Diablo finally accepted each other. They both had overinflated senses of pride, perhaps, but deep down, both of them knew the extent of each other's power.

Diablo walked off, not looking back as he gave orders to his staff.

"Venom, protect those children like your life depends on it. Or sacrifice your life for it—either way, just *do* it."

Rimuru had given no orders for Diablo's own forces. He thus saw no need to consider their feelings. All that really mattered here, he coldly reasoned, were the children and the orchestra.

"Oh, um, all right."

Wish he could've considered us a bit more, Venom thought—but he wasn't foolish enough to say it. If he did, Diablo would've ended his life before any foe could.

Besides:

Well, looks like Lady Shion and Sir Ranga are handling the major threat. With all of us, protecting this area should be doable enough. It beats fighting Sir Diablo, at least...

That summed up Venom's feelings on the subject.

"May victory be yours, Sir Diablo!"

"Silence. I have no interest in you worrying over me."

Diablo wasted no time coldly brushing off Venom's encouragement.

There's the Diablo I know...

Venom's memories of being forcibly pressed into service by him flashed through his mind. He banished them as quickly as he could. If Diablo ever saw him looking disgruntled, there was no telling how he'd react.

As he mentally refocused on his mission, Diablo left the scene to his friends and strode off the battlefield.

He teleported to his destination, reappearing in a spot removed from the

cathedral, and outside of Lubelius itself—a corner of a vast, vegetation-free plain. Awaiting him was a beautiful blue-haired woman in a dark-red maid outfit. Several paladins were on the ground at her feet—even these guardians of humanity, each one boasting the power of a thousand, were helpless against her.

"How nice to see you again, Noir. I was growing impatient with your lateness."

"Indeed, I could feel your murderous rage from miles away, but I had some business I couldn't extract myself from. But I'd really prefer if you called me Diablo, Bleu...or I suppose *you* had a name, too, didn't you, Raine?"

Raine, the blue-haired beauty, gave this response a satisfied smile. "That's right. The name Raine was granted to me by Rouge, the Original Red, the great Sir Guy himself, strongest of the Primal Demons. It's not at all like being named by some mutt of a demon lord like *you* were."

"Huh? Are you looking to die? Or maybe you want to be detached from this world entirely. Keh-heh-heh-heh... I'll be happy to oblige."

Diablo's smile remained, but his gold eyes were no longer friendly. The red pupils within them narrowed as he eyed his prey.

"Let us battle, Diablo! Ah, I cannot wait for this. Ever since I detected you fighting Blanc over to the east, I've always wanted a chance at you."

"Ridiculous. If you think this will be any fight at all, you are sorely mistaken."

"Well, why don't we begin and find out?!"

With that signal, Raine made good her question and went on the move, dropping a chop with her hand that moved beyond the speed of sound. A casual wave of Diablo's arm deflected it. It delighted Raine. The wish she kindled for many long years was finally happening.

Yes... Yes, this is it. I can't have this end that quickly. We are both Primal, and yet you enjoy all of this freedom. No building your own factions, no undertaking someone else's mission... All demons want nothing more than a physical body, and you laughed that off...

It was fair to say that Raine was jealous of Diablo. For someone like her, who followed the rules by the book, his behavior was inexcusable.

He fought Sir Guy to a draw, as loath as I am to admit it...and here he is now, blithely wandering around, no desire for more strength. As a demon, he needs to gain a body the right way! He needs to strive for what lies beyond his evolution!

All of Raine's power was being thrown Diablo's way. After stewing over these emotions for years, she was now acting on them.

Diablo—Noir, the Original Black—was a unique demon. Long, long ago, he and Rouge fought to be crowned the strongest of their kind. The match, while ending in a tie, wound up sealing both of their respective fates. Rouge manifested in the physical world, gaining untold powers, but Noir refused to change, turning down his chance at evolution.

The cases of Blanc, Jaune, and Violet could be understood—those three colors were all meddling with one another, preventing any evolution, creating a sort of balanced rivalry that remained to this day. But Noir, despite having no such restriction, simply remained his natural self and enjoyed life, as if he thought the other six shades were all fools. That is how things had been for tens of thousands of years.

And it was exactly why Raine could never forgive Diablo. He was so selfish, going wherever his whims took him, living in perfect freedom—and Guy, the strongest of all, recognized him as an equal.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You're right. All this dodging can hardly count as a battle. You always were good at *evading* things, if nothing else."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh... I told you: Don't get the wrong idea. I simply have no need to tap my full force against the likes of you. Also, I should note that I have zero intention of avoiding you."

"Making apologies already? I'm sure you're still too new in your body to tap its full potential, but don't expect me to accept your pathetic excuses."

Raine fired a bolt of magic from her fist. Exposed to the laws of nature, it transformed into a Nuclear Cannon blast—one Raine called for with no casting time. But Diablo, naturally, had expected this, not demonstrating a moment of

concern as he cast dispulsion magic to make the nuclear blast vanish. This is what battle between high-level demons is about: breaking through one another's layers of magical barriers and counterattack spells to land a lethal blow on your enemy. Neither side had any need for time-consuming spellcasting as they threw supercharged blasts of magic at each other.

And as more and more time passed...

"I—I can't believe it! You were drawing this while you were fighting?!"

"That's right, Raine. To me, fighting you was merely busywork. One can hardly call it an engaging game if you can already see the ending."

Raine was in shock. The outcome was already set in stone.

Surrounding Raine was a layered circle, alive and glowing with magical runes. It had appeared in the air just now at Diablo's signal, and now that she was in it, Raine could no longer move. Whenever she tried to, even a little, Diablo could summon any magic she wanted against her.

It was called:

"A... A multilayered Disintegration...? The antithesis to all demons, a magic dangerous enough to crush us all... Why do you...?!"

Diablo looked coldly down upon her, a slight sense of pity in his otherwise-frozen mind, as if he couldn't understand why she wouldn't know.

"Ridiculous. As long as my faith in my master is deep enough, I can even hold sway over spiritual particles. Common sense, don't you see?"

"Are you insane?! How could that ever be common sense...?!"

"But let me extend you the courtesy of ending this. You have insulted my wondrous master Sir Rimuru, and soon you will burn with regret."

Seven rays of light were released. Even one of these deadly arrows held the power of absolute destruction, and now they came crashing down upon Raine...



From the bottom of her heart, Luminus was irritated.

Right here, in the midst of the concert she invited the demon lord Rimuru to

stage, she had allowed Granville to arrange an all-out rebellion. Such a dreadful error was unheard of in the history of her nation. She was taken by an urge to run to the cathedral and massacre everyone inside herself, but her sense of reason (and her instincts) restrained her. She realized that, as public of an attack as this was, it was undoubtedly a diversion.

Louis and Gunther, stationed by Luminus's side, stayed silent, not willing to set her off. They said nothing—like Luminus, they were greatly disturbed but not stupid enough to prioritize the wrong thing here.

If Granville's blitz was a diversion, what purpose was there to it?

I'm sure he knows about my cherished ark. That means there's a nonzero chance he's thinking about releasing the girl inside...

The ark was the greatest of Luminus's secret treasures. But she had an even bigger reason to keep it absolutely safe—and she knew Granville was aware of that reason. This is why it was hard to imagine him gunning for the ark—but still, she trusted her instincts. And she was correct to do so.

Here she was, inside her innermost chamber—a burial room, one nobody was supposed to know about. It was currently playing host to an uninvited guest.

"Well now, guess our little home invasion got spotted, eh? Or were you just beefin' up the security around here?"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! A pity. But here's a bit of prey we can have some fun with. Think it's all right for us to raise a little hell?"

"Fine by me, but you better be careful. That li'l beauty over there's a menace, through and through. You're the demon lord Luminus, ain't you?"

The two home invaders—Laplace and Footman—stepped in, acting less than polite to their host. Luminus watched them as she elegantly relaxed on a couch in front of the ark she absolutely had to protect.

To her, this pair didn't even remotely seem like a challenge. But something about the atmosphere kept her on close guard.

Luminus took care to conceal her rage as she spoke.

"...I will ignore your attitudes for the moment. State your names."

Laplace was the first to react. He was a bit surprised that someone expected their breakin, but Granville had mentioned the possibility. To address it, he had provided them with a guide, someone to help them traverse the multiple defense lines blocking access to the chamber.

"It is an honor to meet you. I am Laplace, the Wonder Jester and vice president of the Moderate Jesters—a kind of handyman outfit, know what I mean? And this here's Footman."

He deliberately took a less-than-serious approach to the greeting as he motioned toward Footman.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! I am Footman, the Angry Jester. Glad to meet you...although I don't think we'll be staying long."

Footman, to his credit, was standing strong against this demon lord. His mind worked on simple terms—if there's an enemy, he'd crush it. Now he was just waiting for Laplace's signal to begin.

"That—and we've got one more person here. C'mon in!"

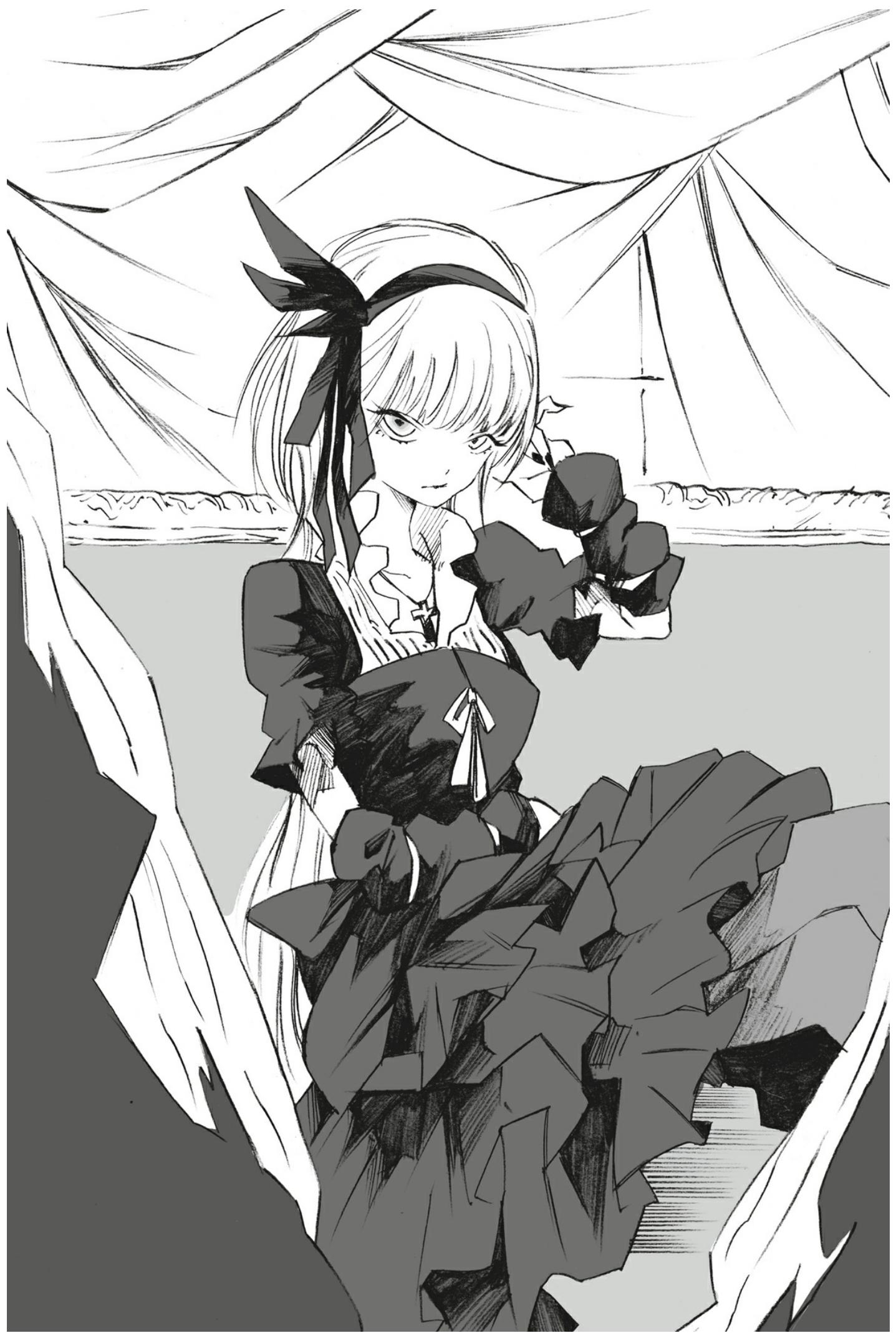
Another figure emerged through the door, a blond-haired beauty.

"..."

"She's not too talkative, mind you. I think her name was—"

"No. I remember her... Yes, yes. Maria Rozzo? The woman Granville loved?"

"Yeah! Maria! That's the name! Wow, Lady Luminus, you two knew each other?"



Luminus winced. “I’m not your friend, you know. We are done greeting each other, and thus there’s nothing left to discuss. Going forward, we will discuss matters not with words but with fists.”

Her patience was reaching its limit. She had detected this person hiding and decided to put up with it, but with Maria now introduced, she could endure this no longer.

“Eesh, no need to be so hasty. And yeah, we all know one another now, but I got a message from Granville, too.”

“Oh?”

“Right, so listen to this: *‘I await you up above. Let us settle this, demon lord Luminus. Come soon, or else those you hold dear will die.’* So there ya go! And I think that monster oughtta be in combat with the paladin captain, Hinata, by now, so who knows how *that’s* gonna turn out—”

Laplace was interrupted by a strike from the lunging Louis. Luminus had lowered her hand—her signal to commence the attack.

“It’s you, isn’t it? The man who killed my brother?”

“Tchh... Can’t you at least let me finish?! Ah well. I’ll spot you an answer to that one: Yes! I killed yer body double, Roy, sure enough!”

“Hmm. I have no interest in petty revenge, but since you’re here, perhaps I can prove to you that I am *far* more talented than he was.”

With that, Louis began stalking his prey.

“So I’m fightin’ you, then? Better not bore me, man!”

“Hohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! I’d ask the same of you!”

Gunther and Footman eyed each other—and in the next moment, they flew out of the burial chamber. They had their own battle to fight, and collateral damage wasn’t remotely a concern to them.

“Louis and Gunther can be *so* annoying. They’re normally so calm and composed, but when the time comes to battle, they simply cannot hold back their thirst for blood. But I suppose the same can be said of me. Granville, just

you wait. Even with your stout ally, you'll find it impossible to stop me!"

Luminus, too, had her eyes sharpened upon Maria, the fleeting, silent figure.

"A corpse? It couldn't be," she continued, almost whispering to herself. "I see Granville still hasn't given up. Maria is dead. Even with Resurrection, the miracle of my god, nothing can be done for a soul already lost. And now look..."

The figure before her wasn't Maria at all. It was something in the shape of her.

"But very well. Allow me to perform your last rites!"

Her aura blazing around her, Luminus stood up—and with that, she and Maria began fighting at a level beyond what a normal person could even observe. Would the winner be Luminus or this thing taking the shape of Maria?

And then...the ark was left behind in the chamber.

Everyone had left the room, not wanting to damage it. And as if waiting for that exact moment, a lone boy appeared in the darkness.

"Ha-ha-ha! I didn't think it'd go *this* much to plan. Granville was absolutely right."

It was Yuuki laughing.

Never accepting Granville's information at face value, he had remained in the shadows as he followed the intruders in. He had successfully shrouded his presence to all, even deceiving Luminus. He usually kept himself at least a *little* bit detectable, so he'd be ready if things ever went south. A lot of people could detect his presence that way, and once those adversaries presumed they had the upper hand, that made it easy to put them off their guard. Yuuki was always pursuing that strategy. His accumulated experiences were paying off in vital situations, including this very one—and now they let him obtain what he wanted with practically no work at all.

"So this is the ark?"

He reached out, touching that beautiful coffin of ice.

"Whoa. So that's what makes it a holy coffin? Matter made out of pure spiritual particles... I didn't know you could do that."

Now he was glad he came. He wasn't sure anyone besides him could even lay a hand on this thing. Even a magic-burning coffin couldn't affect Anti-Skill, and that made it perfectly possible for Yuuki to make off with this ark.

Then, without another moment of hesitation, he smashed it open. The hidden treasure Luminus worked so hard to protect shattered all too easily.

Slumbering inside it was a beautiful young woman—the Hero everyone was after, no doubt.

"Ooh, there's a seal on this girl's body as well? Not that it'll work on me...but I can deactivate it later, I guess."

Yuuki chuckled. They certainly tried to be careful. A barrier more powerful than the ark itself covered the girl's skin from head to toe. He could take his time removing it once he was back to safety.

As he made this decision, Yuuki's eyes turned toward the girl's face.

"Who *is* this girl anyway? She seems vaguely familiar...but nah. It can't be *that*."

She looked to be around sixteen, and while her long dark-silver hair hid her privates, she didn't have a stitch of clothing on her.

"Hmm... I guess this is technically assault or something like that, but not much I can do there..."

With that whisper, Yuuki hefted the girl's body up.

"Well, I've got my Hero. Now to flee the scene."

With one more sly grin, Yuuki quickly left the chamber.

...Why is there a Hero sleeping in an ark anyway? Is she really the ultimate weapon Granville called her? And what does Granville even want?

Yuuki was a skeptical young man by nature, but given his rash opinion of his almost excessive talents, he often figured things would work out in the end. That was what his pride did for him, and thus, despite his doubts, he signed on for Granville's operation...but at this point in time, he had no idea what kind of situation his actions were about to cause.



The otherworlders lurched upon me like zombies. Carefully, I neutralized them one by one, making sure not to kill any. With my powers, not even a hundred of these at once would give me a challenge...but undoing the locking curses on them all was a pain.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder about these otherworlders. I focused my mind upon them for a bit, and yes, they definitely packed a lot of magicules. They had real physical skill, too; some of them could even manage an A rank. But for some reason, they didn't seem particularly strong to me. I thought that was just the difference in talent at first, but something told me that wasn't the whole story. I was sure Granville's robbing their freedom was one other reason, but was there something else?

Understood. In this battle, no adversary has used any unique skill so far.

Aha! That was it! And it made sense to me. None of these guys were using any kind of special attack, and that made neutralizing them pretty straightforward work. But would a group of otherworlders this big really have *no* uniques at all? Or were they going easy on me? Either way, it was kind of creepy.

Of course, no matter what Granville was planning, I'd just beat him, and we'd be done with it. That was the plan I had in mind as I turned my attention toward the last one of them.

She still looked like a young girl to me, maybe a bit past ten—her power would've just barely stabilized by that age. Like the others, she was intensely powerful, but that was it. With a now-practiced hand, I undid the lock on her—no problems there. She was conscious again and looking thoroughly confused, but there was no time to explain matters. Putting her to sleep for the time being, I laid her down where I had placed the others.

There were a few kids like her in the group, which made things seriously difficult for me. Granville didn't seem to care much about how he looked in the midst of this, but regardless, I managed to take care of them all. I'm assuming he was just looking to buy some time; if I wanted to, it would've been quicker and easier to just kill 'em all. Along those lines, I guess it's mission accomplished

for him.

Still, the otherworlders attacking me were now neutralized. I don't know what he wanted to do with the time he earned, but once I ended this battle, it wouldn't matter anyway. I glanced across the battlefield to see how things were going.

The children were safe, which was a relief. Meanwhile, despite it all, Baton and his orchestra were still starting to practice their music. They had nerves of steel, I guess—or *something* of steel. I suppose focusing on something is a good way to calm your anxieties, though, so maybe it wasn't that crazy after all.

Hinata, meanwhile, was fighting on an even keel with Granville. I had to hand it to her. It was literally a supersonic contest, an advanced back-and-forth where no one could afford a single mistake. If I stepped in without a plan, I could destroy the balance and inadvertently turn the tide of the battle. Better save that for later.

Shion and Ranga were being pushed back by Razul, but it didn't look like they were *that* badly outclassed. Shion was taking Razul's attacks, but as she did, she was swiftly healing herself each time. Ultraspeed Regeneration really *was* like cheating—it was easily enough to make up a difference like this one. Ranga, meanwhile, was concentrating on offense, diving into Shion's shadow and sniping away when he found a blind spot, throwing in magic like Death-Calling Wind and Dark Lightning. I was impressed with his nimble performance—the only problem was that none of it worked on Razul.

I mean, Razul's just insane. I recalled that if he's an insectoid, that put him in the same family as Apito and Zegion. Their segmented eyes meant they had no blind spots, making it easy for him to dodge Ranga's surprise attacks—and besides, most regular attacks didn't faze him at all. What I thought was black armor was actually an exoskeleton harder than steel. He could simply lift up his left arm and stop Shion's large sword in its tracks. Unless you aimed for his joints, you likely had no chance of damaging him. Even worse, judging by the way Ranga's magic bounced off him, his surface must've had a Magic Interference-style effect applied.

No wonder he gave Diablo trouble. Magic was Diablo's main thing, so I could

see why he wasn't the greatest matchup for Razul, although I think he'd still manage a win.

Given his edge against both physical and magic attacks, Razul was a serious threat. And someone this amazing was just meekly serving Granville, with no ambitions of his own...?

Well, as much of a challenge as he posed to Shion and Ranga, I figured I could handle him.

So I was about to head over there...and then I steeled myself as I turned toward the cathedral. I wasn't alone—Hinata, Shion, and the others did the same, looking nervous. I think we were all justified. After all, the demon lord Leon—a guy who should never have been here—was standing in front of it.

He wore a white robe, a nice-looking, knightly suit of golden armor underneath. Handsome as always, to be sure, but he looked very peeved at the moment. And he wasn't alone—several knights were stationed behind him, and by the looks of it, they were handpicked from his top officials. What's he doing here? Is he friend or foe? I found it hard to picture him as an ally, but I really hoped he wouldn't decide to fight us.

"Ah, you're here, demon lord Leon? And, Hinata, you must be finding this terribly boring if you're turning away from our battle."

Granville sounded more like the bored one. He seemed totally unfazed, standing composed and not trying to sneak an attack on Hinata right now—although, of course, if he tried something so underhanded, he could've been walking right into her trap anyway. With this high-level a battle, you'd never be crowned the victor unless you overpowered your foe with a frontal attack. Either way, though, Granville clearly knew Leon was coming—his casual tone proved it. They had to be in cahoots.

"Aren't you being a little *too* friendly with me? Who are you?"

"Ah yes, we haven't met in person before. You've been very good to the children I've collected. I'm sorry to make you take time out to come here."

"..."

Wait, they're *not* in cahoots? Because it sounded like this was Leon and

Granville's first meeting. It could be an act, but... Oh, and speaking of which, a lot of the otherworlders I just fought against looked no older than middle schoolers. Was *that* what Granville was talking about...?

"What do you mean by that? I have no business with you. I came here to—"

"Hmm? I'm the one who summoned the children with the spells you taught me, you realize. Are you going to claim ignorance? Aren't you using unstable otherworlder children to bring yourself more elementalists? Warriors as powerful as Shizue Izawa herself?"

It was like someone punched me in the head. Hinata lowered her own sword, eyes darting between Granville and Leon.

Report. Danger. The subject Granville Rozzo is using wordplay in an attempt to pit you against the demon lord Leon.

I had a hunch. Clearly Granville's plan, however misguided, was to antagonize Leon as much as possible. It'd be a terrible idea to lend much credence to anything he said. And yet:

"How many failures do you think we had to endure to call over all the people you wanted? That's what *those* people are. The castoffs."

And yet, I just couldn't ignore that. Shizu was summoned by Leon, then cast aside by him. And she wasn't alone—Leon had reportedly summoned many other children. That was an unforgivable crime.

"Is that true?"

"Very true, indeed, demon lord Rimuru! As merchants, it's our job to provide whatever merchandise our customers demand!"

Granville's manner of speech irritated me. I wasn't even *asking* him.

The providers need to have ethics, too. Throwing all the blame on the consumer went against my creed. But even ahead of that, there was something else I wanted to confirm.

"So...you summoned other people, too? Not just Shizu?"

"Yes."

"Even when you knew that children subjected to unstable summonings have drastically shortened life spans?"

"That was—"

Leon was about to say something, only to be interrupted by a roaring, echoing laugh. Granville was the source of it.

"Heh-heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don't make me laugh, Leon. Aren't you the one who explicitly asked me to provide '*otherworlder children no older than ten years*'? Instead of attempting to subjugate the stable summons, you found it easier to make the unstable ones feel they owed you their lives, didn't you? And you used them as weapons!"

Through the taunts, Granville's goals were clear. He knew I could be a softhearted pushover, and he was attempting to milk that as much as he could, fanning my do-gooder attitude and trying to make me despise Leon. The thing was...his words were convincing. If Leon's aim was to implant elemental spirits into children, then Granville was right—they needed to be "*unstable*." And maybe that was why I detected exactly those sorts of elementals within Leon's underlings here.

"...Is *that* true?"

"Yes. But there's a reason for—"

"Shut up! *You're* the cause of all this!"

With that shout, I started running toward Leon. I just had to go and give him a wallop, or I wouldn't be able to contain myself. I knew full well I was playing into Granville's hands, but I just couldn't contain my rage for Leon any longer. I can hear his reasons later. First things first—I had to vent my anger.

So with everything I had, I struck at Leon. He didn't move. All he did was raise a hand to keep his troops at bay, staring directly at me. Was he that confident, or...?

Leaving my accelerating thoughts in the dust, my fist drew closer and closer to him. He didn't move.

...Target shows no signs of countering you. It will be a direct strike.

There was no trap in the end. My punch thundered against Leon's right cheek.

"...Happy now?"

My full power was in that, but apparently it didn't damage Leon much. I must have cut his lip, because he felt obliged to take out a handkerchief to wipe up some blood, but his composure was fully retained. *Pfft.* I know I wasn't using any skill there, but maybe I underestimated him a little.

Still, that punch taught me one thing. This guy, the demon lord Leon, was more good-natured than I thought. He had no obligation to take that punch, but he shed all his defenses and took it anyway—and that proved it.

He came across as cold and unfeeling, but maybe he wasn't such a bad guy, actually. Shizu didn't hate him, after all. She tried to, but as she put it, she just couldn't—and it was her final desire in life to figure out what Leon's motivations were. Of course, I didn't need Raphael's warning. I was calm from the beginning. I made a promise with Shizu—a promise that I'd take the feelings she left behind and shove them in Leon's face. And I was fully ready to take advantage of today for that.

Leon had to have some reason for what he did. I could decide later whether to forgive him. As entangled as things were today, making a foe out of Leon as well would be suicidal. Getting emotional like this wasn't the shrewdest plan. He was no ally of mine, but he was no enemy, either—and now that I knew that, I had to speak up.

"Not yet, no. That was my way of expressing Shizu's feelings, but I still need to show you mine. Let's *talk about things in depth* right now!"

So will he pick up on my intention here? I noticed an eyebrow twitch up. That's a relief. He's not such a fool after all. So...great. Let's talk it out, then—our plans for how to deal with Granville.

With that in mind, I readied my sword in Leon's direction.



He was a dead ringer for Shizu in her youth. There was no pigmentation; his skin was smooth, his hair shining like each individual strand had its own glow. He couldn't be described as looking Asian now, but he still retained Shizu's core

features, making them all the more beautiful. Now his golden eyes were trained upon Leon, his pink lips speaking to him.

"Not yet, no. That was my way of expressing Shizu's feelings, but I still need to show you mine. Let's talk about things in depth right now!"

Such were the words of Rimuru, and Leon immediately understood.

I see... He wants to take advantage of this situation. We barely know each other, and he's decided to trust me without a moment's doubt? He's more stout-hearted than I expected.

But, Leon thought, he liked that. Rimuru seemed to be driven by emotion right now, but apparently that was all part of his calculations—his way of determining, in this chaotic battlefield, exactly who was friend and who was foe.

I always knew I couldn't let my guard down around him...but at times like these, I'm glad he's around.

He took his own blade up from his hip, holding it forward.

As he took the dragon airship here, Leon was briefed about an emergency magical call from Cerberus. It seemed one of his agents had fallen out of contact, and there was a chance someone had blown their cover. Exactly who found this agent out, they didn't know—maybe it was the demon lord Rimuru, maybe one of the Five Elders. Maybe even the Crusaders, for all he knew. With the agent captured, and no further information available, nearly everyone was a suspect.

Of course, Leon wasn't gullible enough to fully trust Cerberus. There was a plausible chance they were hatching an elaborate scheme to deceive him. But one thing was certain: Being here right now, in this holy space, was akin to walking into a trap. And yet Leon couldn't stay away.

Even if this is a trap, if I find Chloe here...

No matter how much danger it entailed, Leon would never care. And now, crossing swords with Rimuru, Leon was finally serene again.

He looked around, surveying the area. The scene was shockingly chaotic. It

was difficult to determine who was on which side. The elite magic knights guarding him had been dragged into the fray while he wasn't paying attention. They had been lured into opening hostilities with some of the local defense forces.

(Keep yourselves defended! Do not kill the enemy!)

(Yes, sir!)

Now seemed like an opportune time to give Arlos the Silver Knight some orders. He did so via an anonymous magical call, but there was every chance someone would eavesdrop on it. That's why he kept the order to something that wouldn't cause problems later.

Regardless, Leon was the intruder here. To the demon lord Luminus, he was an uninvited guest, and it wouldn't surprise him if she decided to retaliate. If she did, he wanted to retain as much of an advantage as possible while keeping the dead to a minimum.

But where is Luminus...?

Leon and Rimuru were fighting near the cathedral entrance while the paladin captain, Hinata, and Granville were a short distance away. Farther afield, Shion and Ranga—both present at the last Walpurgis—were in pitched combat against the insectoid Razul. Luminus, the master of these sacred lands, would never allow open warfare here...and yet, she was missing. And if someone like Luminus were pinned down elsewhere, that was seriously bad news.

To Leon, this entire situation was nothing short of nonsensical—but as he looked over matters, he could see where the trap was. Someone—he didn't know who—was trying to goad him into fighting the demon lord Rimuru. What this someone didn't expect, and what Leon was lucky enough to see, is that Rimuru wasn't so easily hoodwinked. Now Rimuru was attempting to take advantage of that to gain control of things.

I see... So he's the one behind all this? Very well. Might as well try trusting you.

It was a rarity for someone as wary as him, but for once in his life, Leon decided to meekly trust in Rimuru.



Leon wasn't the only one thoroughly confused. Hinata was having similar trouble dealing with this rapidly changing battlefield. But even worse than that, her opponent Granville was starting to seem eerily different.

"Finding it odd that you can't steal my skills?"

"...?!"

He had guessed right. It made Hinata nervous, despite herself.

"Hmph. Why the surprise? Did you think I never picked up on your secret? A little observation, and it was easy enough to surmise. Why do you think I had the other six fighting in front of me?"

"Ah... I see."

Hinata's unique skill Usurper gave her a decisive advantage against the most powerful of foes...and yet it assessed Granville as "inapplicable." Previously, Granville definitely was above her, and whenever they trained, she constantly used Usurper until it succeeded, seizing—or more accurately at the time, copying—his skills.

"You have some way of taking skills and arts from opponents, do you not? But I imagine that only works once on the same foe...and you've already taken from me, haven't you? So it won't work twice."

"That couldn't be..."

Hinata found herself reacting to Granville's statement—and then she realized her mistake.

"Heh-heh-heh... So I was right? Hinata, you are a calculating woman, one of the greatest talents among all my apprentices. You are careful and cunning. Out of all the paladins of the past, nobody has ever reached your level. You should take pride in that, but you are still young. You're far too unfamiliar with opponents of your own level."

"Enough!!" the clearly provoked Hinata shouted back. But she understood Granville was egging her on. Thanks to her reflexive reaction, she had inadvertently admitted that her skill was stealing other people's powers. Granville had his hunches about it before, no doubt, but couldn't be sure about

it. Now, with his social engineering skills, he knew it for a fact.

Who's the cunning one here?!

Despite being wholly devoted to battle at the moment, Granville kept talking to Hinata. The carefree ease he exuded made her resent him even more.

"Even if I only took you once, that's all I need. I wouldn't look down on me that much."

She made no secret of her hostility. After all, she had one more trick up her sleeve—Force Takeover. Now she was doing more than just copying someone else's skill. She was forcibly wresting it away from them, for good. It would let her strip away one of Granville's cards, and it all but guaranteed her victory.

To Hinata, the preliminaries were over. She began a relentless attack, each sword strike a potentially lethal blow. At the same time, she continually activated Usurper, attempting to sap Granville's power. But:

No... My skill has to work against him! But...?!

The results: inapplicable. Proof that Granville's actual power was below Hinata's. Right now, she had grown far more powerful than before. It wouldn't be strange for her to surpass Granville, so these results were understandable. The only problem was that even when she seized a skill with Force Takeover—her final lifeline—Granville would just use that skill again the next instant. It happened over and over, no matter how many times she tried it.

It was now impossible to hide her panic. She was definitely capable of taking Granville's skills and arts—but to Hinata, they were useless. She had already taken them once, and thus she gained nothing from them. If she could at least take away some of Granville's skills, there'd be a point to it, but...

Why? Did Granville anticipate this and set up some kind of backup system?

It wasn't out of the question. No regular person could do it, but she could picture an ex-hero like Granville pulling something like that off.

"What's wrong, Hinata? You look unwell."

Granville, a sneering grin on her face, seemed to read Hinata's mind. It irritated her to no end.

"Hmm... It seems you don't understand what I'm doing. The most important thing in battle is to carefully observe your opponent. Did you expect me to not take any sort of measures against you? If so, you sorely underestimated me, Hinata."

"Geh! Enough from you."

"I can see from your fighting style that you retain an advantage against foes stronger than you. Meanwhile, there are few examples of you seizing skills from weaker opponents. I say few and not zero, however, so you must have *some* kind of method for that. But the effort must exhaust you, does it not?"

"..."

"You don't have to answer me. Looking at you, I'm now convinced my suppositions are correct."

Being so completely seen through was a shock to Hinata. Somewhere in her mind, she was looking down upon Granville as a relic from the past—and now she wanted to punch herself over it.

"Ngh... No, I doubt there's any point in continuing this."

There was no reason to keep up her attempts at Force Takeover. With that decision made, Hinata retreated a distance away from Granville. Gathering her breath, she looked for a suitable opportunity. Her heart rate was setting a new record, the sweat from her brow pouring down. Then, with a *thump*, she could sense a small throbbing inside her, deep within her chest.

...What was that? I've tired myself out more than I thought. But not because I miscalculated this. Maybe I'm being attacked...

Impartially observing herself, she realized that her exhaustion was stacking up more quickly than usual. Even all the Force Takeover attempts wouldn't have gassed her this much—but as Granville pointed out, her fatigue could no longer be ignored.

"You seem confused. You are powerful, Hinata, very powerful. That must be why you have so little experience with underhanded combat techniques such as this."

“What was that?”

“It’s simple. My actions are designed to make you overwork yourself. Little by little, I made you wear yourself down, believing that your attacks would succeed if you just pushed a little more, a little more. Listen to me. If you confront someone on the same level as you, whichever side tires the other out first wins. The more fatigued you are, the slower your decisions, and the wider you leave yourself open...just as you are personally experiencing right now.”

“...!!”

She wanted to deny Granville’s claims, but she couldn’t.

Hinata had used her unique skill Measurer to calmly analyze the battle situation...or so she thought. But Granville went one step beyond. She thought she was overly on her guard. Yes, she underestimated him a little, but she didn’t let her guard down at all.

So does it mean this man’s stronger than me? That... That must be the case. It’s the difference in level here, brought on by experience.

She was now convinced—convinced and ready to admit to it. Even with Usurper, she couldn’t take Granville’s expertise.

“Now I understand. I see I’ll have to get serious if I want to defeat you.”

“That’s right. Give me all you’ve got. Otherwise, trying to outclass me will be a dream beyond a dream for you.”

Hinata banished the ambient noise from her mind, focusing squarely on Granville. The sound disappeared. They were the only people present in the world.

“Here I come, Granville!”

“I hope you learn from this, Hinata!”

Thus, Hinata and Granville’s battle grew even more heated as time went on.



The multilayered Disintegration unleashed by Diablo smashed into Raine’s defense barrier, destroying pieces of it in succession...and then, the final ray

pierced through her chest. Everything had gone the way he had calculated it, including the fact that Raine was still breathing.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh... How weak. You were even less competition for me than Testarossa before her evolution."

"T-Testarossa?"

"Never mind. It has nothing to do with you. But explain to me why you came here."

"Who would ever—?!"

Diablo was barking orders from high above, but Raine saw no reason to oblige him. Her predictable refusal irked him a little.

He had clearly beaten Raine, but that didn't mean it was smooth sailing from now on. The perfectly formed insectoid he was having Shion and Ranga deal with really *was* the nemesis of all the demons. He was an unusual creature, one who lived in the space between the material and spiritual world. As a half-spiritual life-form, whenever he slipped into the physical realm, he'd naturally assume a palpable form and become a burdensome invader. A group of them was extremely dangerous, requiring quick detection and extermination.

Even worse, an insectoid attaining humanoid form was quite rare. Most examples settled into some more primitive form, finding themselves not quite suited for life in the material realm. But Razul, this insectoid here, was in his final and complete state—and Diablo could see why even Shion and Ranga would find him a handful.

Of course, Lady Shion works under Sir Rimuru. She has the potential to do well near anything to overcome her foes' strength. And with Sir Ranga around, there's no need to assume they'd lose. Still, though...

Diablo could win. It would suit Rimuru more, he knew, if he eliminated all the question marks from the battle. Right now, going back and taking care of Razul would be the right thing to do...

...But then another thought crossed his mind. What, he reasoned, if Rimuru deliberately left Razul to Shion and Ranga? Diablo *was* flustered earlier, true. He detected Raine's arrival and didn't want her (or her cohorts) joining the fray,

and the distraction had kept him from focusing on the battle.

I thought it best at the time to drive her away as soon as possible, but...

But was it, really?

Perhaps Sir Rimuru wanted Lady Shion and Sir Ranga to experience battle against someone stronger than them? In that case, it wouldn't be right to intrude...

That seemed plausible to Diablo. Truly, these were the thoughts of someone crazed for battle, a nonsensical conclusion that no regular person could ever imagine. But to Diablo, who placed Rimuru above all else, doing anything that went against Rimuru's intentions was a gross error. He wasn't some simple creature who assumed that fighting, and winning, was all that mattered. He could see that if Rimuru wanted to give them such a powerful foe, he truly wanted them to win—and learn from it.

A difficult decision. This will require careful consideration on my part.

Now Diablo's thoughts were starting to spiral in a pretty wrong direction. In front of Raine, the highest level of fighting force in the world, Diablo was thoroughly confused.

Rimuru, of course, was thinking of nothing so idiotic. What he cared about was putting an end to this fracas, while keeping the children and orchestra safe. He had no obligation at all to see this as some kind of training situation for Shion and Ranga.

So Diablo was wrong. But with that wrong idea in mind, he now had a new path to take.

"I was going to kill you, but I decided against it."

"What are you talking about...? Threats won't work on me—"

"No need for that, thank you. I don't need your act any longer, so come on out," he told the demon with a large hole in her chest.

Raine didn't seem to understand this. In short time, however, her expression turned to panic. It wasn't the pale face from before as she faced defeat, but something rather more complex—a mixture of frustration and hatred.

"Noir... You only just evolved into a Demon Peer after all this time, and look at you..."

"Just as set in your ways as always, I see. The true essence of strength does not lie in magicule counts. What's important is your level. I was taught to believe that differences in magicule energy do not make a decisive difference in battle ability."

"Ridiculous," replied Raine, her voice raspy as her body began to fade away. By the time she was fully gone, nothing but dust in the wind, a ray of light shot out from beyond the heavens, only to disappear and reveal two people—blue and red. Raine was the blue one, and she was kneeling before Guy Crimson, the strongest of demons, who had just entered the scene.

"Hey, Noir! It's been a while."

"Mm... Rouge—or Guy Crimson now, I believe? So you were here, too, then?"

Diablo was wary of Guy from the start, even as Guy seemed to view him with nostalgia.

"So you noticed Raine's Ubiquital Mist from the start? So why did you execute such a large-scale skill on her?"

Diablo scowled, dreading this question. He had intended to feign ignorance of this skill, allowing her to divide up and regenerate her body with a second copy. His original plan was to make Guy and Raine (in her original body) believe that here was a man who wouldn't give them great trouble. If Diablo destroyed Raine's Ubiquital Mist body, got all cocky, and left the scene, Guy would no doubt lose hope in him, as well as lose interest in this whole battle. He'd leave on the spot, and thus Diablo could buy more time while hiding his full powers from him. Then he could go support Shion and the rest.

That plan was now mothballed, thanks to Diablo's own desires. Even he could admit to it—now was no time to stage an act.

"Disintegration wouldn't be enough to defeat Primal Demons like us, would it? This parlor trick doesn't even qualify as a secret trump card."

"Wow, is *that* what you have to say? If I took a direct hit of that, not even *I* would survive unscathed."

"Indeed. The same is true for me...if it were a direct hit."

"Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh..."

Diablo's answer made Guy burst into self-satisfied laughter. Diablo did the same, still hoping to look unfazed. At this point, Raine was all but invisible to them.

"So why didn't you evolve until this point in time? You had no interest in dragging others down, unlike the other three."

"Mm... You could say they're dragging one another down, yes, but really, it's just a game they enjoy. You're right, though, that I have no part in it. As for myself, Guy, let me ask you—is there anyone in this world stronger than us?"

The question was similar to what Testarossa asked. It was a view shared across all the Primal Demons, Guy included. Bringing up common ground like this made it easier to stoke kinship with each other.

"No, there sure isn't. Maybe the True Dragon, if I had to bring up a name, but that's more of a phenomenon of nature, y'know?"

Even the True Dragon wasn't a threat before Guy. If Veldanava, the Star-King Dragon, was ever revived, that'd be another story, but as of right now, Guy was telling the truth.

Diablo nodded. "Precisely. So if I evolved while knowing that, any battle afterward would seem so boring. So one-sided, wouldn't you agree?"

He grinned at Guy. His battle-obsessed brain was working hard as usual.

"Hmm... I see."

Guy, for his part, seemed convinced. Maybe he would deny it, but the two of them were actually fairly alike—two kindred spirits, when it came to this topic.

"So did the slime give you a change of heart?"

"Sir Rimuru. I'll ask you to not refer to him as slime, please."

"...All right. So is that Rimuru guy the reason you evolved?"

Diablo's adjusting the pace of this conversation to suit his tastes irked Guy,

but complaining wouldn't help advance things. He hated playing by the beat of a different drummer, but this time, he chose to make an exception.

"Very good," muttered Diablo. "The growth of Sir Rimuru, you see, is a constant surprise to me. I wouldn't be afraid to call it evolution in action. His looks are charming; his soul brimming with refinement. And what's more—"

"Is this going to go on for a while?"

"...?"

Diablo met Guy's stare, as if to say *What did you expect?*

"I don't need to hear about Rimuru. Let's talk about *you*, all right?"

This annoyed Diablo a bit—but perhaps remembering the urgency of the situation around them, he acquiesced.

"*Tch...* Well, all right. Let us return to the topic at hand. Sir Rimuru's compatriots, as well, are changing rapidly from day to day...and I think seeing that has influenced me."

"...Hmm. That much?"

This chat seemed to be tiring Guy out, but he still had the wherewithal to scrutinize what Diablo just said.

"Indeed. I fear that if I do not make an effort of my own, even I might be left in the dust. And in that sort of environment, there is no longer any reason to set limits to my growth."

A fascinated Guy nodded. Now things were going at his pace again. He unleashed an evil grin.

"It *does* sound like Rimuru's got the nations to the West under his control now, yeah. But I'm sorry to say, my own people are wreckin' the place right now, I think."

To Guy, this was just some playful harassment of the human race. That was his intention, at least—but to Rimuru, so driven to play nice with humanity, it must've been a serious crisis. That's what made Guy mention it. He could see that none of this surly behavior would work on Diablo, but if he could get under Rimuru's skin, he knew that'd have its effect on Diablo as well. Thus, if his

minions happened to be messing around in the Western Nations at the moment, he thought he could take advantage.

The sight of Diablo—someone who fought evenly with Guy in the past—calling someone his master put Guy off a bit. So he wanted to mess with him, stir him up. With Razul gone from his usual post up north, the Western Nations were vulnerable. Much of it, like Guy warned, was no doubt looking like hell on earth by now. Diablo wouldn't be able to do anything about it, and as Guy saw it, not even Rimuru could take action.

But Diablo just gave him his trademark snicker instead.

"Keh-heh-heh... You thought Sir Rimuru didn't see it coming? It has all been taken care of. His wisdom, you see, is deeper than the ocean, his perception giving him insight into all things—"

Guy thought that would agitate Diablo at least a little. It didn't. In fact, he chose this moment in time to revert back to praising Rimuru. *He must be sick in the head*, he thought, facing no choice but to accept it.

"...Ah. Yes, very interesting. You think he's surpassing even *my* expectations?"

"Yes, of course. For Sir Rimuru, that is a given."

Diablo continued to verbally taunt Guy about Rimuru for a while, despite Rimuru not actually being there. If he was, he would no doubt shout, *What the hell are you doing?!* Only Raine was listening, biting her lip—but Guy and Diablo were wholly ignoring her as they continued.

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Meanwhile, the Western Nations were facing a danger unprecedented in their history.

The Cidre Frontier Defense Force, always busily handling the demon threat, suddenly found its main offense gone. No longer able to push back the demons who visited their territory regularly, they sent out an emergency request for reinforcements.

"Ridiculous! The demon forces are advancing southward?!"

"What could Margrave Cidre possibly be doing?!"

"We can't think about that right now. Every nation needs to deploy its troops and build a layered set of defense bases! Otherwise, we'll have a marauding army of demons right here, in the capital of Englesia!"

All the representatives at this emergency Council session were in an uproar.

Being composed of councillors from all its member nations, the Council of the West held a great deal of political power—but when it came to sudden crises, there was always going to be time wasted. That was the biggest disadvantage of a majority-vote system.

The defense of the northern regions was left entirely in the hands of Margrave Cidre of Englesia. It was a large, powerful kingdom, and still a good half of its military strength was stationed up north, forming a bulwark against Guy Crimson. They were joined by several members of the Crusaders, as well as a team of A-ranked adventurers from the Free Guild, which functioned as a subsidiary of the Council. That was how important a defensive line this was. Losing it could be a matter of life and death for humanity, and thus the panic around the Council chamber was understandable.

Currently, they were just barely hanging on to the base defined as their last line of defense, and even that was thanks to the paladins and adventurers stationed there. Considering the situation, they needed to deploy troops there immediately, but time would not allow it. This wasn't a monolithic dictatorship; it was a federation of independent nations, and each representative needed permission from their home state.

The only thing the Council could do right away was call for emergency backup from the Free Guild. They could also ask the Council's host nation of Englesia to deploy its regular forces, but the request was likely to fall on deaf ears, since it'd leave the capital more exposed. Besides, Englesia was already shouldering the burden of defending the north; nobody would fault it for asking other nations for support in an emergency.

Like the lesser-known Council members were currently shouting, it was time to create a federated, multination force. The problem, however, was that all

these disparate armies would be led by the brand-new member nation of Tempest, the land of monsters. The Council had unanimously voted for it, so there was no room to complain about it now—but leaving precious military resources in the hands of monsters presented a thorny dilemma to many councillors.

“Order, all of you, please!” shouted the chairman. The noise gradually died down as all eyes turned toward him.

“Right now, we can’t afford to waste a single minute. Instead of debating among ourselves, we must immediately contact our home nations and have them send forces our way. The demon lord Rimuru’s representative, Lady Testarossa, is in attendance today, and I understand she is well versed in military affairs. If Sir Rimuru appointed her, I am sure leaving our forces in her hands will not be an issue.”

The chairman’s words were greeted with some sporadic disagreement, but no one stood up and spoke on the record against it. With no better ideas forthcoming, lodging complaints now would only make things worse.

Now all eyes were on Testarossa. If the Council was raising an army, she’d be its de facto commander—it was only expected that everyone was appraising her abilities now. She was a young woman, a rarity among the councillors, and a beauty the likes of which one rarely lays eyes upon. Many councillors had the impression that Tempest featured a lot of pretty faces, but no one was foolish enough to say as much here. Everyone’s focus was on whether this woman Testarossa truly had any power.

It may have been an exaggeration to say, but on this debate rode not only the future of each councillor, but the future of humankind itself.

“L-Lady Testarossa,” began one councillor, finally drumming up the courage to speak. “Um, I fully recognize that asking this might be considered rude, but are you capable of commanding a military force?”

Testarossa gave him a gleaming smile. “Do not despair, councillors. My master, Sir Rimuru, has ordered me to defend all the nations that belong to the Council of the West. In fact, my own personnel have already been deployed across the land. And also... Moss?”

"Yes. According to the latest information, reliable reinforcements have now arrived in the north."

"Wh-what?!"

"Is that true?"

The councillors didn't even have the time to realize that Moss was likely one of Testarossa's assistants. What he had to say sent the hall into another furor.

"S-so what reinforcements are these, Lady Testarossa?"

"Moss?"

"Yes, my lord. A dragon airship from the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion is currently on its way to the area. I am sure that high elf's forces are more than capable of dispatching the low-level demons threatening the region."

"You heard him, Chairman. And, Moss, she is more than just a high elf. She is a sworn friend of Lord Rimuru."

"Ah...! My—my apologies..."

"Don't make that mistake again, all right? From now on, you will refer to her as Lady Elmesia."

"Y-yes, my lord."

Moss withered under the gaze of Testarossa's crimson eyes. He turned pale, realizing he could no longer behave like the demon-world prince he once was. Angering Testarossa would lead to his ruin—and even worse, disrespecting someone Rimuru recognized as a friend was an error he couldn't forgive himself for. Testarossa, likely realizing that, let him off with just a warning this time. If Moss didn't correct his insolent ways, she'd no doubt punish him for it the next instant. That applied even to him, a great demon who had served Testarossa for ages. She was a woman possessed of kindness and ruthlessness in equal measure.

The Council she sat in was a scene of chaos. The words she and Moss exchanged provided an overview of the situation, but there was still no evidence to back them up. Opinion was clearly split on whether to trust them.

"I will speak for my nation when I say that I trust Lady Testarossa."

"Indeed, our nation's of the same opinion. I want Lady Testarossa to command our forces!"

"It would be the height of irresponsibility! If something should happen, it will be far too late then!"

"Exactly! If this talk of reinforcements turns out to be a ruse, the demons will trample all over human civilization!"

Unity was now in short supply across the Council as the debate continued to heat up. Testarossa calmly watched matters unfold, listening instead of offering her own opinion. After a little time had passed, though, she suddenly spoke.

"Ah, it was you? I thought you might be here."

The sudden statement invited confusion among the councillors, many failing to understand what she was talking about. Only one among them—the person her eyes were presently aimed at—broke out in a cold sweat, the color draining from his face. It was Prince Johann Rostia of the Kingdom of Rostia.

"Wh-what are you saying about me?" he asked, trying his best to hide his apprehension. But Testarossa simply arched her lips upward. It made him lose his patience.

"I—I knew monsters weren't to be trusted! Only we can step up to defend humankind. Guards! Guards, come out now!"

He was now dramatically shouting, sweat running down his face in a portrait of despair. Meanwhile, Testarossa's smile only broadened.

Following Johann's orders, soldiers began to pour into the Council hall. Some of Johann's personal guards were among them, their presence putting him more at ease. Testarossa elegantly played with her hair as the other councillors sat there, bewildered.

Johann's behavior was beyond illogical. Even if Testarossa *did* have some malevolent intent, any unlawful violence would never be allowed in a hall of laws like the Council. No matter how important a figure Johann was in here, such arbitrary behavior would never be smiled upon.

"Your name was Johann Rostia, right? Prince of Rostia? A very high figure,

aren't you?"

"Wh-what of it? Flattery will get you nowhere—"

"Sir Johann, who were you talking to in a magical call just now?"

"Wha...?!"

"And why did you send out an order to have this nation's defensive barrier destroyed?"

"H-how did you...?"

"Would you mind explaining?"

Testarossa was relaxed, as if chatting over tea, as she painted Johann into a corner. The other councillors looked on in awe. Now was no time for confusion. They all immediately ordered their staff to check on the state of Englesia's barrier. But before they had an answer, the entire land around them began to rumble.

"It—it's true...?!"

"Destroy the barrier? If you do that, there's no defense against the monsters. We'll lose countless citizens!"

"What could possibly be the meaning of this, Sir Johann?! Answer me!"

When confronted with someone in a panic, most people are hardwired to either fall into a similar panic or take a step back and calm down. Johann was the latter. Realizing that his plans were complete, he let a relaxed smile creep upon his face.

"Sir Girard, the barrier is gone now. It's time to call them out..."

The councillors, seeing the figure Johann was addressing, were startled.

"It— It's the head of the Sons of the Veldt, that mercenary gang..."

"...Girard!"

"...The Veldt's connected with Sir Johann, too? Not just Gaban?!"

"But what's Sir Johann going to do with them?"

Ignoring these cries, Girard walked up to Johann, standing beside him.

"Yes," he said, "our contract is now ratified. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Oh, not at all. The last hope of our mutual master Granville Rozzo happens to match your mission as well. No need to hold back now. If you're going to raze this land, be as showy as you can about it!"

Now Johann's laughter rang loud across the hall, the light of reason no longer visible in his eyes. His face was transformed into something fiendish as he revealed his true colors to all. At long last, the councillors realized Johann had betrayed them—but the kingdom's defense barrier was already destroyed. And as they gradually understood this, despair began to reign.

"Have at it, Ayn."

"You got it!"

The woman Girard called Ayn began to cast a spell—a summon spell.

Ayn was an elementalist and the leader of Green Fury, the team that made it far into the Dungeon not long ago. But this was no spirit she was summoning this time. It was, in fact, the very deity the Sons of the Veldt worshipped as their spiritual leader.

A large, oval-shaped transport gate appeared, a living personification of power stepping through it. It was a beautiful girl with green hair and a crimson-red maid outfit—but everyone witnessing it could sense how dangerous she was. After all, despite her attractive looks, the aura she unleashed plunged the entire hall into hopelessness. The magical inquisitors who ran in, sensing the danger, were frozen in place; their instincts told them that any movement could very well kill them.

This was Mizeri the Demon Peer, stepping out from the darkness.

Despite the overwhelming despair, Johann looked supremely pleased with himself.

He recalled the last time Granville called for him, after Gaban's fall reduced the Five Elders to four—Granville Rozzo of the Rozzo family, Margrave Cidre of Englesia, King Doran of the Kingdom of Doran, and himself. They had all come together at Granville's bidding, and he had a fearsome final order for them.

"Maribel is dead—and with that, the Rozzos will likely meet their doom soon. Perhaps, depending on how one looks at it, we could reconcile with the monsters after all. If they show no interest in human territories like Lady Luminus, it may even be possible to coexist. But the demon lord Rimuru is seeking nothing less than complete rule over humankind. He must be stopped at all costs."

"But, Sir Granville, any attempts along those lines are doomed if we have no realistic way of resisting him."

"I understand what Maribel was concerned about, but if we've lost our Chaos Dragon, there's nothing we can do. We have Razul under our control, but we can hardly move him around..."

Doran was being realistic, with Cidre offering his support and Johann in agreement. Johann knew well the threat Maribel posed, as young as she was, and the demon lord Rimuru's victory over her filled him with fear. *For now, he thought, our best plan is to pretend to do Rimuru's bidding as we build up our power.* But Granville, perhaps sensing this internal weakness within Johann, fired back.

"Have you fools *all* lost your nerve? No matter how much chaos is in the world, no matter how much we sacrifice, we humans must retain the right to rule over ourselves. Am I wrong?"

His sheer vigor took Johann and the others aback. Granville rarely wore his emotions on his sleeve, which made his deep-seated anger and rage all the more clear to them.

"I am tired. If this keeps up, the human world will perish and the demon lord Rimuru will rule over us all. If that is the fate we're doomed to face, then why not stage one more final resistance? You may do whatever you choose, but I'm going to take one last risk."

Once he was done, he gave his three companions some time to consider their choices. Either they could follow Granville's orders and resist their fates, or they could align themselves with Rimuru. Only Doran among them decided to separate from the group—choosing to resist as he normally did, on his own turf, to keep the Rozzo name alive.

"My territory is located far from the scene of conflict. As a survivor from the Rozzo family, I will observe and care for your true and correct history."

Granville nodded at Doran. "Very well. This will likely be the final time, so I say this to you as my final request. It may be too late, but I wish there to be no ill will."

Doran listened to Granville's resigned words, tears in his eyes...and then he departed, alone.

Johann, too, realized this would likely be their final meeting. But he had no regrets. Considering the suffering Granville must have gone through as the Rozzo family patriarch, joining him on the path to almost certain death seemed a perfectly reasonable proposition. Cidre, who also stayed, was of the same opinion.

So the three of them worked out their final operation. Granville would use the Guild Grand Master Yuuki to stage one last challenge against Luminus. Cidre would abandon his northern defenses and allow the demons up there to march for the Western Nations. Johann would destroy Englesia's defensive mechanisms and kill the core members of the Council. Tempest's representative would likely be among them, and with her murder, they'd even be able to stage a confrontation between the demon lords Guy and Rimuru.

Once they pulled all of that off, human society would be in shambles. Doran, left behind, could opt to rebuild by himself, or maybe another nation would lead the way. Perhaps humankind would find some charismatic savior to guide them. Granville had some other motivations in mind as well, it seemed, but that didn't matter to Johann.

"...But you're truly sure about this? I am asking you both, in essence, to die for me."

"What are you saying? As a member of the Rozzo family, my heart is always with you, my master!"

"As is mine. I cannot join your frail body on its final journey, but at least allow me to fulfill my duty to you."

Johann and Cidre didn't hesitate to answer Granville. It was quite the

opposite of what Johann thought a moment ago, but he had a good reason for that. Everyone in the Rozzos took the absolute rule of Granville as a given. They depended on him; it was all but impossible to imagine prosperity without his patronage. So if Granville was now venturing forth to his final battlefield, even the previously indecisive Johann was ready for it.

I'm sure it's just as difficult for King Doran to bear. He must feel helpless, like a child abandoned by his parents.

By comparison, Johann counted himself as a happy man. Until the final moment, he'd be able to take pride as a member of the Rozzo family.

So as ordered by Granville, Johann made contact with the Sons of the Veldt, a demon-affiliated group he and Gaban were familiar with, and won their promise to join in the effort. Their mission: to summon Vert herself and plunge the world into chaos. And for the Sons of the Veldt, like any paramilitary group dreaming of a world at war they could profit from, it was the greatest—and most self-centered—thing they could ever wish for.

And now, here in the Council, Johann's job was done. The Sons of the Veldt's dreams were coming true before his eyes. Their god—the Demon Peer Mizeri—had heeded the summoning. And with Mizeri, a threat more fearsome than any demon lord, laying waste to Englesia would be a simple task.

Heh-heh-heh... The rumors called this nation's magical inquisitors the most powerful presence in the kingdom, and this demon's frozen them stiff. It's all over for Englesia. My homeland of Rostia will be caught up in it, no doubt, but I can apologize to my countrymen in the afterlife...

Satisfied with himself, Johann looked around the council hall. Then he witnessed something he couldn't believe. One figure there was breezily smiling before Mizeri, the personification of all fear. The boy next to her was similarly unfazed—a little bored, even.

Wh-what are they doing?!

Then he remembered who they were: Testarossa, councillor from Tempest, and her assistant Moss.

"Yes, you've certainly come up with an interesting scheme. Sir Johann. Were

you trying to destroy this country and plunge the world into chaos?"

"And what if I was?"

Johann didn't like anything about Testarossa's reaction. She acted totally unaffected in front of Mizeri, this calamity ranking above all demon lords, and it bothered him. But he quickly reconsidered matters. Testarossa is on the stronger side of monster-dom, no doubt, but her confidence would be her downfall.

There's such a thing as being too strong for your own good, I suppose. It makes you fail to see the abilities of your adversaries. It dooms you.

And this strong woman would soon be wailing over the reality she faced. Simply imagining Testarossa pleading for her life gave Johann a sadistic rush.

"How comical can you get? All of this, despite the fact that my presence here makes your scheme an immediate failure."

"Heh-heh-heh... Such nonsense," Johann said with a self-assured smile. The more Testarossa shone with confidence, the greater her despair would be in a moment. Glorious expectations filled his mind.

"L-Lady Testarossa!" shouted the chairman, interrupting them. "Now's not the time for such casual talk. You must flee at once and send a report to Lord Rimuru!"

"Chairman? What did you want me to tell him?"

Accurate information about the demons was scarce within the Western Nations. Compared with the experts in the Eastern Empire, this made the West seem eminently ill-prepared for them. The chairman was no exception, and not even having Mizeri on hand would tell him much about her or her race. However, the simple fact that she served the demon lord Guy Crimson, the greatest evil anyone here knew, made her a threat.

Ignorance is bliss, as they say, and here it was definitely working in their favor. If the chairman and other councillors knew more about demons, having Mizeri here would cause them to abandon all hope. The chairman didn't realize how lucky he was to avoid that as he kept shouting at Testarossa.

"Tell him that one of the demon lord Guy's chief agents has invaded our capital! He'll surely not abandon us then!"

Even the chairman knew this was wishful thinking at best. No matter how much the demon lord Rimuru sought to live hand in hand with humans, it was impossible to imagine him going out of his way to make an enemy of Guy. Anyone who spent a moment to work out what he stood to gain or lose could see that.

But, the chairman thought, there was always a chance. He couldn't fully give up yet. He had seen the demon lord Rimuru for himself, and he trusted in his words. A demon lord so emotional in nature—so *human* in many ways—might just throw all his potential stakes out the window and come riding to the rescue. He knew it was a stupid hope to have, but he couldn't help but kindle the thought.

That was the only reason why the chairman could keep his sense of reason in front of this terror. And now Testarossa was smiling at him.

"You realize that I am here, yes?"

The chairman wasn't sure what she meant. He would find out quickly.

But he wasn't the only one confused by this. Johann was as well, and Testarossa's cavalier attitude was sorely testing his patience.

"You think I will let you? Sir Girard, it is time to give everyone here a dose of reality."

Girard, despite Johann's order, was among the many here unsure what to make of this.

Why...? Why is Lady Mizeri not making a move?

Ayn, Girard's right-hand girl, had lost consciousness upon summoning Mizeri. The effort no doubt took years off her life span, but she deserved enormous praise for being alive at all. However, without a supernatural power along the lines of Mizeri's, she might never wake up again.

Girard, even as he took pride in Ayn's masterwork, was already seeking an opportunity to retreat. With all of her powers beyond imagination, it'd be easy

for her to kill everyone present. In fact, she could burn the entire capital of Englesia down with her purgatorial flames. Before that happened, he planned to scoop Ayn up and get the hell out of here. The people of this city would serve as the Sons of the Veldt's offering to Mizeri, and then Girard and his friends would be added to the ranks of those his deity recognized as peers.

That was the plan, at least. But things were going completely off the rails.

From the moment she appeared here, Mizeri hadn't done a single thing except stare at Testarossa. Now, at long last, she spoke.

"Unbelievable, Blanc. Why have you received a physical body?"

"A pity you saw fit to call me *that*. I've been granted the wondrous name of Testarossa now. You don't like being called Vert, either, do you, Mizeri?"

"A... A name? You? It can't be..."

"Oh, but it is. And I hate to spoil your grand welcome, but I'm afraid I wouldn't lose to you right now. If you still want to fight, though, I'd certainly be interested. In fact, I'd be happy to put you to sleep for a thousand years or so."

She snickered, an elegant laugh meant entirely to taunt Mizeri. She had a body now and a name as well—and even better, she was a Demon Peer just like Mizeri. They were the same.

At first glance, they'd seem to be a pretty even matchup. However, under normal circumstances, Testarossa would have the disadvantage, given how new she was in her body. However, that assumed Testarossa wasn't as belligerent as she was. Here you had Mizeri, who mostly performed office-style duties under Guy, against Testarossa, a fellow Primal Demon who had spent far more time fighting for influence with other demons. You didn't need to crunch the numbers to see the difference in battle experience—and what's more, Testarossa's associate Moss was with her.

I may have more magical energy than she does, but I cannot afford to take on two Demon Peers at once—especially if one is Blanc or Noir, the more dangerous ones of them all. Sir Guy merely ordered me to stir up a small commotion in the capital, not risk my life attempting to defeat a fellow Primal Demon. If anything, it is more my duty to return alive and inform Sir Guy of this.

Mizeri coldly gauged matters. She instantly recognized the difference in strength between them, and just as instantly, she made the best choice possible for her.

"You don't need to provoke me...Testarossa. My goals today do not involve you. I have destroyed the capital's barrier, and that, I feel, is enough to fulfill my mission."

"Oh, are you running away?"

"I am. My life belongs to Sir Guy. It is not something I have the right to throw away."

"Ah. I see. I will look forward to the next opportunity, then."

"As will I, to be sure. I hope you get accustomed to your new body quickly, because when you lose, you shouldn't expect your excuses to work on me."

Testarossa's smile broadened. Mizeri greeted it with a completely emotionless stare. The two watched each other for a while... Then, out of nowhere, Mizeri vanished.

"...What?"

Girard was the first to react. With Mizeri gone, everyone who remained didn't have the scantest idea what just happened.

To Girard, it looked for all the world like this god—this superhuman presence that Girard's gang viewed as omnipotent—had just been talked into submission by a councillor with good looks and nothing else.

To Mizeri, the Sons of the Veldt were nothing but disposable tools, something she set up on a whim to watch over and collect intelligence from human society. She could replace them at any time, so the fate of Girard and the rest were of no concern. They had been completely forsaken, but that reality wasn't one Girard was willing to accept.

"N-no! Dammit! Thanks to you, our god has gone back!"

Enraged, Girard began swinging at Testarossa. He was above A in rank, and that wasn't just for show—his speed with a sword made it impossible for most people to track his moves. But to Testarossa, he may as well have been frozen

in place. Besides, she didn't even need to lift a finger. Moss was still there, and Moss had no reason to let this insolent violence go unanswered.

With a piercing *ting*, Girard's sword was cut in half—and in another instant, Moss had Girard restrained.

"Don't kill him. And don't kill the lofty Sir Johann over there, either."

"But, Lady Testarossa, these two insulted you—"

The next moment, Moss was deafened.

"Do I have to say it again, Moss?"

"N-not at all, my lord! It was selfish of me to second-guess you!"

He fell to a knee, immediately regretting his gaffe. Testarossa's good mood as of late had made him forget, but she could be an extremely egotistical woman. The same was true of Ultima and Carrera. "Birds of a feather flock together" described them well.

"If you understand that, I will forgive you once more. What a generous person I am, aren't I, Moss? Don't you agree?"

"Absolutely!"

Moss was as obedient as he was smart. Despite the occasional mistake, he had been serving Testarossa through all her selfish whims for over ten thousand years, a feat that no one else could ever duplicate.

Thus, Johann, Girard, and Ayn were all in custody, bound down along with the soldiers who served them.

"It—it wasn't meant to be this way..."

Girard, thoroughly defeated by Moss, had a cooler head now. Gradually, the conversation between Mizeri and Testarossa ensconced itself in his mind, helping him comprehend it.

Our god recognized her as an equal...? Blanc... By Blanc, did she mean the Original White?!

He was aware of the Primal Demons, hence why he noticed Testarossa's true identity. The moment he did, his ego all but imploded. Now he understood just

who their enemy was...and that his soul would never enjoy another day of peace in his life. As strong as he thought himself to be, it was valueless against the Primal Demons.

"Ah-ha...ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha-haaaaa!!"

Insane laughter echoed out of Girard. In a strange way, this was actually a happy ending for him—they were all handed over to the magical inquisitors and weren't even cognizant enough to realize it.

Johann, meanwhile, looked like he had aged a couple decades, sitting on the floor and staring into space as he mumbled.

"I—I failed...? Sir Granville's hope, his final request... I couldn't do it..."

"No, you couldn't do much of anything," Testarossa scoffed, her words bearing lethal poison as she whispered them into his ear. Her sweet breath tickled his eardrums, numbing his very mind.

"Dammit... *Dammit!* If—if *you* weren't here, everything would have worked out perfectly!"

"Oh, would it have? Well, sorry about that. I suppose I got in the way, but you'll just have to chalk that up to fate, won't you? Now, I think some people are waiting behind me, so I'll just step out of the way..."

Without another word, Testarossa ran a snowy-white finger across Johann's jawline, then left the scene for the magical inquisitors to take over.

"N-no. Stay away! Don't come near me!"

Silently, the inquisitors seized him.

"Halt! No! No, let me go! Wh-who do you think I am? Do—do you bastards have any idea what you're doing?! My homeland won't take this sitting down! You're setting off an international incident!"

Johann screamed his head off. Nobody reacted; nobody lifted a hand to help. Of course they didn't. With these many witnesses on hand, Johann was all but assured to face justice.

"No crying, now. No carrying on. You must atone for your crimes. You'll have friends joining you, won't you? I'm sure it'll be loads of fun."

"Damn all of you! You accursed demon! I hope you burn in hell!"

"Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee. Yes. I like that. Ah, why is the howling of the truly lost such sweet music to my ears? But you're cursing the wrong person. Any crimes committed in the Council, you realize, are judged in a court of law. And if those crimes include treason, plotting against the state, or other insurrectionist behavior, that falls under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of Englesia. Too bad, isn't it? I'm afraid I have no legal right to personally punish you. I could have done it anyway and called it self-defense, I suppose, but you're a little too weak for me to claim *that*."

Testarossa let out a blissful laugh as she faced the frantic Johann.

Everything she said was in compliance with international law. With the law as her shield, she had cornered Johann with an incontrovertible argument.

Thus, Johann was now in custody. And much like old Count Gaban, he would likely be dealt with in secret so that he'd never see the light of day again.

When you looked purely at the externals of all this, Testarossa had just banished a demon bent on destroying the kingdom. She had saved the councillors, the Council itself, and all of Englesia, too.

To say the least, it solidified her position within the Council. Nobody could compare with her in brains and brawn. The chairman wanted her in far more important posts now. Her reputation would be known far and wide shortly.



Now Testarossa's rule over the West was complete.

"Do you think he read all of this?" she said to Moss. "Ah, we're all dancing on Sir Rimuru's palm, aren't we? What a truly, truly wonderful ruler!"

"Yes, there's no telling how deep his talents run."

"I firmly agree. But today's events might drive Guy Crimson to get more serious. And if he does..."

"We'll have to firm up our powers. No matter the storm facing us, we must show the public that no one shall block the path of our master!"

"I'm glad you understand. May you remain just as diligent going forward. I expect great things from you. And tell Cien for me, won't you?"

"Absolutely, my master!"

Testarossa gave him a satisfied smile and an elegant nod.

Over in the north, Cien—one of Testarossa's demon servants—was holding his own until Elmesia's Magus forces could arrive. Thanks to Guy not being all *that* serious about this invasion, the demons saw their position weaken in due time—and in the blink of an eye, they had retreated.

Thus marked the end of the disturbance in the West. But in a way, the true upheaval was only about to begin.

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"Hey, I just received word from Mizeri, but why the heck does Blanc have a name now?"

"Oh, you mean Testarossa? Well, it proves that she, too, understands the glory and wonder of Sir Rimuru."

Diablo was all too eager to explain things to the nonplussed Guy.

"And it sounds like they're making mincemeat of my minions out there... Guess this little prank blew up in my face, didn't it?"

"Naturally. It is all according to Sir Rimuru's plan. And Guy... You, too, are being taken advantage of."

Diablo, completely unbeknownst to Rimuru, was keeping up with his taunting. If Rimuru was here, he'd probably be holding Diablo's arms back and screaming "Have you gone insane, you fool?!" in his face.

"So did that bum Rimuru name Testarossa?"

"Yes, he did."

"And her getting a physical body and evolving to a Demon Peer...?"

"All the blessings of Sir Rimuru, yes."

"...Oh."

Diablo's smile widened as Guy's headache intensified. Raine, stationed behind him, turned white at the enormity of the news.

Ugh, are you serious? We've somehow maintained this delicate balance of battle skill for the past millennium and a half-ish, and now it's all crashing down...

Guy had to resist the urge to laugh. A three-way deadlock between Primal Demons; the East in a standoff with the West; Luminus in a staring contest against Daggrull—somehow, everything had balanced itself just right. That was now gone in the course of a single day.

Suddenly, he was struck with a dark foreboding. He turned to Diablo.

"Hey, so if Testarossa's now above the other two, what're *they* up to right now?"

"Ultima and Carrera, you mean? Sir Rimuru put them to work as well, of course, and let me assure you, they couldn't be happier..."

"Wait! Hold it right there!"

Guy stopped the smiling Diablo before he went into full gear.

"What? I am getting to the good part."

Being interrupted just when he was about to banter away offended Diablo. Guy, as always, wanted nothing but the facts.

"It's gonna be another long story, isn't it?"

"It would *have* to be, wouldn't it?"

That was up for debate, but Guy had no intention of doing so.

"Well, I'll listen to the whole thing later, so...um, this Ultima and Carrera you mention..."

"Ah yes—Ultima is Violet, the Original Purple, and Carrera is Jaune, the Original Yellow. You really *must* call them by their names, because they have a rather short fuse if you don't. In fact, they've all but forgotten their old monikers as of late."

"They have...?"

Guy was at a loss for words. *Come on... What the hell could that bastard Rimuru be thinking? Noir, I can understand—he's always been a strange one. But if Violet and Jaune are jumping on his bandwagon, it's not so funny anymore. And Blanc, too? The proudest out of all the Primals, and now she's also serving someone else...?*

He mulled this over as Diablo kept casually chatting.

"I invited them, mind you. Having more work to do is certainly a welcome thing, but if I cannot support Sir Rimuru directly, there's no point to it. Don't you think so?"

"...Huh?"

Now Guy eyed him with great suspicion, wondering if he heard him correctly. He may have wielded absolute power in this world, but now Diablo was verbally toying with him.

"This way, you see, I can give the trivial duties to—er, that is, I was looking for companions to work alongside me, and their schedules were free, so I invited them. Having these stupid power struggles for all time is simply ridiculous, so I told them to grow up a little and help out Sir Rimuru!"

Guy internally cursed the proud Diablo. *This is all your doing?! If anyone needs to grow up here, it's you!*

"...So Rimuru brought them on after you invited them? And gave them

names? And bodies?"

"Exactly. Thinking about how rudely they treated Sir Rimuru at first fills me with murderous rage, even today. However, they're proving to be quite helpful. If Sir Rimuru is not bothered by it, then I am open to generously forgiving them."

Diablo was strange enough, but Guy knew full well that Rimuru was beyond abnormal. Naming Primal Demons was something your average demon lord should never be capable of doing. It was lethally dangerous, opening you to the risk of either dying or simply being *poofed* out of existence. Besides, even if a Primal Demon's power was recognized and praised, that demon would never bow down and serve anyone. If they were named, they'd repay the favor by consuming the namer's soul—that's all. This wasn't just a matter of being crazy or overly confident in oneself.

I think I better talk things over directly with him, Guy concluded.

"Right. I'm gonna go pay a visit to Rimuru soon."

"Oh? I will pass on that. It will only invite more trouble."

God dammit...

Guy was already balling his hands into fists. But losing his temper would put him out of the game. Diablo was a unique case—if he ripped him apart right now, he'd just resurrect himself. Guy was fully aware of that, so he never took the bait.

"Nah, think about it. I want to hear more about your story, y'know, and we can't really relax and chat over matters amid all *this* stuff, can we? And Deeno's been telling me about how prosperous Rimuru's lands have become. I'm getting kinda curious."

He put a hand on Diablo's shoulder, acting buddy-buddy as he spoke.

"*Sigh...* Well, all right. In that case, you are welcome to visit. I'm sure Sir Rimuru would be delighted."

Diablo, for his part, never minded when people complimented Tempest. Feeling a bit better, he accepted Guy's request.

If Rimuru were here, he'd probably be screaming even louder now. *Good lord*, he thought when Diablo briefed him on it later, *he's learning all the bad lessons from Shion and none of the good ones...*

Thus, unbeknownst to Rimuru yet, Diablo and Guy's conversation came to a close.

"In any case, if all of you are on hand, I'm outta here."

"Yes, I'm sure Sir Rimuru will handle things here...no matter *what* happens."

"Will he? Well, tell him I said hello."

"I will. In that case, I look forward to seeing you again soon."

With that, Guy was gone.



*

Diablo sighed.

"It seems I somehow made it through *that*, I suppose. If Guy decided to interfere with things, I couldn't say what would happen then. Even I have trouble dealing with him, after all. Keh-heh-heh... I need to get stronger..."

Only his echoing laughter could be heard.



Deep inside the cathedral, a fierce battle was taking place.

The chop unleashed by Louis had enough slashing force to cut through any obstacle, the accompanying shock wave continuing to pursue Laplace even after he retreated far away. Laplace still had no trouble dodging it, however, breezily smiling as he did.

"Well, huh. You're Roy's brother, then? You twins or something? I'd quit while I was ahead if I were you. Ya can't beat me, y'know."

Despite darting around, pretending to look for an escape, Laplace was still as talkative as ever. Louis, meanwhile, remained unaffected. Being evaded didn't concern him, as he continued swinging both arms at Laplace.

They had made their way outside the burial chamber, a kind of natural progression as Laplace continued dodging Louis's strikes.

"Yes, as you say, Roy was like my twin brother. We were equally as powerful, and we looked similar, too. If there's any difference, it's that he had a violent streak, and I was far less emotional. But I will inform you that I am superior to him in one way—my eyes are much keener."

"Yeah? So what?"

"I can take my time observing my opponent's skills, movements, and targets. It's been clear to me for quite some time that you're trying to strike me where I'm unguarded."

"...Huh. Better'n your brother, then, eh? But good eyes ain't gonna be enough to beat me."

"We'll see about that. Also, my name is Louis. I'm more than just someone's brother. Roy and I were never on the best terms, in fact."

"Hmm. Can't say I care much."

Laplace seemed carefree, in his element, as he traded blows with Louis—or really, dodged the one-sided rain of blows coming his way. His eyes showed in the most eloquent terms that he, not Louis, was doing the observing.

"You must be tired by now, no?" Louis shouted. "Time for you to go to sleep."

He stepped up the intensity of his attack.

"I'm tellin' ya, you're wastin' your time."

"Am I? Let me go stronger, then."

Although the tone of his voice hadn't changed, Laplace suddenly began to feel uncertain. Whenever he had a foreboding like this, it usually wound up true. With a leap some would describe as exaggerated, he instantly jumped back from the fray. His intuition was correct—Louis's attack fanned out, pulverizing the space he stood on a moment ago.

"...?! What the hell's all that power...?"

It had clearly skyrocketed in that last swipe. If Laplace was still hopping around, making fun of Louis, he wouldn't have been able to defend in time. The damage would've been terrific.

"Phew... Now I'm getting used to this. If you evaded that, you're certainly not one to be trifled with."

"You wanted to put me off guard so you could do me in with one shot?"

"Mmm... I won't say that didn't come to mind, but I think I can win without resorting to such underhanded measures."

"Huh?"

Laplace had taken Roy down. Roy, at that time, had certainly underestimated him, but even discounting that, Laplace was a far better fighter. And Laplace took the fight seriously—Roy might've been a standin for the demon lord Luminus, but he was an even match for the demon lord Kazalim, a sort of father

figure to Laplace and his cohorts. He'd never go into a fight against someone like Roy unprepared.

"What you saw just now was an application of Bloodray. It hides its magical presence in order to reduce my opponent's wariness of me. Of course, it won't work again now that I've shown it to you, will it?"

It was sort of like revealing his hand, but he explained the skill to Laplace anyway. Hearing that gave him an even deeper sense of foreboding.

This ain't good. Is he buying time for himself? What's this guy after?

Laplace's intuition was already sounding the alarm. If this keeps up, he decided, one of these tricks was bound to snare him—so without hesitation, he tapped one of his innermost secrets.

"...That's why you must die here!"

With that declaration from Louis, the area around Laplace exploded. The shock wave focused itself around the center, offering Laplace no avenue for escape. The waves of blood particles were already locked onto him. The fight was over—anyone would conclude as much.

The flames burned high in the air as a human figure inside them collapsed.

"It's too bad. Roy and I used to be one and the same. We were separated by the power of Lady Luminus. And with Roy dead, I've regained my original powers."

Once, there existed a Bloody Lord too violent, too vicious for anyone to handle. Luminus managed to defeat him, adding him to her forces—but he was still so vicious that he caused constant trouble for the rest of Luminus's ranks. Thus, she split him into two separate men—naming one the Holy Emperor and her right-hand man, and the other her standin as demon lord.

In other words, Louis was complete once more, regaining the powers he previously enjoyed. From the start, no matter how much more powerful Laplace was, he was convinced he could win. And that was why...

"Whoa. That was *really* cuttin' it close."

Laplace dragged himself up, a sight that gave Louis pause—a moment's

hesitation that Laplace wasn't about to ignore.

"Let's go, Footman. If this keeps up, you're gonna die!"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! I hate to say it, but it looks like you're right."

Footman had already been battered from head to toe by Gunther. He was the most powerful of the Three Servants under Luminus, and while he lost out to the fully restored Louis, Footman still had no chance. Laplace had kept careful tabs on their battle even as he fought his own, and his conclusion was dead-on accurate.

Even if I gave this all I had, I couldn't take down the whole lot of 'em, and they'll probably kill Footman first. Best to run while the runnin's good. I'd say our diversion worked well enough—no need to expose ourselves to danger over it!

So Laplace, shouting out loud to distract Louis, sprang into action. It worked. In another moment, Laplace and Footman were away from this deadly battleground.

All that remained in the burial chamber were Luminus and Maria Rozzo. Luminus, perhaps hesitating to attack Maria, had yet to really throw herself into battle. The fact that Maria could keep up with her high-speed fighting was proof enough that she was no fake. It was definitely Maria—the kind, affectionate Maria she knew.

Granville must've been preserving her corpse. So this is a death golem using her body...or maybe not? This unconscious shell is a servant generated by Raise Dead necromancy. So he's stooped low enough to tap into forbidden magic...?

Anyone who's lost a loved one has fostered hope of seeing them alive one more time. But it's a lost cause. Even Luminus could see why Granville would resort to necromancy—but it was all theoretical, something to imagine and not act upon. To someone as far removed from death as Luminus was, she had no way of understanding the true nature of sadness.

Maria was a Saint for the Hero Gren, acting as his servant and confidant. He comforted her as well, trying to relieve the heavy burden of her position. They enjoyed an intimate relationship, one that their then-foe Luminus envied.

What would it take for Granville to make her a zombie servant? And if she's *this* strong, that couldn't have been the only forbidden magic he cast. Maria was using a litany of special skills to hold her own against Luminus, including what seemed to be several uniques. Luminus wasn't sure how to handle this, and that made her worry.

She is astounding but still weak. I doubt that fool Gren thought she had a chance against me. So why, then...?

Suddenly, intense anxiety attacked her. Something told her she was overlooking something extremely important...

"Lady Luminus, the invaders gave us the slip. Louis is currently pursuing them, and I was about to join him..."

Just then, Gunther came back in to report. The moment his voice trailed off, Luminus saw what was wrong. Something was missing from the chamber. Something vitally important. Now even Luminus's heterochromatic eyes could see it as they followed Gunther's gaze.

The coffin of spirit-infused ice, the relic they took such great pains to store here, had disappeared.

Luminus fell to confusion, unable to speak or accept this reality. It was something that should never have happened. It threw her, exposing her to Maria's full attack.

"Lady Luminus!"

She could hear Gunther's concerned shouting, but she couldn't listen. The pain racking her body was the stimulus she needed to keep a cool head. She appreciated it.

The rational part of her brain began to consider her options anew. Calming her desires to scream against it all, she faced up to her reality. No matter how much her emotions refused to accept this, her cold analytical skills gave her the facts. The coffin of ice had been stolen, and that was that.

In another few moments, Luminus harnessed the anger bubbling up within her to stab right through Maria's chest.

"You would go *this* far, Granville? You... You have incurred my full wrath, Gren!!"

With a scream of fury, she unleashed her hidden magic force. In an instant, this unprecedented level of mad tyranny destroyed the burial chamber. A swirl of chaotic magical force pooled around her. She had created a dimension of death, one nobody would even dare approach.

"Guntherrrrrr!!"

"Yes, my lady!"

"Find them. Find the invaders!"

"As you wish!"

There was no need to say more. Realizing Luminus's intentions, Gunther quickly sprang into action. As truly angry as she was, not even Gunther could be completely safe here.

If we fail, Lubelius itself could fall...

He ran away at full speed, compelled to act.

Luminus, left alone, struggled to control her rage. If she made a move right now, her analytical side told her, it would only make things worse. It was natural for her to keep her thoughts separate from her emotions. But even with that, this came as a massive shock.

This cannot stand. We must keep it safe until the time comes, or else it may spell doom for the entire world. And if even I cannot handle the fallout...

The ark was given to her by a trusted friend. Mishandling it could unleash disaster, so she had kept it sealed and under strict guard. Carefully, she analyzed her situation. Only she could undo the seal on that ark. It was a tremendously powerful barrier, one whose holy force could even burn the body of Luminus, the one who installed it. But now it had been carried off.

...Who could have done it? Anyone capable of taking it away must be at least as powerful as me...

Someone classified as a demon lord or better.

All the chaos Granville sowed in the cathedral must have been just a diversion. Who would he leave this *true* mission to? If Granville was willing to offer himself as bait, he must've been sure this person could steal the ark—a bet that certainly paid off.

...No. It's too soon to call this lost. Weakness is a sin. Right now...

Right now, what did Granville want with the coffin? First, she needed to find out. She knew she hadn't told him anything about the ark—it was supposed to be the most closely guarded of secrets. Not even Gunther and Louis knew any details about the girl sealed inside. And here was Granville, using every card at his disposal—he must've been absolutely resolved in this mission.

It was almost eerie to Luminus. His drive to succeed today was malicious. He wanted to get this *done*, no matter what the fallout was.

"All right. First, let's find out what your true motives are."

With that whisper, she turned her eyes toward the cathedral.



I had gotten my intentions across to Leon. He crossed swords with me, and to the outside observer, it must have looked like a serious sword fight. And it *was*! If I stopped for even a moment, he'd cut me down.

Wait. Did he *really* understand what I wanted from him?

As far as I could tell, Leon must've understood that Granville was behind all this. Now all we'd have to do is this bit of sword sparring for a while, until the time was right, and then we'd be fine. That's what I thought anyway, but Leon was really giving me no time to rest. He was *crazy* fast. Hinata's pace with a sword was amazing enough, but Leon sure wasn't any slouch. Like her, he was a traditionalist with the sword, showing off a beautiful stance. Since my education from Hakuro, I had begun to teach myself a thing or two—I fight with more than just a sword, so I can't really help it. With Raphael watching over me, I'm pretty sure I'm not doing anything that'd hurt myself, at least.

But enough about that. We were talking about how sharp his attacks were. I thought he was really out to kill me, but his face had almost no expression on it. It was hard to tell whether he really meant to harm me. I began to grow a little

worried about trusting him.

Understood. There is no problem. Using Predict Future Attack to synchronize our plans.

That was a relief, then. I would just keep leaving this to Raphael's auto-battle mode.

But that wasn't my only concern. For a while now, I'd been detecting rumblings underground. I thought the bedrock might be moving; such was the enormity of the shaking. *It's probably the work of Luminus*, I thought, a figure who still wasn't present. We've had problems up here; she had problems down there... This sure wasn't your run-of-the-mill scandal, no. I was definitely an involved party at this point, and if it was anybody but me, it'd probably become a huge diplomatic fight—not that Luminus would care, but regardless.

Shion and Ranga were still struggling against the insectoid Razul. Hinata seemed to be keeping it even with Granville, but I had the impression that Granville hadn't tapped his full skills yet. If that fight dragged on, I had a feeling Hinata would be at a disadvantage soon. So no, things weren't really going swimmingly for us. I wasn't even sure what I should try to wrap up first.

But as I analyzed the battle, I suddenly detected a huge burst of magical power from down below. *That* was Luminus, for sure. The cathedral's flooring flew into the air, opening a circular hole six or so feet in diameter. The blast of heat that shot up from it broke straight through the ceiling, ascending to the heavens. Its power was ridiculous, but I'm sure it was kid stuff to Luminus.

"It seems you're serious about antagonizing me, Granville."

Luminus appeared from the hole, carrying a beautiful woman in her arms—and the moment she did, she clearly indicated that she wanted Granville dead. *Now things are gonna move*, I thought. Leon must've thought so, too, because his eyes were on Luminus.

"Heh-heh-heh... Well done, Lady Luminus. Not even my servant could halt you, could she? She was a masterpiece of mine, you know. I infused her with the power of only my best handpicked otherworlders."

"You fool. Pool together all the fake imitations you want; an unconscious doll

could never beat the real thing. *You*, of all people, should know that!"

"Oh, I do, of course."

Granville, faced with an enraged Luminus, remained serene. The speed of Hinata's sword grew sharper against him, but Granville easily parried every strike, as composed as ever. She could steal her opponents' skills, but apparently that didn't work on him. Arts, unlike skills, couldn't be used immediately after taking them. It's the difference between reading about baseball and winning the World Series; only through continued training could you hone those arts. Granville's strength was the result of years of that kinda training—and now he was humming along, as stable as the unmoving earth.

"Strong, isn't he?" Leon whispered to me. "They don't call him a former Hero for nothing."

"No. He's a bit better than I thought."

"In that case," Luminus said, ignoring us, "what were you doing with *this*?"

She laid the woman in her arms down. It looked like she was sleeping, but she wasn't. She was most definitely dead, a corpse that had been used for servitude. With no soul inside, pumping her with energy was a pointless endeavor. I knew that well.

"...Why do you continue to denigrate Maria, even after her death?!"

I guess Luminus knew this woman. Maria, huh? Her face resembled Maribel's a little. Did that mean she was...?

"Because I needed her. Everything was for the sake of this exact moment."

Before the quizzical Luminus, Granville removed the glove on his left hand. The magical patterns on it were glowing, and now Maria's corpse was glowing with it.

"What are you...?!"

It was Luminus who said it, but everybody there was thinking the same thing. Leon stopped engaging with me, watching over the proceedings. There was no point keeping the act going. I almost forgot why we started in the first place.

Then, before our eyes, something unbelievable happened. Maria's body

turned into a ball of light, flowing straight into Granville's glowing hand. As it did, his body began pulsating with power—visually, not just in terms of magicule energy. This process was revitalizing his body's cells. His white hair turned a shining blond, his withered skin regaining its youthful luster. There, in front of us all, was Granville Rozzo from his younger days, the Hero of years past, his eyes dead sharp.

"You... You took all the Love Energy I gave you and injected it into Maria!"

Granville nodded at Luminus. Love Energy, if I recall correctly, is a type of energy meant to retain one's youth. So he mixed that with some other powers to rejuvenate himself, and the result is the Granville we're looking at now?

"Lady Luminus... Or how about I just call you Luminus? I still need to settle things with you—I realized some time ago that I can't die until I do. Now that Maribel is dead, my ambitions have been crushed—but still, above all else, *this* is what I desire!"

"You...!"

"Don't toy with me!!"

Luminus and Hinata both responded simultaneously.

The young Granville turned toward Hinata. "Ah yes. Hinata, I still need to provide you with my guidance. You are the most talented of all the apprentices I dealt with. You always strove to improve, never afraid to make an effort and polish yourself. I will gladly praise your excellence any day. But..."

With that, Granville casually swung his blade. The effects were beyond belief.

"Meltslash...?! No! You can control spiritual particles with no casting delay?!"

Hinata dodged it, which amazed me. But Granville's ability to handle Overblade skills with such nonchalance was jaw-dropping, completely beyond anyone's imagination.

"Hinata, I always wondered why you never became a Hero. It takes more than talent and hard work. Unless you have the love of the elemental spirits, you will never qualify to be one. But you *had* that love, and yet..."

"Well, sorry. Whether they loved me or not, sometimes things are just

beyond your reach, I suppose.”

“If you awakened your Hero side, it would have helped my ambitions immensely. So here’s a word of advice. You hold darkness within your heart, don’t you? Did you kill someone close to you in the past? Your parents, your brother, a friend?”

“Shut up!!”

Hinata had retreated to avoid his Meltslash, but now she shot back into position, lunging at Granville. Something about what he said must’ve touched a raw nerve. Anger filled her eyes.

The high-pitched ring of sword against sword filled the air. Granville remained steadfast...as Hinata was helplessly blown away.

“Ngh...!!”

There was just too much of a difference. Seeing Hinata treated like a child made me doubt my eyes.

“You never accepted the elemental of light. You have to overcome this. The darkness is just an illusion your heart creates for itself. You must forgive your past self and take pride in the present—the way you live. Then you will accept the light—”

“I told you, shut up!!”

Granville’s cold eyes sized up the enraged Hinata.

“It’s a pity, Hinata. If I had more time, I could have guided you. But if you can’t understand me, then it’s best for you to face the truth. How will you ever save the world if you can’t even protect what you hold dear?”

My instincts told me this was bad. With this conversation, everyone’s eyes were now focused on Hinata. What if Granville wanted that? And what he wanted...

Report. According to Predict Future Attack, his goal is—

His sword swung down in a slash. It was Disintegration, and there was no way to stop it. It was more of a stabbing move than a slash—call it Meltstrike if you want. It came down at close to light speed, and no doubt it’d gouge its way into

its target. So I ran as fast as I could toward them.

According to my calculations, not even me at full speed would reach them in time. But if I could use Belzebuth to consume it—and the air around it... Even if I couldn't capture these spiritual particles moving at light speed, I knew they were targeted toward Chloe, so I could get ahead of them.

"Chloe!!"

By the time I finished shouting, everything was over.

Hinata was the first to move. Without a moment's hesitation, she stepped between Chloe and Granville's line of fire. Sacrificing her own body, she took the Meltstrike blow to her chest. It stabbed right through her, and she collapsed to the ground coughing up blood—but all it did was lower the speed of that beam of light a little, as it extended toward Chloe.

The next person to move after Hinata, surprisingly enough, was Venom. Just like Hinata, he tried to sacrifice himself to protect Chloe—he must've been awfully faithful to Diablo's orders, because he had kept himself focused on protecting the kids over everything else. That's why he was in time for that moment.

"Gah! ...Oh man, owww!"

There was a large hole in his stomach, but he seemed pretty chill about it. That's a demon for you. As long as your soul's safe, any damage to your body was apparently just window dressing. If Granville was aiming for him, it might be a different story, but for now, he could tend to himself.

Then, thanks to the minuscule amount of time Hinata and Venom brought for me, I made it over. Consuming the air in front of Chloe, I all but instantly teleported in time. Now I just needed to activate Uriel's Absolute Defense to protect Chloe.

"Huh? Mr. Tempest? Miss Hinata...?"

No offense meant to Venom, of course, but Chloe was focused solely on Hinata. That was understandable. I was worried for her, too.

Luminus ran up to Hinata, gauging her wound.

“Miss Hinata! Miss Hinata, don’t die!!”

“Chloe! Hey!”

Before I could stop her, Chloe started running. The other kids were taking her cue, so I hurriedly used Paralyzing Breath to knock them out. Giving Venom some healing potion, I tasked him with protecting them.

“Ch... Chloe?! Is that really Chloe...?”

Leon was acting incredibly suspicious, but that’d have to wait. Chasing after Chloe, I ran up to Hinata, keeping a careful eye on Granville as I sized her up.

...Whoa, look out.

“Hey, Luminus...”

“Silence! The spirit particles are eating into her fast! Too fast!”

Her physical wounds were now healed, but Hinata was growing weaker by the moment. The Meltstrike particles were destroying her spiritual body, and in time, they’d start whittling down her astral body as well. And at that point, not even Hinata could—

Just then, Hinata barely opened her eyes.

“G-good! Good, Hinata. You gotta stay awake for me!”

“N-no, Lady Luminus, I... Hurk!”

Oh man. Hinata was in serious trouble. But not even Luminus, much more versed in holy magic than I was, could rescue Hinata from the brink of death. That’s how fearsome Granville’s strike was.

“Ch-Chloe, I’m glad you’re safe...”

Even with blood flowing from her mouth, Hinata tried her hardest to sit up. Her will was like steel. I’m sure she couldn’t see any longer, but her lips were still taking the form of a smile. She turned toward Chloe and raised a shaky right hand, the one holding her Moonlight sword and bearing the Holy Spirit Armor bracelet.

“...Chloe, I want you to have this. I... I couldn’t be much of an...instructor to you, but I know...you can surpass me...”

Her voice was hoarse, but it was clearly coming through to the sobbing Chloe.

“Miss Hinata...”

Chloe’s hand gingerly touched Hinata’s—

—and the next moment, Hinata’s body began to glow, the light seemingly flowing into Chloe through her fingers. Was I seeing this right? Because not even Luminus was reacting at all. It was like time was stopping...

“N-no!” Chloe screamed. “This can’t be happening! It’s *too early!* Why?!”

“Uh, Chloe?”

The moment I tried calling for Chloe...she vanished, almost like she was never there at all.

...I snapped back to attention.

What was *that*?

“Chloe? Where’s Chloe? Rimuru... What did you do to Chloe?”

“I—I have no idea what just happened...”

Leon had me by the shoulders now, demanding an explanation, but I was clueless. Seriously, where *did* Chloe go? Did she really just disappear?

But at least Leon seemed to believe me. He looked around the area, panicked, and even I couldn’t hide my confusion. I had absolutely no clue what was going on.

...Unknown. This is an abnormal situation. Failed to grasp the full extent of what happened to the subject Chloe Aubert.

And surprisingly enough, Raphael—whom I could usually rely on for well-nigh everything—didn’t have any idea, either. But right now, I had no time to just stand there and ponder this.



The disappearance of young Chloe was not a concern to Luminus. Her own friend was more important to her right now. Her Resurrection spell had deployed itself, but it feebly dissipated into the air, much to her shock.

"Why?! Barely any time has passed since her death! Why...?"

...But Luminus could "see" it. Even with Hinata's body back in perfect condition, her insides—her soul, the most important thing of all—was lost.

"Hinata, forgive me. I was here for you, and still you had to endure this..."

A single tear fell from her eye. It was greeted by a boorish voice interrupting her.

"I wish you wouldn't wail like that. This, too, is exactly as I aimed for. My final plan is going quite smoothly, Luminus!"

Only Granville was smiling at this sequence of events. It greatly irritated Luminus. Now she wasn't even allowed time to mourn Hinata's death.

"You will pay for this. You *will*. I will tear you apart!"

The scream was as loud as it was furious. Her face was reddened with intense rage—the rage she felt by having Hinata, her favorite, taken before her eyes.

Her mind was filled with despair at how powerless she was, incapable of doing anything. It stirred her demon-lord heart in ways that couldn't even compare with when Veldora laid waste to her kingdom long ago. The emotions stimulated her mind, like ripples on the surface of a cup filled to the brim with water—and the trembling force on her previously suppressed emotions caused a change inside her.

The World Language echoed, like a bell calling Luminus to the loftiest of heights, like none that even her almost limitless abilities had taken her.

Confirmed. Conditions met. The unique skill Lust has evolved into the ultimate skill Asmodeus, Ruler of Lust.

At that moment, the massive power within Luminus evolved into even more intense, vicious heights—into the realms of the ruler of the skies.

Asmodeus, the evolved skill she just gained, held sway over life and death itself. The powerlessness she felt at Hinata's death was exactly what awakened Luminus to it. But she did not react. Now, her instincts told her, even this ability would be meaningless.

"It doesn't matter any longer! It's too late... I was useless right when it

counted, and it doesn't *matter* to me anymore...!!"

All but ignoring the World Language, Luminus continued to seethe with rage.



"So you wanted to settle matters?"

"Yes, Luminus. You've evolved, haven't you? I hadn't anticipated that, but it's a fine thing to see."

Her blue-and-red heterochromatic eyes blazed as they stared straight at Granville, full of hatred. Suddenly, the disappeared girl flashed into her mind—but she banished any sentiment from it.

"This wasn't what I heard would happen...but that no longer matters. Prepare to face the afterlife, Granville!!"

And so open battle began between Luminus and Granville—the culmination of a rivalry that had lasted over a thousand years.



All I could do was watch as Luminus treated Hinata's mortal wounds. The Resurrection spell was administered perfectly...but had no effect.

I couldn't believe it. As long as the soul was intact, Resurrection should also work, restoring the spiritual and/or astral bodies as needed. So what went wrong?

Understood. The soul of the subject Hinata Sakaguchi appears to have vanished. It is impossible to restore lost data particles by any method.

Her soul's...gone?

No, I knew it. That was the second time Hinata fell, so I could tell the difference all too well, and I was sure Luminus did, too. But a soul would normally never fade out of existence this quickly. I supposed we were holding out hope that we had just lost sight of her soul by some mistake, but that was a fruitless dream.

I didn't think Luminus would be *this* thrown by it, though. She and Hinata must've been closer than I knew. And this was *my* business, too. I started to think about why this was happening, which made it hard to collect my thoughts. Now wasn't the time for regrets.

"This wasn't what I heard would happen...but that no longer matters. Prepare to face the afterlife, Granville!!"

With Luminus's scream, I realized just how out of it I was.

Spacing out in battle... What was wrong with me? That's just asking to be killed. I had to save my sadness for later and do everything I could here. Luminus's words seemed odd to me, but I could think about what she meant later. I had calmed down. Things hadn't been settled yet. If I lost my temper and got defeated, then Hinata's death—and the efforts of everyone else—would have been wasted.

It was a pretty forced effort, but I successfully managed to move on. If Luminus's scream had come any later, things probably would've gotten even worse—because the next instant, the whole cathedral was engulfed in a massive explosion.

The light and shock wave from the blast burst out from the entrance to the middle of the site. Its speed was intense but still yawn inducing compared with the speed of light. Keeping my mind cool, I stepped up to protect the children and musicians. I turned an eye toward Shion and the others out of concern, but Diablo—who had returned at some point—had put up a protective barrier for them.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh... Sorry I'm late."

"No, I'm just glad you made it!" I said, thanking Diablo. However, the real surprise was Shion. Ranga had noticed both the explosion and Diablo, but Shion still seemed to be entirely focused on the enemy in front of her. Her expression was terrifying, her face flush, as if intoxicated by the blood around her. It was oddly kind of alluring albeit definitely improper for a battlefield...but ah well. Despite being on the defense before, it looked like she was holding her own, which was good. I think I'll leave Razul to Shion and Ranga for now.

I examined the cause of the explosion. The first thing that struck me was a gigantic aura—an evil presence, one that felt like your spine was freezing solid. This was more than just a bad feeling. It was an intense pressure, like the sky was falling down on you—although didn't it feel a bit like the high-level elemental spirit that fused with Chloe? It resembled that but seemed a little different as well. The sheer size of this presence reminded me of what I felt with Chloe back then.

Report. The object is a material body. Unusual amount of existential energy detected. Its maximum level is equivalent to that of the subject Veldora.

Great. We've got a monster here! At least Raphael could measure it this time, although that didn't calm my nerves much. If this was operating on sheer instinct like the Chaos Dragon, I could deal with that...but if it was sentient, I was screwed. Especially if it actually had battle experience—just imagining that scared me. I'd lose without a fight then. We're talking energy several times my own...and either way, I had a feeling I'd have to deal with it.

Would this be enough to be considered dire straits by this point?

Then the smoke cleared, revealing an incredibly beautiful woman, naked as the day she was born. She stood there, eyes closed, her lustrous dark hair fluttering as she shone in a silvery light. It was like something out of a fantasy, and I was immediately smitten.

But now wasn't the time to stop and stare.

"Are you the one who took my ark?! And you've even undone my spiritual seal and awoken Chronoa..."

Luminus was now shouting at a much more familiar figure who just entered the scene. It was Yuuki. So he's in on this, too? Part of me still wanted to believe in him, but I guess Raphael was right after all—and given the choice, I was always going to trust Raphael first.

I thus felt no surprise at all as I turned my icy gaze to Yuuki.

"So you're involved in this?"

"Oof, guess you know, huh? But that works, too, so..."

He spoke entirely off the cuff, not being shy at all. I was dealing with the *real* Yuuki right now, no doubt, but he's a lot more shameless than I thought.

Behind him were two unfamiliar people wearing masks—an asymmetrical one leering at me and the other one looking angry. I assumed those were Laplace and Footman from the Moderate Jesters, and although I had a hunch about it before, I guess they really *were* linked with Yuuki.

"So you're Luminus? My name's Yuuki Kagurazaka. It's an honor to meet you."

"Silence! How did you undo the seal?"

"Well, about that—I've got this really unique thing called Anti-Skill that lets me cancel any type of magic or special skill."

"...I see. Rather daring of you to reveal that."

Luminus shot Yuuki a look full of loathing, although her senses were still firmly attuned on Granville. They were in a dead heat, and neither of them could afford any false moves. Granville himself was also eyeing the dark-haired girl, even as he dealt with Luminus's attacks and fired back with his own. Duels between two experts like this went far beyond the realm of mere "skill."

"Yeah, well, Rimuru already knows, so there's no point hiding it. But I want to ask you something, too—well, not *you*, but Granville over there."

"Heh-heh-heh... I can guess what it is, but go ahead."

Yuuki sounded casual, but his eyes were surveying the area around him, never resting. As long as Leon and I had freedom of movement, he knew he couldn't escape too easily...assuming he planned to, that is, but I'm sure he did. I really had no idea why he was even showing up at this point; something told me he didn't anticipate this turn of events. With as many question marks as there were, moving around would be dangerous. I'd have to figure out from Yuuki and Granville's conversation just what kind of situation we had fallen into.

"So about the Hero I heard was sealed inside that ark... I mean, 'controlling' her turned out to be super-easy. The seal just came right off! What's the deal with that, Granville?"

Hero? That girl's a Hero?!

This was making even less sense now. Why would a demon lord keep a Hero sealed away? And given how much Luminus seemed to care for her, this wasn't any kind of normal sealing.

"You are right! Because this is both a Hero...and *not* a Hero. Right now, that child is a personification of evil, by the name of Chronoa..."

It was Luminus who answered Yuuki, her voice filled with intense rage and a surprising fretfulness. Calling this girl Chronoa a "*personification of evil*"

sounded pretty foreboding to me—she must've been something really dangerous.

"Heh-heh-heh... You did very well, Yuuki. Not even I could dismantle the elemental seal on that ark. That's why I took advantage of you. Now that she's released, nobody could ever defeat her. Attention, demon lords! Attention, servants of evil! All of you will die here today!"

Granville erupted into laughter as he shouted. Awfully kind of him. Revealing everything without prompting like this sure helps me a lot...not that it makes this situation any better.

"Wow. Guess I lost this game of wits, huh? You sure got me good..."

Yuuki sounded surly about it. Sooner or later, though, this stalemate had to end. And now, with a relaxed motion, the dark-haired Chronoa started moving. With a light shake of her head, her eyes opened—and that was the signal for the free-for-all to begin.

*

I could ask Luminus what she knew later. For now, I had to survive.

"Diablo, handle this area for me."

"...Yes, my lord!"

It looked like he wanted to say something for a moment, but he meekly agreed, perhaps sensing the atmosphere. He probably wanted to fight, I think, but now wasn't the time for a back-and-forth conversation. I wasn't going to change my mind, and I'm sure he knew that.

So that just left one question: What would I do now? Luminus and Granville were at a stalemate. Shion and Ranga were fighting hard against Razul. Yuuki's group was trying to escape, and while I didn't plan to let them, they were much less dangerous than Chronoa. I couldn't just leave them be, though, which posed a difficult issue. They might stab me in the back—and *forget* about us fighting together here. Leon, meanwhile, had been acting like he was in his own little world for the past while—I honestly couldn't put much trust in him.

Thus, I had few allies and lots of enemies. It was a disastrous situation, way too difficult to handle.

Chronoa's eyes were open. She looked naked to me before, but now I realized she had a single bracelet around one wrist. It was glowing, emitting black particles that wrapped around her body—a system something like Hinata's Holy Spirit Armor. *Her* armor, however, was pure black and much sturdier than what Hinata wore.

Next, Chronoa summoned a single sword, a beautiful rapier not unlike Hinata's Moonlight, albeit with a jet-black blade.

Report. Although its shape is identical, its latent statistics are incomparably higher.

That sword and armor were both apparently way better than Legend class. Her sword was as strong as mine, or maybe stronger, which meant it was God class. I guess I could no longer be optimistic. It's wasn't just a matter of knowledge—she may have even had me beaten in skill, and I had a feeling her weapon could penetrate all my defenses. This was seriously becoming a do-or-die situation.

Report. The hostile subject Chronoa is—

I know, okay?!

I didn't need Raphael's analysis to understand how scary this girl was.

Following my instincts, I deployed Absolute Defense and commenced evasive maneuvers. Immediately after I began, a dark beam of light smashed through where I was just standing. It continued in a straight line, demolishing all obstacles it hit along the way. It was only stopped after breaking through a cathedral wall.

That was beyond crazy. If I was one step slower, I would've taken that head-on. Would I have withstood it? It all would've come down to luck.

Negative. Even with Absolute Defense from the ultimate skill Uriel, spiritual particles can still make their way through. It is only through predicting their movements and making the particles interfere with one another that they can be canceled out. The hostile enemy's attack variation is greater than originally pictured, and prediction is therefore difficult. To sum up—

...You can't defend it, right? Okay, then. "Absolute" Defense, my ass. But now

was no time for whining. I'd have to thank my own quick-wittedness for dodging that.

And Chronoa was aiming her attacks at more than just me. Her next strike headed straight for Yuuki. He couldn't quite dodge it, suffering a slight cut on his cheek. It wouldn't be nice to cheer for that, but hopefully nobody minded if I let out a bemused giggle.

Still, Chronoa's attacks were astounding. Even Yuuki's Anti-Skill was helpless against attacks purely physical in nature. I suppose I had Cancel Melee Attack, but Yuuki enjoyed nothing that convenient. He had powered up his whole body, but he was still merely human. I had thought of Anti-Skill as a major threat, but maybe there were a lot of holes to it after all.

I had the time to ponder this while other people were fighting. Better come up with some kind of strategy before I'm aimed at again.

Suggestion. Deploy Summon Storm Dragon, part of the ultimate skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm?

Yes

No

Hey, that sounds nice!

I hated to use one of my most secret moves in front of such a big crowd, but it'd be even worse if I kept it hidden and fell into a hole I couldn't get out of. If I lost someone like Hinata, it'd be too late after that. Luminus's relationship with Veldora gave me some concern, but now was no time to hesitate.

So I leaped at Raphael's suggestion. I had been practicing in secret, so it felt natural now. Opening a soul corridor to Veldora, I called for him.

(Mm? Rimuru? Well! I hope you are happy with yourself, going on a nice field trip without me.)

Great. He was dolefully pouting at me. And this *wasn't* a field trip. I wish he wouldn't lodge these accusations at me, but I didn't have the time to argue. At times like these, you had to speak your mind.

(Veldora, *please*, I need your help. Lend me your powers!)

With a soul corridor, you could communicate your emotions more directly than with Thought Communication. Normally, you wouldn't use a corridor for conversation, since any lies could immediately be spotted out, but if you *really* wanted to bare your soul, this was the best way. Thanks to that, I could tell Veldora seemed surprised.

(Oh-ho? You need my power? Well then, you will find few companions as trustworthy as I. I can certainly understand why you rely on me so!)

Crap, did I egg him on too much? No, I'd be okay. Veldora was bound to step up for me.

(I'm short on time. Can I call for you?)

(*Pfft.* A silly question. If you ask me so nicely, I could only respond in kind! Please go ahead. I will exercise the full extent of my force!)

Veldora turned out to be just as trustworthy as I hoped.

Consent acquired. Launching Summon Storm Dragon.

And in just a scant few moments, a gale-force wind blew over the cathedral...



Leon was struck dumb.

Was I too late...?

The girl called Chloe was without a doubt the childhood friend he had been searching for, an effort he spent hundreds of years on. He had even dirtied his hands with certain forbidden methods in the attempt...and now she was here. She was here...but that little girl was gone.

At first, Leon thought that Rimuru had done something—but he quickly dispelled the thought. As he saw it, the only conclusion to make was that something truly unexpected and mysterious had happened.

No... I can't give up on this yet. Just now, I met her. There's going to be another chance, I'm sure of it!

He decided to cling to that thought, persuading himself it was so. It helped him regain control, but by that time, things had suddenly begun to unfold

quickly. A new enemy appeared, demonstrating unstoppable force. Her identity was unknown, but he could tell she had Rimuru playing defense. And Leon was no impartial observer; there was no guarantee he wouldn't be targeted next.

Next Yuuki was attacked, dodging the strike with everything he had. Seeing that promptly made Leon realize that he was standing in a battlefield—but that realization came a little too late.

People knocked out of battle were already strewn near the cathedral wall. Leon had no way of knowing, but Rimuru had deposited them there so they wouldn't get caught in combat. They were still alive but completely unconscious, so Leon wasn't particularly wary of them. In normal times, he'd never make an error like that, but the shock of seeing this girl he pursued for so long suddenly disappear had made him lose his composure. Put it all together, and he had let his guard down—and that's why, for that one moment, he reacted too slowly.

A small blast of magic shot out from near the cathedral wall. It didn't look very lethal as it made its way toward Chronoa, who was currently preparing another attack on Yuuki. It certainly wouldn't damage her, but the blast did exactly what its creator intended.

Chronoa turned around, her eyes settling on Leon.

"Tch... Trying to push her on me?!"

Despite his reluctance, Leon had to cast off all the niggling concerns in his mind. If he took his eyes off Chronoa, he'd be dead the next instant. Unless he seriously fought this out, even a demon lord like him would have a disadvantage—and even with a full effort, there may be no way for him to win this. That was how strong a threat Chronoa had become—and with the way things were, Leon could no longer distract himself with other issues.

One side of the battle was cheering at this. It was Yuuki's group.

"Nice job, Teare!"

"What a great idea. I didn't think she'd help out like that, but now I'm glad I took out that insurance."

This move on Teare's part was originally meant to antagonize Rimuru against

Leon, but the opportunity never arose, so Teare kept playing possum. Her perseverance was rewarded at the perfect time.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Now we can get out of here once Teare makes it back."

Being targeted by Chronoa made Yuuki sweat bullets, but now he was his usual composed self, kicking back as he observed the fight between her and Leon. Thus, he could easily see Teare clambering her way from the cathedral wall. He headed off to rescue her before Laplace finished up their preparations to retreat—and by the time he was back with her, Laplace's spell was complete.

"All set, Boss. Let's blow this joint."

"I hear you," Yuuki replied with a nod. "I think Rimuru's up to something, so it'll be dangerous to stay put. We better get out of here fast."

He raised his hand up high, knocking out the magical barrier that covered the whole of Lubelius.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Nice one, Boss."

"Whenever I see it in action, your skill seems like such a cheat..."

"Hey, if it lets us scram in a hurry, I'm all for it."

As Laplace implied, escaping the center of this city with magical means would normally be impossible. Thanks to Yuuki's power, though, they could modify anything and everything to their liking. It *was* a cheat, as Teare put it, but if it got them out of here alive, nobody was going to complain.

"I dunno who's going to survive this, but whoever it is, I'm sure we're gonna be enemies next time we meet. Anyway—good luck, guys!"

With those final words, Yuuki and his team left the battlefield.



I could see Yuuki and his cohorts escape. I resented that. Making good on their retreat, with all these threats left for me to deal with—but when I thought about it, this actually worked well. Someone like them, who could be either friend or foe—well, definitely foe right now—but teaming up with someone like that, I had no idea when they'd decide to betray me. It might've even become two on one against me, so having just one enemy to deal with now definitely

boosted my chances.

The Western Holy Church held a great deal of influence among the Western Nations. If I made a public statement, and it received Luminus's agreement, Yuuki would pretty much lose all standing in the West. Besides, the Free Guild was backed by the Council, and the boss of the Council was currently in active warfare against Luminus. If we won today, Yuuki was no longer a threat.

Convincing myself that his escape wasn't worth feeling down about, I sized up the enemy in front of me.

"Rimuru, is that not...the Hero who sealed me away?" Veldora asked.

"Seems to be."

"Ah, I see. She is not masked, but the area around her lips is identical. I see my eyes do not deceive me. Beautiful, is she not?"

Veldora's speech accelerated as he bragged about her. Now really wasn't the time for this. I wondered if a True Dragon even knew how to assess human beauty. It certainly lent more credence to the theory that Veldora lost after falling for her good looks.

"I agree with you, but right now she's our enemy. Luminus sealed her away, I guess, but she's out of anyone's control right now. I think she was meant to be insurance against you, so do something about this!"

"How rude of you. Why are you ordering someone as irreproachable as me to '*do something?*'"

Who do you think you're talking about here, man...? I almost had to applaud his audacity. But I didn't have the time to put up with his nonsense.

"Enough jokes. Just take her on and buy me some time!"

"Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha! Absolutely! We have a score to settle, besides. I was just thinking about how I wanted a rematch. It is all right if I defeat her, I assume?"

Wow! My hero!

Although, whenever anyone says that in a show or video game, they're basically doomed to lose afterward.

"Yes, of course! Have at it!"

"Leave it all to me. I was defeated last time because I was in my dragon form. Now is a good chance to show you how I've grown."

I'm glad he's so confident, but hasn't he actually gotten *weaker* since then? I don't really see the logic behind being stronger as a human instead of a dragon...but I didn't want to rain on his parade when he was so enthusiastic, so I sent him off with a smile.

Not like losing would kill him—that much I could be assured of.

"Are you all right, Leon?" I asked, turning toward him. Chronoa was still looking right at us, so I kept an eye on her.

"Yes, somehow. Don't leave yourself open. She's stronger than you can imagine."

I decided to heal Leon a little. His sword was already cut in half, and he was thoroughly battered and bruised. I was impressed he held out this long. Thanks to his efforts, I had enough time to successfully summon Veldora.

"I realized that the moment I saw her. You saw how wary Luminus was. I'm not expecting this to be an easy win."

That was why I broke out Veldora, one of my last resorts.

"And so you called for Veldora? I won't ask how you did that, but having you as an ally is certainly reassuring. But even a True Dragon will have his work cut out for him."

That I knew as well. Chronoa, after all, was the very person who sealed him away.

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. I used an excessive amount of magic force to keep my sword intact, but this is nothing fatal."

Of course, he couldn't save his sword in the end. And as unconcerned as he looked, I was detecting a lot of fake stoicism. I didn't have the excess capacity to protect Leon, so maybe this was the right thing to do after all? Good thing I kept my summoning to Veldora only.

There was actually one other person among us.

“Are you all right, Sir Leon? It is good to see you again.”

This was Charys. My summoning hadn’t gone perfectly after all, because Veldora insisted on bringing Charys along with him.

“Are you...Ifrit?” Leon asked.

“Yes. I have now received the name Charys and am in the service of Sir Veldora.”

“Ah. Well, glad to see you in good health.”

“I...was unable to read your true intentions. Thus, I failed to reach an understanding with Shizue Izawa. Receiving Sir Veldora’s guidance has helped me realize just how foolish I was.”

“...Has it?”

Leon nodded, although I wasn’t wholly sure he was paying attention. He seemed to be brushing Charys off, but I didn’t want to call him out on it. They both had similarly serious personalities, to be sure.

“Rimuru,” Leon said, “please buy me some time. I have a trump card of my own to reveal.”

I considered the chance he’d try to run, but even with what little time we had spent together, he didn’t strike me as that kind of guy. Let’s trust in him, then.

“All right. I’ll go support Veldora. Charys, defend this area until Leon’s ready.”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

We were all set to go. Leon promptly got to work on...something, with Charys protecting him—the old master-and-servant team reunited. Me, I went back to the battlefield. It was time to kick off the final fight.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
5

THE HERO AWAKENS

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THE HERO AWAKENS

Ughh... I'm exhausted.

Hinata was faced with an irresistible temptation as she found herself about to be sucked into a bottomless abyss. Memories of times near and far crossed her mind—her life was flashing before her eyes.

Yes... Now I remember. Even my own dad played with me sometimes, huh?

She had been so focused on the “now” that she forgot all about it, but long ago, she belonged to a normal family. Normal, that is, until her father’s company went bankrupt, and everything fell apart. If her father could’ve kept it together, maybe her mother wouldn’t have gone insane, either. Hinata had too many of her own problems to think about just how much his father suffered. So he kept on hating him, resenting him, trying to pretend her current unhappy reality didn’t exist. She refused to forgive his crimes, judging him in her mind in order to justify her own actions.

Everyone has weakness in their heart. Her father did as well. And perhaps, if they all supported one another as a family, things might have turned out differently...

It's comical for me of all people to talk about justice. Maybe that's why I kept looking for traces of my father in him...

Hinata always felt saved by his sense of ideal justice, and by his bottomless softheartedness, although he’d probably deny it. Whenever her heart felt stretched, ready to burst, he always provided her the gospel of extra breathing room. That was him...but it was all in Hinata’s own mind. If she told him, it’d probably just annoy him. But sometimes she was tempted to anyway, on the off chance that maybe, just maybe, he’d accept her.

This is exactly what Granville said. I've never been able to forgive myself.

Now Hinata realized that it had all come too fast. She always lived under the idea that she'd never be forgiven. Her mother would never be sad for her; even if she somehow got back to her own world, nobody would celebrate. Only her faith in the idea of rescuing as many people as she could gave her motivation.

But now I'm just exhausted. I just want to gently float into this gloomy darkness...

Softly, Hinata's consciousness drifted deeper into the swallowing dark. Her five senses were already gone, all resentment untangling itself from her heart, and there were already no regrets left—

"Don't fall asleep!!"

Hinata's consciousness awoke to the piercing scream.

Was that Chloe...?

The thought called Hinata back to reality. But this wasn't reality—it was a very strange place to be. She could see outside through a window floating in space, but she wasn't seeing with her eyes—rather, it was a sight she felt in her heart.

"That's 'cause you're inside me, Miss Hinata."

Before she could ask Chloe's voice what she meant, Hinata recalled the situation she was in.

Oh... Right. Granville stabbed me...but I'm not dead?

Remembering it all greatly confused her. Running her Measurer skill at full blast, she still couldn't come up with a convincing answer. The fact that she could tap into her skills at all was incredibly odd.

"I'll explain everything, so do your best to stay conscious for now. I also want you to sync up with me."

"Sync up?"

"Yes. Can you see the light?"

Guided by Chloe's voice, Hinata focused her consciousness. In another moment, she came across a small point of light.

"Right! That's it!"

She—or her consciousness, although it felt like she was moving her body—headed for the light. And then, the moment she touched it, her consciousness was greeted with a dazzling rainbow of colors.

After a few moments:

"Are you awake?"

"Where am I...?"

"Good, you're stable. So um, Miss Hinata—"

"Just Hinata is fine."

"...Oh, okay! So anyway, Hinata, you were inside me—or my 'soul.' This is probably the first time for you, so it must be confusing, but that's definitely what happened. If I didn't get you out of there, you would've been swallowed up in an Unlimited Imprisonment!"

Then Hinata realized where she was. No wonder she didn't have a body—her soul was inside Chloe, as she now understood. The Unlimited Imprisonment she mentioned was, no doubt, at the bottom of that gloomy darkness.

"Oh... Well, thanks for reaching out to me."

She felt obliged to thank her.

After that, Chloe explained assorted things to Hinata. According to her, when Hinata was stabbed, her soul moved into Chloe. Normally, when you die, your soul separates from your body, dissipating into the air and ceasing to exist. This time, however, Chloe's soul intervened with it, creating a highly unusual situation. It wasn't enough to fully convince Hinata, but even before that, she had other concerns.

"So is Rimuru all right?" she frantically asked. *"What happened to Lady Luminus? And to Granville?"*

"Well," Chloe coolly said, "I want you to stay calm when you hear this, but right now...we've gone back to a long, long time ago."

"Huh?"

"You see that mountain over there?"

"Yes... Wait! Isn't that the sacred peak of the Riola Mountains? So—so where are we? Based on my positional data... Are we in the Lubelius sanctuary?"

Hinata couldn't be blamed for her panic. There, hazy in the distance, was likely the lofty Riola Mountains. They were visible because there was nothing between them and Hinata—just flat grassland. There *should* have been a city there, but there wasn't. For a moment, she feared the worst—the city blown away by a war between superpowers—but then there'd be a barren waste here, not a healthy prairie.

Which meant...

"I know this is hard to believe, but I swear I'm not lying at all."

Chloe had to be right. This would eventually become a sanctuary, but now they were in a time far before the founding of Lubelius. Hinata had heard that Luminus moved to this land over two thousand years ago...

"Are you kidding me...?"

She understood it was the truth, but she still had to say it. It was just so crazy—but then a question arose in her mind.

"*Chloe, why are you sure this is the past?*"

That felt important to ask. Assuming she was willing to accept that this was time travel at work, why did she know they were in the past? Maybe this was far in the future, long after their nation fell. There wasn't a single other person in sight nor any buildings or ruins, so perhaps the past was more likely—but maybe the ruins were buried deep underground by now. It was impossible to say for sure.

But Chloe was confident as she smiled at Hinata.

"It's simple! This isn't the first time I've been here. My power keeps going out of control, you see, so I get sent back a lot—back *here*, too. So I remember it."

Hinata had no idea what to say. Slowly, she mulled over Chloe's words, gradually accepting them.

"Mind explaining what's going on in more detail?" she asked in a somewhat

threatening tone.



Chloe's story was truly surprising.

It turned out her skill involves time travel of a sort—"of a sort" because Chloe herself didn't understand it too well, either. Apparently, she couldn't trigger it at will; the best she could do was recall events that happened in her past. But you couldn't underestimate it, because *past* here meant the past that Chloe herself experienced—and since she was a regular time traveler, this past included events from the future.

Unfortunately, these memories weren't perfect recollections. There's always an element of vagueness in people's memories. For many, it's hard to remember exactly what happened when—and if you're talking about memories from over two thousand years ago, of course it'll be a tad garbled.

"So how did you discover this ability?" Hinata asked.

Chloe hesitated a bit before replying. "Um, when Mr. Tempest rescued me. He took Alice and me and everyone else to the Dwelling of the Spirits to stabilize us. Then I had a spirit planted inside me, but..."

Apparently, Chloe didn't receive a spirit but an embodiment of her own powers from the future. Even more unbelievably, this embodiment was sentient.

"...I think I must've died at some point in the future, so I guess I just repeat this process of planting that version of me in myself."

"So the Dwelling is where you learn of this process? Like, every time in the cycle?"

"Not exactly. I don't remember anything about it at the beginning, but then once I start going back in time, I do."

"You mean you've been doing this same thing over and over?"

"I think so. I can only *really* recall things from the last time around, but sometimes memories from elsewhere get mixed in..."

"Oh," Hinata said, a bit relieved. If she was repeating the exact same life every

time, that'd be a sort of living hell. No one is strong enough to continue waging a battle if you knew the end result.

So Hinata silently listened as Chloe continued. Apparently, her time travel always took place in the same era, in the same axis of time—those were likely the limitations of her skill. Exactly where she was taken depended on the timing of her out-of-control episodes.

In the previous cycle, Hinata apparently died in the Forest of Jura.

“Mr. Tempest had died, and Veldora got revived—”

“Huh? Rimuru died? Who did it and how? He’s practically unkillable.”

“Um, well, with *this* cycle, my memories between when I received myself in the Dwelling and when I get taken to the past are working out pretty differently. In fact, this is actually the first time Rimuru was still alive when it happened to me.”

Hinata found the sudden shift from *Mr. Tempest* to *Rimuru* pretty funny, but she didn’t point it out. Instead, she lent an ear to Chloe as she recapped her memories up to her last visit to the Dwelling.

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During the last cycle, after rescuing the children, Rimuru used Spatial Motion to return to Tempest. He didn’t run into Hinata, missing her by only a few seconds at most. By this point, he had beaten up a lot of the otherworlders who came to Tempest, showing the nations bordering the Forest of Jura that he was no one to mess with.

When the danger Rimuru posed became common knowledge, the other nations of the world all but froze in place. The Kingdom of Farmus was still around, waiting for their opportunity to strike. Some sort of incident took place among the Ten Great Demon Lords as well, but all Chloe knew were rumors that something might’ve happened.

As Rimuru cemented his friendship with Grand Master Yuuki of the Guild, he

began to exercise his influence on other nations—but apparently it was rough going, thanks in no small part to Farmus's interference. But Rimuru didn't give up, trying out all sorts of strategies. The children's school was one of them, a place in Tempest where Chloe and the others could get an education alongside monster kids.

Suddenly, though, everything changed. At the behest of the Council of the West, Hinata led a suppression force to attack Tempest.

"I did that?"

"Yeah. It was pretty scary, Hinata."

"Oh. Sorry, I guess."

"No, it's okay. You guys kinda made up after that, so..."

According to Chloe, Hinata and Rimuru staged a duel that ended in a draw—and when the children (Chloe in particular) intervened to plead Rimuru's case, Hinata put her blade away.

"So you said 'I'll keep an eye on you' and made nice with Rimuru."

Sensing something strange with Tempest, Hinata apparently kept up her own investigations of the country. As she did, she exposed the assorted nefarious things Farmus was up to, and that made her begin to trust in Rimuru.

Five years passed. Rimuru remained leader of the Forest of Jura, never becoming a demon lord, and his days were as busy as ever. Thanks to making peace with Hinata, he was on good terms with Lubelius—Luminus took a liking to him for some reason, which helped preserve the peace. Chloe also grew, becoming stronger and befriending the demon lord Milim as she paid regular visits to Tempest.

But that peace came to a sudden end on the fateful day when the Empire invaded.

"You know, I already liked Rimuru a lot by then. I didn't want him to go off to battle, so I begged and pleaded with him. The Empire's so big and strong; they had all these scary weapons, and I didn't think we could win. But Rimuru just smiled at me and said 'Don't worry! I'll take care of everything!' I'm sure he was

just as scared as me, but he tried to play it off...and he gave me this mask.”

“*You mean Shizu’s...?*”

“That’s right. I gave it to her.”

This was an event that happened in the future, but paradoxically in the past as well. It was a precedent that had a knack for occurring repeatedly, as Chloe put it.

So Rimuru set off for battle. He never came back, and soon the nation of Tempest fell. That was thanks to the suddenly revived Veldora, who flew into a murderous rage. The Empire was destroyed as well, and then Luminus, Hinata, and Chloe and the rest teamed up to take on Veldora—if they didn’t, all of humankind was in danger.

In the end, though, before they could settle that score...someone killed Hinata. A glinting flash pierced through Hinata’s chest, and then Chloe “woke up” and got sent into the past. She never did find out what happened next.

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Chloe’s time loops tended to all work out in somewhat similar fashion, although there would often be disparities here and there. Apparently, the death of Hinata was always the key event, and the same was true this time as well.

This time as well...? I die every single go-round, don’t I?

This made Hinata feel a tad awkward. She didn’t know whether to feel sad or pathetic about it. But Chloe pressed on.

“But you know, *this* time is special. Every time I got sent to the past before, Rimuru would always leave the picture before I did. And he never got to see me off. Not even once!”

Up to now, every time loop involved Rimuru leaving everyone’s life for one reason or another. This time, however, he was still intact when the jump happened. Hinata knew that, and therefore, she expected this to conclude in some new, different way. There were a lot of differences from before, and—as

Hinata decided—maybe they'd be able to put an end to Chloe's looping for good.

“...You know him. You can’t help but hold out hope, no matter how illogical, that he’ll figure something out.”

“Right? So if we can get back to that time period, Rimuru will still be there. This time, I’m sure we can all survive—and we need to figure out who keeps killing him and you!”

They could hold out hope for the future. Hinata thought so, too.

“It sounds like a lot changed with this loop. I wonder what caused that...?”

“Hee-hee! Well, to tell the truth, I actually remembered a couple things from my future self at the Dwelling of the Spirits. That’s why, over at Englesia, I pleaded with him and kept him there for a little bit. And then I got this.”

Chloe took out the mask, seemingly from nowhere.

“So you got it again, this time around? Then maybe there’s a way for you to reach that future.”

Hinata’s attention was also on the mask. Since her death apparently happened under different circumstances, there may not have been any time for Chloe to receive the mask. If so, there may not be any mask for Shizue to receive this go-round—but if Chloe already had it, that wasn’t a concern.

Very shrewd of her, she thought as they worked out their next move. Trusting in Chloe’s words, she decided to place her hopes on the future.

“Also,” whispered Chloe, “lemme just say this one thing. I really love you, Hinata, but I won’t let you take Rimuru from me!”

“Huh?”

“Some battles a woman will never give up on, you know. Alice said so!”

Hinata smiled at her. *She really is still a kid, huh? I mean, Rimuru and me? There’s no way that could ever possibly happen...*

She chuckled, even as the thought of it “possibly” happening haunted her.

“Did that upset you?”

"N-no! Not at all! But we need to get moving!"

Confronted by Chloe, Hinata decided to change the subject.

...Thinking about it, this girl's retained over two thousand years of memories and experienced them again and again, right? I was tricked by her looks, but maybe I was wrong to treat her as an innocent child...

Hinata had finally reached the truth...and so began their strange journey.

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The first thing they did was travel to find Luminus, one of the few acquaintances of theirs who'd be alive in this era. Chloe immediately started walking.

"You know where she is?"

"Yeah. This really huge war—like, crazy huge—had just started, so I went to watch it."

"Veldora, right?"

"Right. Rimuru introduced him as his friend in this cycle, but he was definitely an enemy the last time. It looked like he was fighting someone, so I wanted to lend a hand."

"Oh. That was Luminus he was fighting, huh?"

"Yeah. So this time, I want to come a little early and help everyone escape before Veldora starts going nuts. I want to win Luminus's trust and get her to work with us."

Chloe sounded remarkably determined. She also had a great sense of direction, unlike Rimuru, so she headed for her destination without any help from Hinata. Before long, they arrived at the demon lord Luminus's castle.

"So this is Nightrose Castle... No wonder Lady Luminus was so proud of it."

It was beautiful, an entirely artificial structure that also boasted the splendor of a natural fortress. Thornlike protrusions were visible across its edifice, serving as standby posts for the castle lookouts. They quickly spotted Chloe, a small herd of vampires bustling over to greet her.

"I'm here to see Luminus," she said to the soldiers surrounding her. "Please take me to her."

Hinata was shocked.

"Wh-whoa! You think you can just walk up and demand to see a demon lord?"

Chloe paid the frenzied advice no mind.

"It's okay. Luminus is my friend!"

"But that's not until after you save her from Veldora, right? She doesn't even know you at this point!"

Only then did Chloe realize she was mixing up her memories a little.

"Oh... You're right. I've repeated this so many times, I guess I thought that part was done. And come to think of it, I always do start with you getting angry at me every time, Hinata..."

I knew it, Hinata thought as she feared for their future. Yes, Chloe was certainly used to this. Perhaps, since Hinata was experiencing this for the first time, she'd handle this with a little bit more carefulness. So she suggested that she could serve as leader.

"Listen, Chloe. I'm going to give you advice, but don't reply to it right away, okay? Don't talk until I'm done telling you what to do."

"Um, all right. That's probably a good idea. If I say something weird, I might wind up changing history."

Hinata was relieved to see Chloe readily accept the offer. At the same time, the portent behind what she said made her blood run cold.

Wait a second! She's right, isn't she? If we do something wrong, it'd mess with history itself, right? We're connected to a pretty hopeful future here, but one mistake, and we could screw up the whole thing!

Now she was extremely grateful for intervening before Chloe did anything rash. They had already messed this up big-time, but at least they wouldn't be stacking up more disasters on top of that. They were still okay, she thought.

Soon, they were brought to Luminus. It wasn't easy, of course, but Chloe

quickly talked the guards down, never taking no for an answer.

“Um, do you remember what I just told you?” Hinata asked, quivering as she kept her anger at bay.

“It’s fine,” Chloe breezily replied. “I’ve been through this once before, where I pushed my way in to warn them about Veldora’s attack!”

No shyness here, for certain. If this had worked before, Hinata wasn’t going to ask any more questions.

We’re still good. We should be all right. But I think we’ll need to make sure we’re on the same page...

Hinata internally sighed, bringing a hand to her forehead.

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“So you say that evil dragon will come here soon?”

“Yes. I know you’re really strong, Luminus, but you can’t beat Veldora. He’s going to destroy this whole castle, so I want you to evacuate as quickly as you can.”

Hinata was nervous. Was this really all right? After gauging Luminus’s personality, her Measurer skill indicated that a straight approach was the correct one—but not on everything, of course, or on the really important parts.

“Hmm. I don’t know you well enough to believe you. Do you have any sort of evidence?”

Luminus sounded a bit friendlier now...but they couldn’t rest easy yet. This was a performance, one meant to cast off any fools wasting Luminus’s time. Hinata knew that quite well, so she quickly gave more advice to Chloe, asking her to confirm what era this was and pooling their knowledge together to calculate exactly when Veldora would attack.

“Well, it looks like Veldora will be coming here no sooner than two weeks from now. Once fall arrives, for sure. So be on the lookout, all right?”

Luminus was no idiot. She could analyze Chloe’s pulse and other factors, trying to determine whether she was lying. This could just be a concocted story, but someone like Chloe who could talk her way through the castle guard

seemed unlikely to try anything that foolish.

In the end, Luminus saved her decision for later and offered Chloe lodging in the castle.

Then, in another little while, Veldora came. Luminus fought bravely, Chloe attempting to join in before Hinata stopped her.

"Listen. Last time, you said you didn't fight Veldora in this era, right?"

"Right, but..."

"Forget all your other memories. Right now, what we need to do is follow our footsteps from last time. In order to win Luminus's trust, we need to talk to her about the future—but don't talk about the future results from this time around. If we just retrace the route we took last time, we're bound to reach the future from the current cycle."

It was important enough of a point that Hinata said it twice. Chloe, taken in by her force of will, nodded her approval. She understood it well. If they told Luminus about their memories from the current loop—how Granville betrayed them, for example—Luminus would no doubt kill Granville right that minute, and Chloe and Hinata would lose their link to the future they came from. Both of them knew they had to avoid this at all costs.

Thus, while Veldora destroyed the castle, Chloe's timely warning kept human casualties quite low. This was the same as the history Hinata was taught.

Given Chloe's apparent clairvoyance, Luminus enthusiastically trusted her. The two of them became friends, and right now, they were seated facing each other behind closed doors.

"So you're telling me, Chloe, that you've traveled through multiple loops in time?"

"That's right. My memory extends approximately two thousand years into the future. Would you like to hear more?"

"Of course. Go ahead."

With Luminus's permission, Chloe gave her story, internally discussing it with Hinata as she did. For the next two millennia, she will be a Hero—and at the

end of those two thousand years, a slime by the name of Rimuru will make his appearance. This Rimuru will perish in battle, and then Veldora will be unleashed. Before that point, Luminus will befriend a woman named Hinata—but she, too, will be murdered. Neither Chloe nor Hinata knew who was behind these deaths; Chloe couldn't give all the details, but she described their deaths as much as she could.

"I see, I see. And you want to change that future for you both?"

"Not change, exactly. I want to retrace my previous steps through time, as much as I can. If I do anything *too* big that changes a lot of things, I think I'd wind up in a completely different future."

"Yes, I can imagine. Certainly, I have no qualms with the future you describe—I doubt I'd take the death of this Hinata too well, but otherwise, it sounds fine to me. After all, how much can I ask for from a friend I haven't met?"

Luminus smiled.

Luminus... Thank you. I'm truly happy you said that.

Given her unfriendly appearance, it may have been a little hard to believe, but Luminus was actually a very gentle woman. Hinata knew that well.

"Then I promise I will cooperate with you. Roy can be a handful, but you will have nothing to worry about from the others. I will inform them all that you are my friend, Chloe. Now, what are you going to do next?"

Luminus's sharpened eyes descended on Chloe.

"Well, the same thing I always do. I'm a Hero, and I have to help people in need!"

That right-minded answer made Luminus flash a beaming smile.

"Will you, now? Well, how nice. I'm curious to see how your fate will affect others. But what will you call yourself?"

Chloe—and Hinata—froze for a few moments.

"You probably shouldn't go by the name Chloe."

"Yeah. My friend Leon's bound to suspect something."

Even discounting that, Chloe wasn't known as a Hero yet. She gave her real name to Luminus, but it'd likely be safer to keep it hidden from the general public.

"*What should I do?*" Chloe asked Hinata.

"*What do you usually do here?*"

"*Um, I don't have any real script. Usually, I guess I just kinda leave at this point without giving a name.*"

Hinata was just about to say "*Well, just do that, then*" before she stopped herself. For some odd reason, she remembered something Rimuru once told her—specifically, his anecdotes about running into trouble after naming certain monsters. So she just suggested the first name that came to mind.

"*Well, in that case, given your Time Travel skill, why don't we combine Chloe with Chronos, the overseer of time, and have you go by Chronoa?*"

"*And not, um, Chronoe or something?*"

"*That's too close to your own name. You might blow your cover, depending on how people pronounce it.*"

"*Oh! Good point. Okay, Chronoa it is!*"

Hinata had held an emergency conference in her mind, accelerated by her Measurer skill, and together they had come up with a suitable alias.

"...I will go by Chronoa. It looks like it'd be better if I didn't throw my real name around in public. So from this day on, I'll call myself the Hero Chronoa!"

This would mark the first time the name Chronoa was recorded in history.

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Abandoning the ruins of their castle, Luminus and her followers sought out a new land. Chloe, naturally, accompanied them.

"*So why did my Usurper skill disappear anyway?*"

"I don't know. Every time, though, your powers wind up integrating with mine, so..."

Chloe fell silent, seemingly finding it awkward to say. It gave Hinata a vague

but decent idea of how her end would come.

"Well, all right. I guess it turns out the same regardless; it's just a matter of timing. But if naming you took away one of my own powers, I guess Chronoa has some kind of monster aspect to her, doesn't she?"

"Hey! That's kinda mean, don't you think?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I meant nothing by it."

"You can be real nasty sometimes, y'know? No matter how pretty you are, you're never gonna attract anyone with *that* attitude."

"Ah, knock it off. I'm dead anyway, so it doesn't matter."

They kept bickering as their journey continued.

Once she left Luminus's side, Chloe began making a name for herself as a Hero, just as she promised. Time passed...and then they reached a point three hundred years before the last leap backward, just before the moment Veldora was sealed away.

As per usual in her long voyage through time, Chloe had picked up skills like Absolute Severance and Unlimited Imprisonment. Hinata, meanwhile, supported her inside her body, using her Measurer skill to help out. So it was with a less-than-enthusiastic tone of voice that Chloe met with Luminus again and said:

"Okay, I'm gonna go seal Veldora away."

"Ah yes, you *did* mention that long ago, didn't you? But are you sure you can do that?"

Luminus looked worried. Unlike before, she and Chloe were now fast friends.

"I'll be fine. I have Hinata with me."

She had told Luminus, and Luminus alone, about Hinata. The demon lord readily accepted her.

"Very well, then. But don't push yourself."

"She'll be fine. I'll be the one taking on Veldora."

"What?"

This was news to a surprised Chloe, even though the unconcerned Hinata made it sound like settled business.

"I've already fought Veldora once. And when I did..."

Hinata recalled how it went:

"Kwaah-ha-ha-ha! How weak! You call yourself the defender of humanity? Do not make me laugh!! Ahhh-ha-ha-ha, can you no longer stand? It serves you right, for I will never taste defeat! Now to put an end to this—for I am a busy dragon!"

It was a pretty humiliating memory.

"...A lot of stuff happened between us, so I really want to kick his ass, or I'll never be happy."

She meant it. Chloe could tell by the tone of her voice, as could Luminus.

"I understand all too well what you mean. I was hoping to bring that lizard to tears myself."

"Back in our fight, I managed to get him to reveal the scope of his powers. I'd like a chance to take advantage of that."

Both Hinata and Luminus were enthusiastic about delivering Veldora his just deserts. Chloe, who recalled enjoying Veldora's company, couldn't hate him that much—but given how much destruction he was responsible for in the past, she couldn't defend him that ardently.

"Well, I don't know everything about you, but don't hurt him too bad, okay? Because Veldora really is a good person."

So Chloe decided to let Hinata do what she wanted.

And at the site of the final battle, Hinata proved to be powerful, indeed. With Chloe's support, they managed to completely shut Veldora out.

"Gwaaahhh!"

Hearing that pained scream, the beauty underneath the mask blushed, basking in her satisfaction. Then she turned control of Chloe's body back to her.

*

Now Chloe's time was ending. The moment had arrived.

"I didn't tell you this until now, but I think I'm gonna disappear soon."

"What are you talking about, Chloe?" Luminus asked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well..."

Chloe began to reveal what she'd kept hidden this whole time. It was, in effect, what Hinata had secretly been surmising. Before much longer, Leon—the Leon that Hinata knew of—would appear. It seemed, apparently, that Leon and Chloe came to this world at the same time, and therefore you'd have the rather odd situation of two Chloes existing simultaneously.

If advanced theories about multiverses were true, and there are parallel universes for every plane of existence, then maybe two Chloes at once would be all right—but what if there weren't? Chloe's Time Travel skill was an aberration. Maybe there's no such thing as being *too* weird and outrageous to be allowed to exist, but the idea of multiple worlds being born was a little too far-out there for Hinata.

Instead, the idea of the world being *remade* was more tangible. Otherwise, you'd have multiple versions of yourself across multiple worlds, and everything Hinata and her friends were doing was inherently pointless. The idea that she'd find salvation in some worlds and doom in others wasn't something Hinata was willing to accept. That's why she wanted to end Chloe's looping and save the world for *good* this time—even if meant sacrificing herself along the way.

There was a problem, though, one that Chloe was expressing right this minute.

But I guess my reasoning was sound after all...

It seemed, once everything was said and done, that the "one single world" theory was correct—and the world thus would never allow contradictions.

...Well, not quite. It's not that contradictions are verboten—it's that anything that causes the world to unravel is. But if you have enough power to force the issue, you can shove in any paradox you like. I mean, there's no other possible

way to explain that mask.

Hinata was relieved that her guess was correct, but at the same time, the future began to look much gloomier to her. From here on out, she realized, it'd all come down to luck and the efforts of other people.

"...And the thing is, I have zero memories from beyond the moment that happens. If I had to guess, Hinata, you probably take over later and help out Ms. Izawa for me, but..."

"And I suppose, from that moment you describe, I can't do anything until the other 'me' who doesn't know anything shows up, right? So what do you think happens after that?"

In the future, Luminus was carefully storing something she cherished. Looking back, was it Chloe herself in there, sealed away?

"All I can vaguely remember is that I was struggling against something. I'm thinking that whoever's in there is probably a different personality than me."

Then Hinata remembered that she had come up with the Chronoa name—and when she did, someone took a skill away from her. Maybe, she finally realized, that really *was* some monsterlike individual.

"Well, Chloe, are you going to lose consciousness soon, then? That's probably the result of the same person existing in multiples along the same time line. I think your theory is correct, Hinata."

"Yes. And the new Chloe, the one about to be born, is the one that'll eventually get thrown all the way back to the past."

"I imagine you're right," said Luminus.

"Yeah. So, Hinata, I know this is asking a lot—"

"It's all right. Once I save Shizue, I'll rely on Lady Luminus after that."

"Leave everything to me. I can use my spiritual force to create a compartment—an ark, if you will—to isolate you from the present age, Chloe. Both of your souls will likely be thrown into the future, and I promise you... I will find them and undo that seal when everything is complete again."

Chloe, Hinata, and Luminus's hearts were one in that moment. And with that,

they left Luminus to handle all their futures.

With Chloe's consciousness now gone, Hinata was by herself.

Now that her theory was proven correct, Hinata was racked by intense anxiety and pressure. The anxiety was over being left alone. The pressure came from this intense *something* within her, attempting to take over her body from the inside.

Once Chloe—the main Chloe—disappears, I'm sure Chronoa is going to wreak havoc. But I didn't expect this much havoc...

Despite her astonishment, Hinata's iron will beat all that anxiety and pressure down. She rescued Shizue from Leon's castle, safely turning the mask over to her—and once this mask of unknown origin was out of her hands, that marked a great mountain Hinata had overcome.

It almost felt nostalgic to her, traveling with Shizue, although Hinata never revealed it. But that era, too, ended. The day of their separation was here. She wanted to spend more time with Shizue, but it was an impossible dream. With Chloe's main personality gone, Hinata could no longer control Chronoa herself. At this rate, the whole plan was in danger of falling apart, ruining all their hard work. Thus, Hinata followed history, left Shizue, and relied on Luminus.

They never did find out who Chronoa was, in the end. Hinata was now in the ark, and once she was settled in, another Hinata—one who knew nothing about any of this—would soon appear in the world. Once she did, what would happen to the Hinata sleeping inside her coffin? If she was lucky, nothing. If not, it'd be Chronoa waking up next, not her. But even if it came to that...

Even it comes to that, I'm sure you'll figure something out. I believe in you, Rimuru!

Recalling that slime from deep within nostalgic memory, she smiled a little before closing her eyes.



Veldora approached Chronoa. The whining commenced immediately afterward.

“Gaarrggghh! She—she cut me! R-Rimuru, she *cut* me!”

Yeah, I’m sure she did. If you try stopping a sword with bare hands, that’s gonna happen.

That ain’t no normal sword, you know. It’s God class. Way fancy. And even if you didn’t have anything else available—your bare hands? Seriously? This dude really *is* weaker in human form.

Given all his confidence, this was a *real* downer for me. Honestly, I kind of hoped Veldora could take care of Chronoa in my stead, but I suppose things were never gonna go that easily.

“How unsafe can you get?! Couldn’t you see the danger?!”

Seeing Veldora in such embarrassing shape made me want to burst into tears. It was just too much to take.

“B-but, Rimuru, it is quite a bit sharper than the last time we fought...”

“Heroes get to fight with the Absolute Severance skill, okay? Didn’t you *say* she slashed you with that?”

Of course, I was no longer sure how credible the Absolute part of that was. All I know was, I sure didn’t want to test her Absolute Severance against my Absolute Defense.

“Y-yes, but I am impervious to that anyway...”

Veldora kept muttering as he started desperately dodging Chronoa’s attacks. She got a stab in now and then, but he seemed on top of things still, which was good.

In fact, I could get Veldora’s point. What he was saying, basically, is whenever he got cut in their last battle, it didn’t cause *this* much damage. But if you thought about it for a moment, it made perfect sense. It was just a matter of size. A sword could only slash across a given range, and even if you used a skill to expand it, I couldn’t picture ever being able to cleave Veldora’s gigantic body in two. But now he was in human form and trying to defend against a bladed weapon with his *arms*, for God’s sake, so of course he was gonna get a scratch or two. I guess he was healing them as soon as he sustained them, but I’m sure

that was consuming a lot more magicules than his dragon form.

Maybe he got better fuel performance as a human, but against Chronoa, he no longer had an edge to speak of. His much-ballyhooed Veldora-Style Death Stance wasn't exactly saving him against a foe with a sword, either. But I wasn't panicking. This would be a good lesson for Veldora, so I decided to have him continue distracting Chronoa for me.

I turned toward Leon. Under the protection of Charys, he was currently performing a summoning. Not that much time had passed, I imagined, but it felt like forever as he summoned a single rapier.

"Sorry to keep you. I can't do anything without a weapon. I want to have my Flame Pillar, my preferred weapon from my Hero days."

Another God-class blade? That's an ex-Hero and current demon lord for you. He also had a shield, a so-called Gold Circle, equipped on his left hand, and that was Legend class as well. Impressive, definitely, but I didn't think it would stop Chronoa's blade. "Better than nothing," I'm sure he was thinking. Regardless, Leon had his equipment.

Now we could step up and counterattack—but the moment I had that thought, Luminus was blown straight in my direction. For a moment, I feared she lost her fight, but she appeared unhurt—I guess that was just a performance, then. She looked at me for a moment, then slammed a Thought Communication into my mind.

(I have to tell you something—Chronoa is Chloe's alternate self! Hinata's soul might be sleeping in there, too, so whatever you do, do *not* kill her!)

...What?!

The fact that she was sending a Thought Communication at all was weird, but what she said truly surprised me. Like, don't drop *that* bomb in the middle of this huge battle!

I watched anxiously as Leon headed off to confront Chronoa. Luminus, meanwhile, trekked back toward Granville, all but leaving things in my hands.

How was I going to deal with this? Chronoa was Chloe—and now that I looked, I could kinda see it on her face. I didn't know what that "Hinata's soul"

stuff was about, though... But if it was true, what did that mean?

Report. Chronoa and Chloe can be considered the same person.

Meaning...?

In other words, the subject Chloe Aubert traveled through time and emerged in the past. It can be inferred that this Chronoa is the matured version of herself.

Um... Hang on. Was that even possible?

I was sure Luminus could clear this up, but she was fighting for her life against Granville, and I doubted she could give a full answer. That Thought Communication was about the best she could provide right now. But traveling through time, like some sci-fi story? Or more like a one-way journey, if she didn't have control over it?

Ugh... Why am I believing in all this?

But Chloe really *did* disappear before my eyes. That was a fact.

Understood. If that disappearance marks her jumping through time, it would explain why the phenomenon was unexplainable earlier. One cannot observe temporal intervention without the ability to intervene oneself.

Sure. Maybe you understood the concept of time, but that didn't mean you could observe time itself. Or really, maybe you don't have to understand it at all. If you just treated it as "there," the whole thing started seeming a little more coherent.

Maybe, when I tried to rescue young Chloe, I summoned *something* from the future? If something happened to Chloe in the future, and the spiritual body known as Chronoa wrecking things right now had taken a trip to the past...

Affirmative. It is agreed that the chances of that are high.

Ah. That explained why Ramiris had been in such a tizzy back then. I could sense an evil aura coming from Chronoa here, and if she felt it, too, no wonder she tried to stop it.

But there was no point worrying over it. So if Chloe had jumped through time, what was her current status? what was going on right now?

Report. It is impossible for multiples of the same soul to exist at the same point in space and time. It is believed that the resulting rejection sent one of the souls into the past. However, the ark—the spiritually powered barrier created by the subject Luminus Valentine—was created for the purpose of locking a soul inside. As a result...

So chances are good that both Chloe's and Hinata's souls are sleeping inside Chronoa? If the power of the ark could outclass Chloe's time-travel force... Well, I had no choice but to believe in that right now.

What next, then...?

"Leon, don't think about attacking Chronoa. Just focus on defending yourself."

"Do you have an idea?"

"Yeah. I know it's asking a lot to just trust in me, but—"

"—No, I will. You trusted me before."

How surprising. I didn't expect it to be that easy. He wasn't acting all highborn with me any longer. I was starting to like this friendlier, more casual Leon. It came at the perfect time, and I appreciated it.

I turned to Veldora to give an order.

"Veldora!"

"On it."

I didn't say anything yet, man. But whatever. No time to lecture him.

"On my signal, I want you to pin Chronoa down. This is going to be really dangerous, as I'm sure you can tell—"

"I told you, Rimuru, I am on it. I believe in you, so go ahead and carry out your plan."

...Well, *that* made me kinda happy.

In a way, not wanting to hurt Chronoa, or Chloe, was really just me being selfish. I was acting entirely on supposition, guesswork that could've been wrong for all I knew. Besides, having such a sunny view of things in front of this

overwhelming opponent was practically suicidal. Still, if there was any kind of chance, I wanted to bet on it.

"Sorry. Follow my lead."

"Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha! Not to worry! It's hardly the first time."

"I have some concerns of my own, and I wish to confirm them. That is why I am working with you. Nothing more."

Hmm. So maybe Leon noticed, too—not just Veldora—that Chronoa was Chloe. It'd be nice if I could sit down and explain everything, but now was not the time for that. Leon was currently sword fighting with Chronoa, a composed look on his face, but his forehead was covered in sweat. It must've taken a Herculean effort just to speak to me.

So! Next order of business: how to dive into Chronoa's soul...

(Sir Rimuru, not stating your mission objectives out loud was a brilliant decision. I believe it is likely that the demon lord Guy is still monitoring the cathedral.)

That was a Thought Communication from Diablo. Luminus did the same earlier; I guess they were pretty concerned about what was happening around us. Me, though, I resorted to this only because it was a selfish request, and I didn't want Chronoa to eavesdrop on us. If it worked out, though, then great.

(Okay. So what do you need from me?)

Diablo must've sent me a message for a reason. As talented as he was, I'm sure he had a grasp of the situation. Maybe he'd have some useful feedback.

(Sir Rimuru, I believe it's possible for you to intervene with people's souls and send messages directly to them. However, I can think of an even surer way.)

(What's that?)

(When your material bodies make contact with each other, you can use your spiritual body to go inside. Then, when your astral bodies make contact, it is likely possible to directly interact with your partner's soul.)

Whether that was possible or not, it sounded incredibly dangerous, didn't it? Like, to the point where I might never come back. I was planning to stick with

Thought Communication, but was that a bad idea?

Understood. The subject Diablo's suggestion has a higher chance of success. However, the amount of danger is incomparably higher.

And that was why Raphael didn't bring it up before now, I guess.

(Diablo, thank you. But let me just say one thing.)

(What is that, my lord?)

(You are giving me far too much credit.)

(Keh-heh-heh-heh... No need to be modest, my lord!)

I'm not, dude.

If I wanted to help Chloe and Hinata, I needed the option that gave me the best chances. "Safety first" was my motto, but only depending on the situation. I really needed to teach Diablo more about how I'm not all that great, in the end. I guess he met Guy, judging by that offhand comment he made, and I hoped he didn't say anything weird to him. If he started bragging about me like he usually did, that was bound to draw Guy's attention. Better warn Diablo against that, too.

(If it is possible, I think it would be good to do, ah, something to stabilize the opponent's mind. Good fighting to you, Sir Rimuru!)

Diablo's trust weighed upon me. Right now, though, I'd have to thank him for giving me a decent strategy.

"But how will I calm her down...?"

If I could do that, we wouldn't have to deal with all this. Was there some helpful item that'd do the trick...?

"How about that mask, then, Sir Rimuru?"

The suggestion came from Charys, currently devoted to supporting Leon. I guess he saw what I was about to try, too. Really smart guy. Too much so, even.

"The mask?"

"Yes. It was powerful enough to keep me at bay, so perhaps it would calm her as well?"

"I see..."

He was smart, but apparently he didn't notice how I was trying to keep us from being heard. But that was my fault for replying to him.

The mask, though, huh? I gave that to Chloe, if I recall. So where was it now? Um, hang on a second... That was an old memento from Shizu, and I repaired it at one point. If I gave that repaired mask to Chloe, then maybe it had somehow made its way back to Shizu? Uh... So wait. Where did that mask *come* from, then?!

...No. I can't think about that right now. The big question is: Can I replicate that mask?

Understood. Create a copy of the Mask of Magic Resistance?

Yes

No

That was a yes. And I had to hand it to Raphael—it made that copy without any problem, looking and functioning exactly like the real thing. Maybe this would help Chronoa chill out.

I took out the mask, showing it to Charys with a grin as I thanked him. Then I focused my mind on Chronoa. I had the basic outline of my plan set. Now I just had to psyche myself up enough to execute it.

Leon and Chronoa were still dueling, Chronoa pushing him around and Leon sticking to defense—and getting himself more and more wounded. Even someone with his strength had a hard time against that woman. He was bound to lose sooner or later, but that was only true if I did nothing.

"Now, Veldora!"

The moment I shouted it, I made a beeline for Chronoa, mask in hand. And then, just as I pushed it on her face, my consciousness was consumed by darkness.



An explosive blast from Razul, taken point-blank, just blew Shion and Ranga through the wall and outside.

Razul calmly walked in their direction. Their opponents, waging a pitched battle up to this point, were bruised from head to toe. But Shion was still calm, her emotions unwavering as she faced up to Razul like nothing was amiss. She looked dignified, not at all on the verge of collapse—perhaps an expression of her own personality.

Behind her, Ranga was groggily coming to his feet, steeling himself anew. He didn't have Shion's Ultraspeed Regeneration, so the damage he took slowly accumulated over time. To his credit, though, he boasted a host of resistances, enough defense to cancel out your garden-variety physical or spiritual attack. With Ultra-Instinct, part of the King of Magewolves package Rimuru gifted him, he also had evasion skills that bordered on predicting the future.



Getting beaten up in such a one-sided fashion would normally be unthinkable, especially when teaming up with Shion against a single foe. But one look at this scene, and it was obvious just how dangerous Razul was.

Shion took a step forward, covering for Ranga.

"Ranga, you can sit this one out."

"Don't be ridiculous, Shion. He is strong. If we work together, and this is the result, going it alone is hazardous."

"It's all right, Ranga. I think I'm grasping him a little now. I want you to stay there and build up your strength until I give the signal."

With that, she readied her sword in front of her, not waiting for a response. It was a beautiful stance, her core oriented straight toward her foe.

"Impressive. None of the demons could trade blows like this with me."

Razul seemed astonished. But compliments from someone without a scratch on him did nothing but humiliate Shion.

"Silence. I'm gonna rip that cockiness out of you with my bare hands!"

With that shout, Shion went on the move, holding her sword up high and swinging it down like the demigod-like ogre she was. It seemed like a slapdash move at first glance, but it was performed with a flawless, flowing stroke. But Razul didn't flinch. A sharp sound reverberated as the exoskeleton that protected him deflected the blow. As an insectoid, Razul was covered from head to toe with armor harder than steel, giving him matchless strength without extra weapons or armor. Even all the magic Ranga lobbed at him harmlessly bounced off the surface—the exoskeleton generated some kind of special force field that nothing worked against.

Parrying Shion's attack with his left arm, Razul used his momentum to throw a punch powerful enough to crush rock. A regular human being would be torn limb from limb. Shion, before now, wouldn't have thought twice about taking the blow—in her mind, either she'd withstand it or die, one of the two.

Now, though, Shion was more mature. Perhaps instructing others had in turn taught her how to keep an eye on the big picture. If she died here, it'd put her

whole side at a disadvantage. Even if she couldn't win this, if she could stretch this out long enough, someone was certain to help her. She could believe that now, so instead of blindly seeking victory, Shion's focus had shifted more toward survival.

She also had good reason to give Ranga some rest. If she forced him right now, he might be too tired to move later—so she resolved to bear the full brunt of this, while she was still able.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason.

Hee-hee... Now to earn my victory and win Sir Rimuru's praise!

On the inside, she was defiant enough to entertain the thought. Survival came first, but she wasn't giving up on victory, either.

This growth on Shion's part had given her more mental leeway to work with. This leeway, in turn, was accelerating the blooming of her still-untapped talents. Now, her whole way of fighting had changed. She was faithful to Hakuro's teachings, relying more on skill than brute force—and in battle with Razul, she was polishing that even further. That explained the beautiful, traditional moves she exhibited now, like a master sword fighter—real technical skill, in addition to her irrational violence.

The results...

A shock wave of force shot out from Shion's sword as she hammered it down, leaping at Razul. It was little more than a smoke screen to him, of course, but with that moment's distraction, Shion closed the distance between them. With a flowing movement, she unleashed her attack. Razul parried it again, but he could feel his arms starting to go numb. Shion's skill had just ratcheted up, somehow—even in the middle of battle, she was constantly growing.

Not yet! I'm not done yet...!!

That strike just now had the effects of her unique skill Master Chef attached to it. She had come upon the idea of using Guarantee Results to crack his thick exoskeleton. She got deflected, again and again, but she didn't give up, smashing her great sword down on the same spot, thinking about nothing but destroying that shell.

In effect, she was looking to bend the laws of nature themselves to crush the uncrushable. Razul was an overwhelming foe, but Shion persevered, sticking it out, never despairing if her abilities didn't work, constantly believing her wish would come true as she kept attacking. Razul, meanwhile, quietly parried her attacks.

The battle continued along. Razul didn't panic, showing machinelike accuracy as he dealt with Shion. Shion, meanwhile, was exercising her full force, even deploying her Ogre Berserker skill to strike with power beyond her limits. But even with that, this seemed like little more than a preliminary trial to Razul. The strength difference was just too much—Shion had to exhaust everything she had just to keep her head above water.

Razul's movements were like a gently flowing river—but suddenly, a mighty rain made that river overtop its banks. Thanks to constantly tapping her skills, Shion's spiritual force was at its limit. Should she lose her balance, the fallout would likely spell her defeat. And that wasn't all. With Ranga out of the battle, Razul had a bead on every move Shion made. After carefully probing her, he concluded that there was nothing left her for to bring out.

The next moment, Razul's aura ballooned. With ferocious force, he began an all-out attack on Shion, using at least twice as much force as before as he rained a flurry of blows upon her. A moment ago, Razul was a statue facing the torrent of Shion; now the opposite was true.

"Your strength is real. You may be proud of it. But you cannot beat me. At best, you could scratch my outer shell, perhaps? Give up and surrender at once!"

That was Razul's final offer. But Shion was unaffected.

"Hee-hee! Laughable. Did you think I was just raging here without any plan? My wish is to ascend to the loftiest peaks. If I cannot venture beyond them, not only will that impudent Diablo chide me, but I won't be able to serve Sir Rimuru."

"What?"

"Slow on the uptake, insect? I mean that I will overpower you."

Shion's aura suddenly exploded out as she once again slashed at Razul with everything she had. Sword crossed against arm—and this time, too, Shion's attack was deflected. However, Shion merely smiled.

"Hee-hee! Just as I hoped for."

Standing back up, she faced Razul down once more.

"Ridiculous. Your attacks could never strike home."

But Shion only snorted at him.

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Shion recalled her own shallowness.

Power is a symbol of justice. As a monster, that was simple common sense, and the weak deserved nothing but to be exploited.

Born as an ogress, Shion was in the upper classes of the Forest of Jura. But at least one person worried for her—and that was her and Benimaru's teacher, Hakuro. Shion had thoroughly tempered her body, which gave her a measure of maturity, but she still didn't really understand the concept.

She didn't ridicule Rimuru's decree that monsters weren't allowed to look down on other species, but part of her mind simply thought it didn't apply to her. The weak are doomed to die—that was the natural order of things.

When she herself died, that was when Shion realized she had it wrong. One didn't fear being killed because they were afraid of death—they were afraid they'd be gone without being able to help anyone else. And when Rimuru rescued her, the sense of relief she felt—this realization that she wasn't forsaken, as if she had two parents protecting her—filled her heart to the brim.

After their battle against the Crusaders as well, Rimuru lectured her, and she changed again. Back then, she couldn't make herself all that angry against the humans she thought were her hated enemies. She questioned that, but Rimuru's words cleared away her doubts. Not *all* of humanity was evil—there were bad guys but also good guys. It was her job to judge them properly.

A person's value lies in the way they live. Strength, or weakness, didn't mean anything. Someone who seemed useless now could someday awaken to their talents in one field or another. It was up to each person, and not someone else, to decide their own value. Rimuru was trying to say that, and Shion understood—and when she did, she realized just how foolish it was to envy others.

Comparing herself to Diablo, Shion knew she was inferior. In her mind, she feared that Rimuru might abandon her entirely. But she was wrong. Realizing that Rimuru would never forget her made all those worries go away—and in recent days, the ugly emotions that used to dominate her heart had disappeared.

There was no need to envy others—all you have to do is surpass them. Shion turned those senses toward herself. Instead of seeing people as her rivals, she began to find meaning in surmounting her own limits. That way, she believed, she could always grow and mature—and even if it was slow going, with her long life span, she could reach dimensions that those with more fleeting lives could never see.

Once Shion started thinking that way, all her anxieties vanished—and that change of heart encouraged her growth. And that indomitable spirit was now blossoming under extreme circumstances...

Confirmed. The subject Shion's intrinsic skill Ogre Berserker has evolved to the unique skill Divine Berserker.

This was a happy accident, not something Shion aimed for—a miracle that occurred precisely because she kept struggling, never giving up on victory.

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"Let me tell you something—the goddess of victory always smiles upon those who never give up! Here we go—Divine Release!!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Shion tapped into the freshly transformed unique skill Divine Berserker. Ogre Berserker had already used and abused her body; now every muscle screamed at the excessive burden. She used

Ultraspeed Regeneration to shut them up.

The unique skill Divine Berserker was, in essence, an upgraded version of Ogre Berserker. It wasn't a true berserker-type move, abandoning all reason and going into a murderous rage; instead, it simply boosted the user's stamina and spiritual force. Like Benimaru's Magic Burn, it was a bodily enhancement that granted her the essential force of a spiritual life-form. But it was no panacea. It had one major disadvantage. In Shion's current state, her physical strength would be loaded on top of her spiritual body—but it consumed magicules at such a fast rate that she'd be running on empty in short order.

Thus, the moment she triggered Divine Berserker, she was already nearing her physical limits. Shion was in this to win it—she had to settle everything with the next strike.

“What...is that power...? It’s coming for me?!”

Under the influence of Divine Berserker, an eye-watering mystical force flowed out of every pore of Shion’s body. At the same time, it honed every one of her senses, letting her feel just how much power was surging within.

“Now, Ranga!”

“Yes!”

Shion lifted Goriki-maru Version 2 high with both hands. A blast of Dark Lightning charged up by Ranga descended upon it. He had waited for the right moment to unleash it, and it was the most powerful force he was capable of right now. Ranga believed in Shion—even if that lightning damaged her, if that was her will, he wouldn’t hesitate to act.

“You impudent...! My shell—”

Shion had no time for Razul’s words.

“Chaotic Fate!!”

Her will now had the power to alter the results of every type of natural phenomenon. She threw all of it into her lightning-infused sword, thrusting it downward from on high...

Razul’s exoskeleton had blocked every attack from Shion. On his left arm,

there was but a single scratch. However, that was all Shion needed. If something had worked before, even a little, she could utilize Optimal Action on it. Combining that with Guarantee Results to guide her hand was the true worth of her Master Chef unique skill.

...With a flash, the broken blade flew into the air. Shion's sword had finally been smashed into two pieces. But it was Razul who fell. His left arm was severed, a large gash cleaved open from the tip of his shoulder down the center of his body. The ruinous lightning that slammed its way through promptly fried all his major organs.

Now the battle was over.

Razul crumpled into a heap. He understood he would die soon. His eyes swiveled up to Granville, still fighting against Luminus.

Forgive me, Gren... I'm taking my leave before you. We will meet again, at that promised land...

The light faded from those eyes as his life functions failed him. Shion and Ranga had secured their victory.



Seeing Rimuru apply the mask to Chronoa, Luminus all but hoped it would win the day for them. This was a risky wager. Once again, Luminus had bet everything on Rimuru, who had earned Chloe's and Hinata's trust.

Luminus had pretended not to know anything about him, but given everything Chloe and Hinata said about him in the past, she was worried. She only joined the last Walpurgis because she heard Rimuru would be there. Him becoming a demon lord wasn't at all the story she heard. Even when discussing matters with Hinata, she continued to feign ignorance of the truth. But as Chloe's story gradually inched closer to reality, she stopped having any doubt about it. That was why Luminus was never hostile to Rimuru from the start.

Still, recent events hadn't turned out at all like how the Chloe and Hinata of the past put them. Things were starting to get inconsistent, and that scared Luminus to the core. The greater things started to diverge, the more it seemed like Chronoa, kept safe in the ark, wouldn't be revived in the correct manner.

Now that fear had come true—and unexpected events were occurring in a flurry.

Here, right before this musical concert she so looked forward to, her dutiful assistant Granville was turning traitor. To be exact, she knew he betrayed her well before now, but not even she expected him to march in here and so blatantly rebel against her.

Now Hinata was dead, Chronoa was revived, and Luminus's best bet for dealing with these irregularities was Rimuru, whose continued survival was itself an irregularity. That was her decision, and just as she hoped, Rimuru was attempting an appeal to Chronoa's soul.

That's the same mask Chloe wore. There's still hope!

Luminus internally cheered. But then Granville spoke up.

"You look pleased, Lady Luminus. Do you really believe that your beloved Chloe will come back?"

"What?"

"Chronoa is a living destructive force, is she not? And without the ark to contain her, the only way to stop Chronoa is to call back Chloe's soul. But do you really think that soul is slumbering within her?"

"Why do you know that?"

Luminus looked surprised for a moment. But come to think of it, Granville could have easily listened in on Chloe's and her conversations over the years.

"...Oh. So that's what you did..."

"Yes, I'm sure it's just as you imagined. There is no quicker and easier way to destroy this world. All I have to do is leave the matter to someone far stronger than I!"

Granville laughed, the madness readily visible in his dark, murky eyes.

"Silence! Don't expect this to turn out how you want!"

"No? I suppose not. At every opportunity, this world has trampled over my wishes. And just now, my friend has passed away."

It was only then that Luminus realized one of the battles was over. Rimuru's officers had emerged triumphant. Razul was dead.

"Heh-heh-heh... Indeed, this world has been harsh to me."

"I don't care!" Luminus shot back, pushing him aside.

"...And that," he quietly responded, "is why I hope this whole world is destroyed."

"Enough with your nonsense. If you want to be hopeless, go do it by yourself!"

With that shout, she readied her beloved sword, named Nighthrose after her original homeland. Granville responded in kind, turning toward Luminus and unsheathing Truth, his own blade from his Hero days. Both weapons were God class and boasting equal capabilities. And then:

"Hopeless? No, I am not hopeless. In fact, right now my heart is filled to the brim with hope!"

As he made the declaration, the energy being released from Razul's body flowed its way into Granville's. It was both his strength and his very soul. Now he had the powers of Maria, Razul, and himself pulsating within his body, creating a new hope for himself.

Confirmed. Conditions met. The unique skill Nefarious has evolved into the ultimate skill Sariel, Lord of Hope.

Granville, too, was reaching dizzying new heights in this battle—the ultimate peaks, mountaintops that only the chosen can reach.

The ultimate skill Sariel, Lord of Hope, much like Luminus's Asmodeus, worked in terms of life or death. Now they were fully an even match.

Standing there silently, Granville turned his dark, opaque eyes toward her.

"I am ready, Lady Luminus. It is time to break the cycle of fate and finish things."

"...So it is. I will accept your resolve. And worry not—I promise that I will kill you!"

They faced each other. It was a battle between two people awoken to ultimate skills—but it ended in an instant. There was a single flash of crimson red, as Luminus's Nighthrose danced in the air. With a gloomy blue streak of flames, Granville's Truth blade took the blow.

"Requiem for the Dead!!"

"Fortitude!!"

It was a head-on clash between Asmodeus and Sariel. Under matching conditions, whichever side had the stouter will would emerge victorious. Granville, the nefarious Hero, thus had no reason to lose—and yet, it was Luminus now standing.



After putting the mask on Chronoa, I focused my consciousness and began diving into her spiritual realm. Not that I myself was doing this, of course; Raphael was handling all the controls for me.

I was expecting complete darkness, but it was actually pretty bright. There weren't any light sources around; I was sure this was just an imaginary landscape. So I jiggled along, trying to mentally move myself forward, when I realized someone was walking alongside me.

"Hey there, slime. It's been far too long. Or no, wait, it's Satoru, isn't it?"

It was Shizu. She was a nostalgic sight, but I felt a little embarrassed.

"Oh, stop," I said, trying to joke about it. "My name's fully Rimuru these days. I'm not abandoning my past, but it's just awkward whenever I'm called that."

It's not that I wanted her to call me Rimuru. Absolutely not. No way. Still, though, having this imaginary landscape was kind of convenient. If you felt lonely, you could even have dead people drop in for a visit.

Shizu didn't have a mask on. Her face was visible, all of her burns gone, and it made me realize all over again how pretty she was.

My own look was modeled after hers, of course, which often made people think I was this fetching young lady—and looking at her now, I guess I couldn't blame them. As a former dude, I was still sorting my feelings out about it, but...

Having her here reassured me. I began to advance faster. She followed me, smiling.

Facing us up ahead was another pretty young girl. This was Chronoa, her eyes filled with hatred; she looked incredibly scary, like she was about to destroy the world. *First, I thought, we're gonna have to talk this out.* Hoping she was willing to listen, I opened my mouth—but before I could:

“...Are you Rimuru? It’s...really you?”

...Well. *That* was unexpected. I was anticipating more of a, you know, hostile kind of thing.

“Uh, yep. The very one.”

I nodded, and then Chronoa embraced me—a young, ravishing woman hugging a slime. Yes, I *was* digging this, thanks for asking.

Shizu giggled a bit as she watched. “You really worked hard,” she said as she patted Chronoa on the head. “I wanted to see you too, Hero.”

Hmm... Was it really all right for this encounter to be so, like, heartwarming? I could still feel intense warfare going on outside, but right now, this was making me feel all warm and fuzzy.

“So um, you’re Chronoa?”

Looking at her, I was starting to think Chronoa was just Chloe grown up. They really *did* look alike.

“Yes. My name is Chronoa—an embodiment of corruption, shut inside Chloe. At the same time, I’m kind of her alternate self. If Hinata didn’t name me, though, I don’t think I would’ve had sentience like this.”



Oh. I see. I had no idea what was going on, but I could tell there was a complicated backstory involved.

"All right. So what you're trying to do..."

If she was intent on destroying the world, I'd have to stop her with everything I had. If this was Chloe's alter ego, I needed to get Chloe in this scene and perform a bit of a switcheroo. That's why I cut straight to the point.

But:

"It's fine. I've had enough of that. You're safe, after all."

Chronoa was perfectly calm and casual, even though it kind of gave me the creeps. I had been through all kinds of tough scrapes by now, and I survived them all. If you wanted to put me in even *more* danger, I'd have to say no thank you to that.

"Well, sure. I've always been safe, so..."

"You say that, but you sacrificed yourself to save me!"

Now Chronoa raised her voice. Sacrificed? I wasn't sure what set her off, but maybe I ought to just apologize.

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, sorry. I'll be more careful next time."

"Really? You promise?"

So I promised Chronoa I wouldn't do anything reckless. I was totally lost here. It's not like I was *trying* to be reckless.

...But hang on. If Chronoa had memories from the future, was she talking about something coming up for me?

...That possibility is likely.

Aw, man, *really*?! That sucks to hear... Or actually, maybe the other way around. I have to be *glad* I heard that. I swore not to pull any reckless moves, no matter what.

I waited a few moments for Chronoa to calm down before dropping the big question.

"So speaking of Chloe, do you know where she is right now?"

That—and was Hinata here, too? I was in a rush, but I wanted to proceed with caution. If I got on Chronoa's bad side, I might cut off any chance at getting more info. But my worries were in vain.

"She went astray, into the Unlimited Imprisonment deep inside my heart. I'm supposed to be the one locked in there, but two of the same being can't exist at the same time, so we got swapped out."

Judging by how forward she was, it looked like Chronoa cared a great deal about her. She seemed to see herself as a support for Chloe, the "main" personality, and I felt safe in believing that. So I moved on to the next question.

"And what about Hinata?"

"Hinata. Well..."

It was a shocking answer. She told me Hinata was already dead.

"What do you mean? Luminus told me Hinata jumped back in time with you..."

So she should have been just fine...

"You have it all wrong, Rimuru. Hinata died right here. Granville's attack can crush people's souls as well. That's why Chloe absorbed Hinata's soul and jumped back into the past...but Hinata couldn't withstand the time leap."

Huh? No, but... I mean, Luminus and Hinata *had conversations*. Loads of them. And besides...

"...Wasn't it Hinata who named you, Chronoa?"

"Yeah."

"So in that case...!"

"Hinata's consciousness alone was stored in her unique skill—the remains of her soul. That's why I could never take in her Measurer. If I did, her sense of self would completely vanish..."

The sadness behind her words showed me she was telling the truth. But hang on. Hinata's consciousness stayed here because her skill was rooted in her soul.

If you planted this skill back in Hinata's body, wouldn't that revive her?

"I understand what you mean, Rimuru. I—or Chloe—thought the same thing. But it just won't work. Like I told you, the remains of Hinata's soul are locked in the Unlimited Imprisonment, too. Everything in there is chaotically mixed together. I was born from that, so I hate to say this, but Hinata's Measurer is probably already integrated with everything else..."

If you had a will and energy along the lines of Veldora, that'd be one thing. But while Hinata was a Saint, she was still human—and as Chronoa saw it, the Unlimited Imprisonment was too much to withstand. We had Hinata's physical body right here. If the soul was safe, we could revive her. And yet...

"No, it's all right. Hinata's a really strong woman, so I'm sure she hasn't vanished yet. So let's call for her together, okay?"

My spirits fell as Chronoa grieved for her. It was Shizu who tried to assuage us with a calm smile.

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My anxieties were now gone. We could grieve after we saw the results.

"Yeah... You're right. Chronoa, I want to rescue Chloe and Hinata from the Unlimited Imprisonment, but is there a way we can do that?"

"Well, I'm calmer now, so I think I can pick up on the other Chloe's presence. But it's gonna be hard to unlock the Unlimited Imprisonment. If we do that, I'm pretty sure that will destroy our body..."

When I asked what she meant, she explained that the Unlimited Imprisonment held all of their vast amounts of energy. I had forgotten that it was Chronoa here controlling the younger Chloe's powers. If we released a quantity of energy on the level of Veldora's, we'd probably vaporize Chloe's body—and right now, we had no way of verifying whether Hinata's heart was still there or not. We'll just have to trust in Shizu's confidence for now.

So if I wanted to nimbly control the Unlimited Imprisonment's energy while extracting Chloe and Hinata from there...could I use Raphael to intervene with it, maybe? Like, just probe around inside without breaking the whole thing open?

Negative. As it stands currently, this is not possible. We do not have access to the data particles, the smallest unit we can interact with.

Raphael could unlock the Unlimited Imprisonment as well, but since we couldn't access the information inside, that was all it could do. Veldora, who came back to life all by himself, was apparently a unique exception.

"All right! In that case, let me reassign that access. You have my permission to do whatever you want, Rimuru!"

...Huh?!

Just as I was pondering what to do, Chronoa gave me quite the unexpected offer.

These data particles were even smaller than spiritual particles, she explained, their mass about as close to zero as you could get, and they were found in everything that existed in the world. It was possible to observe data particles, although it was limited to spaces like inside my Stomach and Chronoa's Unlimited Imprisonment. They were the units Raphael apparently worked with when organizing my skill sets.

Now that I had the permission of the Unlimited Imprisonment's owner, Raphael had the right to interact with it.

Report. Consent received. Commencing intervention.

Hmm. Was it me, or did Raphael sound a little joyful? This must feel kinda similar to messing around with my own skills.

Things happened extremely rapidly after that. Before I could even try to stop him, Raphael was fully in his element.

Complete. The unique skills Unlimited Imprisonment and Absolute Severance will have Measurer added to them. The resulting sacrifice of energy will trigger an evolution to an ultimate skill.

Raphael kept on going, not even giving me the customary Yes/No prompt. Although maybe asking me for approval was barking up the wrong tree. These aren't my skills, after all...

...Wait. Isn't this kind of weird?

Despite my worries, Chloe's—Chronoa's—power was soon reborn into the ultimate skill Yog-Sothoth, Lord of Time. Even better, Chronoa—a conscious body, normally an alternate version of Chloe—was optimized into an informational body known as a manas, allowing her to switch out with Chloe at any time.

Was it really okay to let Raphael go hog wild like this? I honestly wanted someone to say no to me, but no complaints were forthcoming.

"You're always so reckless, Rimuru...but I still love you so much!"

Chronoa hugged me, dropping a kiss on my right cheek. And what's more: "Hey, Chronoa! You can't just jump in front of me!!"

I detected something soft on the other side.

Chloe, just like Chronoa, hugged me close and kissed me. Even more amazing, Chloe was looking like a grown-up, too, virtually twins with Chronoa and just as stunning. I was *really* starting to love these imaginary landscapes. It's a damn shame this wasn't real life, but being surrounded by hotties was never a bad thing. I kind of wished I was a human, not a slime, in this vision. Maybe even the old me, back when I was a nice human-type guy. What's the harm?

As I let myself bask in all these peach-colored fantasies, Shizu looked down warmly at me. And so did someone else.

"Well, aren't *you* sitting pretty, Rimuru? You don't even know whether I can come back, but I can *see* that's not bothering you too much!"

It was Hinata. No, now wasn't the time to get carried away. I cleared my throat, my blushing cheeks giving away my embarrassment.

But hey, Hinata's still lookin' pretty as always. Should I start by complimenting her? Although I guess I did just see her a moment ago, didn't I? But still, no woman minds a little praise.

"Ah, I see you're—"

"Spare me your pickup lines."

"Um, okay."

She saw right through me. But I still really had to say this.

"But... I mean, I dunno if we want to call you safe yet or not...but I'm really glad to see you again, Hinata."

That much, at least, I really meant.



"Thanks," she replied—and her cheeks were just a tiny bit red.

She's totally being shy, isn't she? Is she starting to fall for me?!

Negative. That is incorrect.

Yeah, no way *that* could happen. Besides, she was already ignoring me and celebrating her reunion with Shizu. She had dropped the attitude now, her eyes tearing up a bit.

"I'm sorry, Shizu. I didn't want to cause trouble for you..."

"I know, Hinata. And I'm sorry I never noticed at the time. Also, thanks. You were the Hero who rescued me from Leon's castle, weren't you?"

"...That's right."

Seeing them embrace, I was about to cry myself.

"You really are a strong girl, Hinata," Shizu earnestly stated. "I think it was Measurer, the unique skill you created, that allowed you to keep it together in there."

She might be right, yeah. Hinata certainly hadn't changed at all.

"I lost one of my other powers, though."

"Hee-hee! Well, that just means you don't need it any longer. You simply need to keep growing, all right? And face up to yourself."

"...But can I really be resurrected?"

"You're fine. You believe in it, too, don't you?"

"Well, kind of..."

Shizu and Hinata turned their eyes to me.

"How long are you gonna keep doing that?"

It took Hinata saying that to make me realize Chloe and Chronoa were still hugging me tight.

"I wanna hug Rimuru more!"

"That's right, Hinata. It's been two thousand years, so just a little longer..."

The way she phrased it could lead to all sorts of misunderstandings, I thought. I mean, *I* wasn't doing anything. These twin Chloes were just being buried in my slime body.

"You'll have all the time in the world later, all right? Because I really need to get going, and we need to revive Hinata soon."

With a smile, Shizu shooed the Chloes away from me.

"Where are you going?"

"You should know, shouldn't you, Rimuru? I'm just an illusion you're displaying here."

Well, no, this was an imaginary landscape, so...

"No dream goes on forever—you have to wake up sooner or later. I'm glad I got to see all of you. It looks like Kenya and everyone are in good shape, and when you punched Leon, Rimuru, that perked me up a little. I guess we had some misunderstandings, but now that I know that, I think I'm starting to like this world a little. So I don't have any regrets now. I feel happy."

Chloe and Hinata tried to stop Shizu, but she just smiled at them contentedly. They watched her, taking in what she was trying to say, and then they nodded back.

"Take care of Hinata for me, Rimuru."

"You can do it, right, Rimuru?"

"You better."

These three were really laying on the pressure. I couldn't stop sweating. Thinking about if I messed this up—no, that's not right. No getting weak in the knees. It's not my style to give up before even trying. I'm more concerned about Hinata than myself, so I couldn't lose my confident attitude.

"You got it," I declared. "I'm gonna help you right now, Hinata."

Words can become strength. Firming up my resolve to make this work, I left this landscape...

...and when I returned to reality, I was still in human form. Apparently, I

hadn't moved at all, striking that exact same pose while I was gone. I stretched and refocused myself. The last thing I saw in that space was Shizu smiling as she faded away. If I wanted to live up to that smile, I needed to make one more effort.

"Aha! You are safe, Rimuru!"

"How'd it go? Chronoa stopped fighting and fell to the ground—"

"I'll explain later. Can you guys stay on alert and make sure no intruders come in?"

"Indeed I shall!"

"Very well. But you *will* explain this afterward?"

Veldora, and even Leon, readily agreed. That was a relief. I doubted he would, but if Yuuki came back, they could take care of him.

So let's look at Hinata's body. Luminus's magic had healed all the wounds on it; it was now down on the ground next to Chronoa.

...Oops. There was a hole in her clothing around her chest, so I needed to cover that up with a spare coat I had on hand. It's these little acts of kindness that make a considerate man like me so appealing. Of course, what I *really* wanted was to have her not glaring at me—but I'd just tuck that thought deep inside my mind.

Now for the main event—the resurrection magic—and that would be a tall order if it was just me alone. I helped Hinata's consciousness surface back up, but her Measurer—her *real* self, in essence—was still left inside Chloe's Yog-Sothoth. It had been absorbed to keep from disappearing, and it would be tough to separate them.

I would prepare some energy to replace that, make the swap, and cast the resurrection spell at the same time—and I'd need some help for that. I called out to her.

"Lend me a hand in resurrecting Hinata, Luminus!"



"Gn... Gah... Well done, Lady...Luminus."

Granville was on the ground spitting blood. After that strike from Luminus, the vitality was draining away from him—but his expression was now serene.

“You...”

Luminus could hear what he wanted to tell her. *If you cannot even overcome this adversity, it will be impossible to protect the human race. If so, we may as well have our Hero protectors destroy the world.*

She correctly understood that he was pinning his last hopes on her. She was prepared to accept that, and as proof of that—and to show her response to his feelings—she had faced up to Granville and struck him down. Now she could understand his emotions all too well. Granville didn’t want to see Chronoa go berserk—he wanted her awakened correctly, so she could give hope to humanity. His awkwardness about it was still there, after a thousand years, and it made Luminus feel a little lonely.

“My... My hopes...are nothing compared with...the heavy weight of time she bears. With her joining you...and the demon lord Rimuru...”

In this world without mercy, justice without power backing it up was meaningless. Even someone with Granville’s strength was left to wail at his own feebleness.

Just then, Luminus heard Rimuru’s voice. He wanted to resurrect Hinata—and that meant he successfully awakened Chronoa...or Chloe.

I knew I could rely on him. He actually did it.

She offered him praise, if only in her mind.

“You have fulfilled your role well enough. Allow me to handle the rest. Just sit back and relax.”

With that, she turned toward Rimuru.

Her strike was a fatal one, but even before it came, Granville had exhausted all of his life force. He was well past his natural life span, and not even Luminus could lengthen it any further. That wouldn’t be the case if he were turned into a monster, but Luminus knew well that he didn’t wish for that.

“B-before you go...one more thing, Lady Luminus...”

“What?”

“I... I want to give my hopes...to her...”

Luminus hesitated for a moment. She wasn’t sure whether to allow it. There was always the danger of Granville trying something. But she decided to hear him out. That was her softer side—and her more generous one.

“All right.”

“Ah, bliss...”

Taking the hand Luminus offered, Granville shed tears of gratitude. Even as he did, his body began to glow and turn into tiny balls of light before dissipating.

“...Sleep well.”

As if guided by Luminus’s voice, the former Hero who fought for years upon years was released from fate and scattered across the world.



“Right. Here I am.”

The pompous words could only have come from Luminus. She had just waged an epic battle, and there wasn’t a single tear in her clothing. She must have won big, which made sense to me, but I really wished she could’ve come sooner.

“What? Is there a problem?”

“No, nothing.”

I couldn’t will myself to yell at her about it. It must be my classically Japanese “don’t rock the boat” attitude coming to the surface. But enough about that. Let’s go save Hinata.

“I’m going to intervene in Chloe’s Unlimited Imprisonment, so I want you to retrieve Hinata’s soul while I do. If there’s not enough energy...”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll handle it.”

I appreciated that. Luminus really *is* a talented lady.

So we got right to work. I held my hand aloft over Chronoa’s inert body, pointing out the location of Hinata’s soul to Luminus. With a skillful touch, she

immediately began performing some kind of action on her—magic or a skill—probably the latter.

“Re...birth!!”

She set off her power. And since I was next to her, I realized—her skills were far, far above mine, at a level as high as the sky. I could never imitate that.

...Analyze and Assess failed. The skill is equivalent to an ultimate skill.

Yeah, I thought so. I mean, with Luminus, that’s par for the course. It’s why I felt safe letting her handle this.

Chronoa’s and Hinata’s lifeless bodies were before us. The pieces of Hinata that had assimilated with Chloe’s soul were gathered together in the form of Measurer, her unique skill. Luminus used her powers to reach the soul I Disassembled from that mass for her. Carefully picking it up, she injected a concentrated measure of energy to replace it.

...

This was far more energy than what we were taking out, but it was probably necessary. As I watched, she then put her hand above Hinata’s body as she returned her soul to it.

Immediately, the shine returned to her hair, her cheeks reddening as her heart began to beat anew. Then Hinata opened her eyes, her throat a little raspy but otherwise in good health.

We did it. Hinata was revived. And with the foreign matter removed from her body, Chronoa was also back in normal shape. She was beautiful before, but now Chloe’s soul seemed to have a divine aura—I hardly believed it was human.

She opened her eyes. So will we have Chloe here or Chronoa?

“Rimuru!”

That sounded like Chloe. She used to call me Mr. Tempest, but I guess I was more than just her teacher now. Otherwise, it was the Chloe I always knew. I smiled softly at this. She was no child any longer, looking very womanly—but wait a minute.

She didn’t feel exactly right to me, and then I realized...whoa, she was back to

being a kid, actually. She had on a black outfit that matched her size perfectly, probably the Holy Spirit Armor at work. *That's* a relief, at least. Between you and me, I was a little disappointed, but let's just file that way back in my mind. Besides, to the outside observer, this was me embracing a little girl. Under different circumstances, that could easily have been a felony, and Hinata's glare was painfully boring down on me. Even Leon looked pretty peeved.

"What are you doing, Rimuru?"

"I'd like to know, too. In detail."

C'mon, Leon, calm down. And Hinata, if you keep grimacing at me like that, you're gonna get crow's feet, you know. Of course, it'd be suicidal to tell her that, but still.

I mean, how come, after reviving Hinata and stabilizing Chronoa, was I still not safe from mortal danger? I just have to say, this is absurdly unfair.

"Guys, guys, chill out. I'm tired, and we can't hang out here all day. Why don't we regroup elsewhere in a little while and sort things out?"

Everyone agreed to that.

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So the battle was over. The only things filling the air right now were beautiful melodies.

Shockingly enough, Baton and everyone in the orchestra had continued practicing through the entire protracted war. Talk about insane willpower. I praised them profusely, of course, before ordering them to take five.

That—and I noticed something else.

"...Huh? Is it me, or is Chloe striking more of a presence now?"

"Just your imagination."

"No, Rimuru is right. No doubt about it—"

"Silence! I didn't ask for a lizard's opinion!"

Veldora and I both jumped in our seats. Can you blame us? Luminus, who seemed pretty serene up to now, just lashed out without warning.

I figured we could leave the conversation at that, but one man didn't get the message. Not Veldora—he was often oblivious to this kind of thing, but even he was starting to wise up lately. We exchanged nods after he picked up on Luminus's rage.

"No, Rimuru and Sir Veldora are certainly right. At first glance, she appears to be merely a ravishing young woman, but her core essence, if you will... It's an improvement over Chloe, isn't it?"

This was the demon lord Leon himself speaking. He always acted so coolheaded, but I guess he had a to-the-point personality. And really, he paid way too much attention to Chloe. He was stuck to her like glue, in fact, not even trying to pry himself away. Between that and calling her ravishing, he wasn't even trying to hide how much he was spoiling her.

"Leon, you're being just as overly clingy as you used to be! Don't I always tell you that you'll never find a girlfriend that way?"

Chloe, for her part, was merciless with him. I have to say, Leon did a hell of a lot for her sake...but I'll refrain from commenting further. It's a little painful to think about. Though really, despite his cool demeanor and good looks, Leon's kind of an unfortunate case, isn't he? Ramiris called him a crybaby, and now I was thinking about being a little nicer to him.

After admonishing Leon, Chloe looked around the chamber.

"Well, looks like everything worked out okay, so I wanted to let you all know—I feel like I've truly awakened as a Hero now. Looks like the egg inside me, along with the one Hinata had been keeping warm, sort of combined into one. Don't tell anybody, okay?"

She smiled a little. I was surprised—and then I remembered something important.

"Chloe! That's far too delicate a topic to—"

We had to watch our mouths—Guy may be keeping an eye on us, after all. So I hurriedly tried to deflect the conversation...but I didn't need to worry.

"Oh, it's all right! I don't think anyone's looking at us."

Chloe declared us to be safe. And at this point, Chloe wasn't the little girl she seemed to be. All children grow up over time, leaving their parents' protection and setting off on their own. I was happy to see her mature, although it made me feel a tad lonesome.

Then I suddenly realized just what we were witnessing.

This was the birth of Chloe Aubert, the True Hero, wasn't it?

Hinata and Chloe hadn't completely separated. The hero's egg that Hinata had begun nurturing at some point was still left inside Chloe. Now she was one woman with two eggs, an impossible miracle that led to a Hero like none other awakening.

...Or maybe not. This wasn't a miracle, some surprise that occurred out of nowhere. With Chloe's unbending will, it was only natural that she made this happen. Despite the infinite, repeating cycles of death and birth, Chloe had overcome them all and still maintained her straight-minded, innocent pureness. That sheer will, powerful enough to push aside all hopelessness, was what engineered this miracle.

Only then did I see, from the bottom of my heart, just how great she was. I had to speak up.

"You really worked hard for this. I could learn a thing or two from you. From now on, I swear that I'll never give up, no matter what."

I meant it.

"You got it!"

Seeing Chloe smile and nod at me, I made a second promise to myself. From now on, I'd never let anything cloud that smile of hers.

Certainly, I couldn't be rosy about everything ahead. I knew that some force out there wanted me dead, and I naturally had to consider my response.

Right?

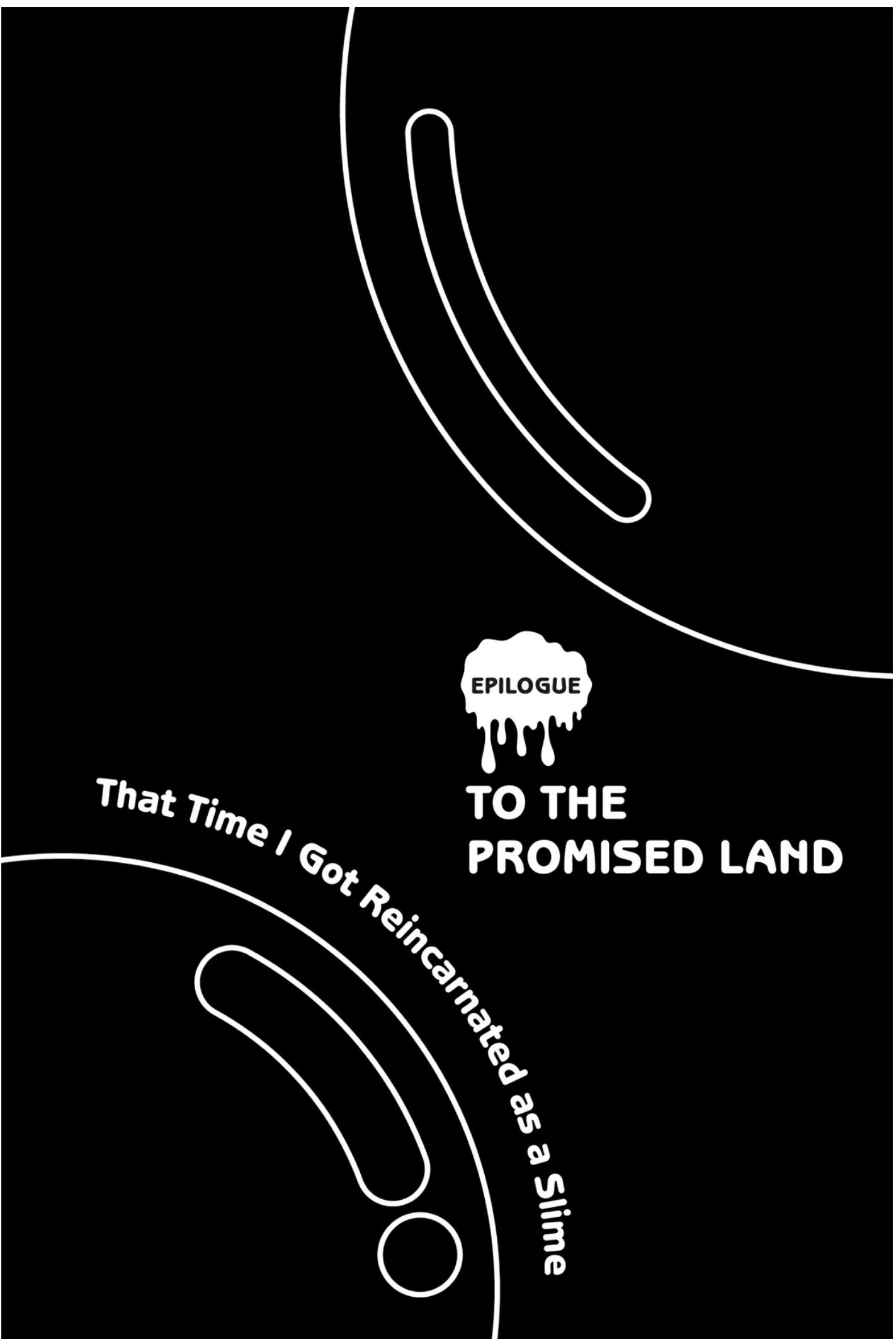
Affirmative. You must take every possible precaution.

These events made me realize that if I'm defeated, it's no longer exclusively my problem. Once again, I resolved in my mind to never show any mercy to my

opponents. It's important to understand the principles of other people, but if you wound up making sacrifices after overvaluing them, that's putting the cart before the horse.

I will take any measure for the sake of victory.

I made a secret promise to myself as I returned Chloe's smile.



EPILOGUE

TO THE PROMISED LAND

That night, we did a quick comparison of notes, planning to discuss the finer details on another day once things calmed down.

From Leon, I learned of his relationship with Chloe. They were once childhood friends, apparently, and practically raised like brother and sister, but he wouldn't go into further detail. Chloe probably forgot all about it, so it was kind of a mystery, although probably not a major one.

As cool as Leon was, there was no end to his doting on Chloe. His dedication was on an even more dangerous level, I think, than Treyni's devotion to Ramiris. He'd continually say stuff like "I swear my allegiance to you" with a straight face. I'm sure Chloe would laugh it off and say "I'll pass," though.

Speaking of Chloe, it turned out that she could take the form of an adult woman, too. Chronoa's consciousness was alive and well, and they now enjoyed a rapport like what Raphael and I had. They could therefore easily switch between who controlled her body, and whenever they were in a serious fight, Chloe could merge her consciousness with Chronoa to return to her true form. Of course, staying an adult all the time would probably confuse the other kids, so she told us that she'd stick with being a child for now.

Luminus, meanwhile, told me about Granville.

"I suppose it was the loss of his wife that truly drove him mad. And when Maribel, his final hope, died, he went crazy all over again...but then, I believe, he regained his sanity."

Serious, sincere, but also awkward and clumsy—that's how you could suitably describe Granville Rozzo. When his wife, Maria, died, he had a breakdown over being unable to protect his beloved. He pinned all his hopes on Maribel—but then she took me on and lost. I'm thinking that Yuuki may have killed her,

although I don't have any real proof—but to Granville, the reason didn't matter. What did was that Maribel was dead, and the loss actually made him regain his sanity.

Talk about ironic. And when he regained his marbles, he came up with his plan to awaken a True Hero, a strategy that threatened to destroy the world if it failed. But Granville made that decision, and he really resolved to it. That much, there was no doubt about.

A Hero, of course, wasn't some infallible golden child. Anyone could become prejudiced—or insane for that matter. Granville had a lot of love for the human race, and I'm sure that's why the backlash from the loss of his sanity was so great.

And it's not like this couldn't apply to me. What if I lost someone I loved? I recalled the heartrending sense of loss I felt when my fellow countrymen were mowed down.

"...It's not just some dumb thought, no."

I think, just a little, I understood Granville's feelings.

The next day, we held that international concert.

It took place outdoors, behind the now-thoroughly destroyed cathedral, in front of an audience arranged in neat rows. Beautiful, melancholy music echoed high into the sky—a kind of funeral march, sent out to those we entrusted with our hopes for the future.



I had a dream. A very strange dream. In it, I was this very selfish little girl.

Maria, now awake, looked at Gren and smiled.

"Was it fun?"

"Yes. Very much so."

They looked at each other and grinned.

"Odd, isn't it? Why couldn't I trust in that slime?"

"Hmm, that's a tough question. I'd like to say 'Because it was a dream,' but

that's not a very elegant answer."

"I'm serious!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry. Well, like you say, Maria, if we accepted and trusted in everything, it'd be a really beautiful world. But we all have our cowardly side. We're afraid of people who live under different rules than us, afraid they might stab us in the back. Even worse, if you don't distrust anyone, people might say you have an innocent heart, but it certainly doesn't bode well for a career in politics. The thing any leader's asked for is to be more watchful of others than anyone else."

Maria scowled at this. "Ugh! Are you saying there's no hope for any of us to truly understand each other? Well, I don't like *that*. I don't like it at all! So I'm gonna start believing next time."

"In your dreams, right?"

"Right. But if I have the same dream again, this time I'll definitely believe in that slime. I think we could really be friends!"

"Oh? Yeah, I'll bet."

Gren gently nodded at Maria's words.

"So, Gren, what kind of dream did *you* have?"

"Me? Well..."

Gren had a very long, and very sad, dream. But right at the end, he saw the light of hope.

"It was a nice one. A very nice one."

"Oh, that's good! Because if you're happy, then I'm happy."

"Me too. If it'll make you happy, I'll climb any mountain for you."

"If I'm here, and you're here, and we can live out our days in peace, then every day will be fun."

"Indeed."

"And we'll have kids, and our family will grow, and then we'll be happier than ever!"

"We certainly will be."

Gren gave Maria a gentle hug.

They could hear a beautiful melody. It was their signal to depart.

"Well, we don't want to leave Razul waiting. Want to get going?"

"All right. Did you forget anything? We can't come back here, can we?"

"No, I'm all right. As long as I have you, I don't need anything else."

So they walked off, hand in hand, toward the promised land where everyone was waiting.

AFTERWORD

Long time no see, guys. This is Fuse. I know I kept you waiting awhile this time, but Volume 11 is finally here.

This volume, too, is an almost completely separate animal from the original web novel. At the risk of giving out spoilers, a number of characters move in wholly different directions, and with that, some of their traits have also changed. Yuuki has been altered a great deal as well, although the biggest changes lie in the world's Hero system.

Thanks to the reckless abandon of my editor, Mr. I, these changes are now set in stone. What kind of reckless abandon am I talking about? To sum up:

"Wouldn't it be kind of sad if Chloe didn't come back as a little girl?"

At that moment, my suspicions that Mr. I harbored a certain complex began to take root. No, not a god complex—but I digress.

It was already tough enough juggling everything Chloe-related, but adding Mr. I's demands on top of that left me with no shortage of headaches to deal with in this book. I do feel, however, that the results turned out really well, and hopefully you're enjoying this light-novel version of Chloe.

*

This volume wraps up the Western Nations story arc. Starting in the next volume, I'm planning to finally have the Eastern Empire go on the move. There'll be new characters debuting, and I think it'll really expand the *Slime* universe.

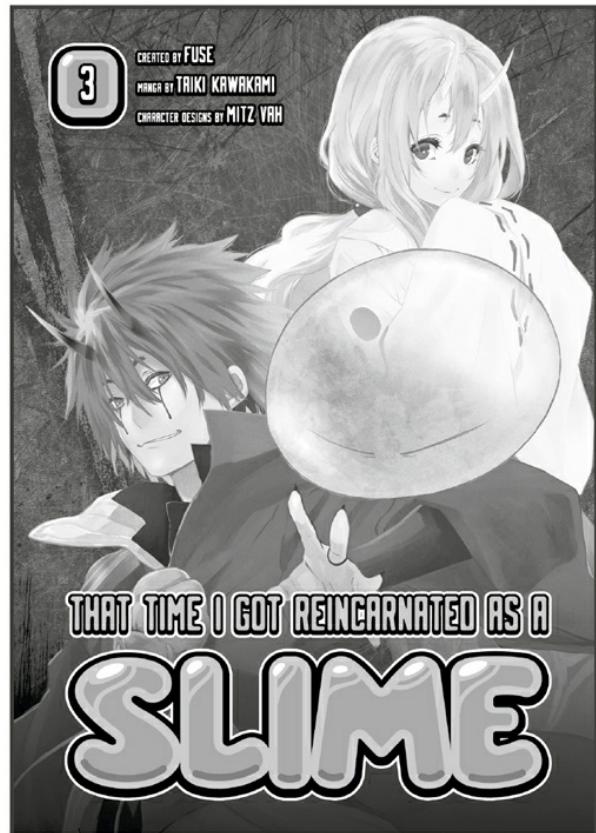
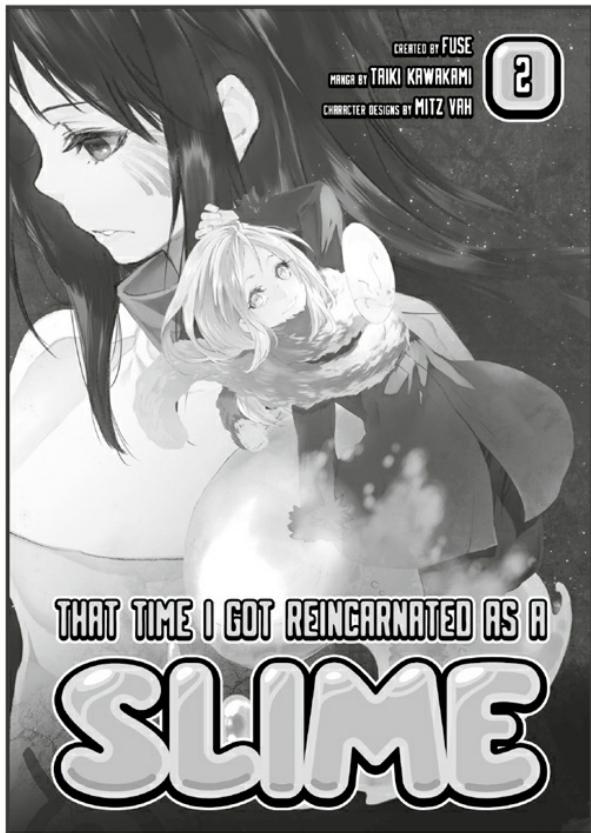
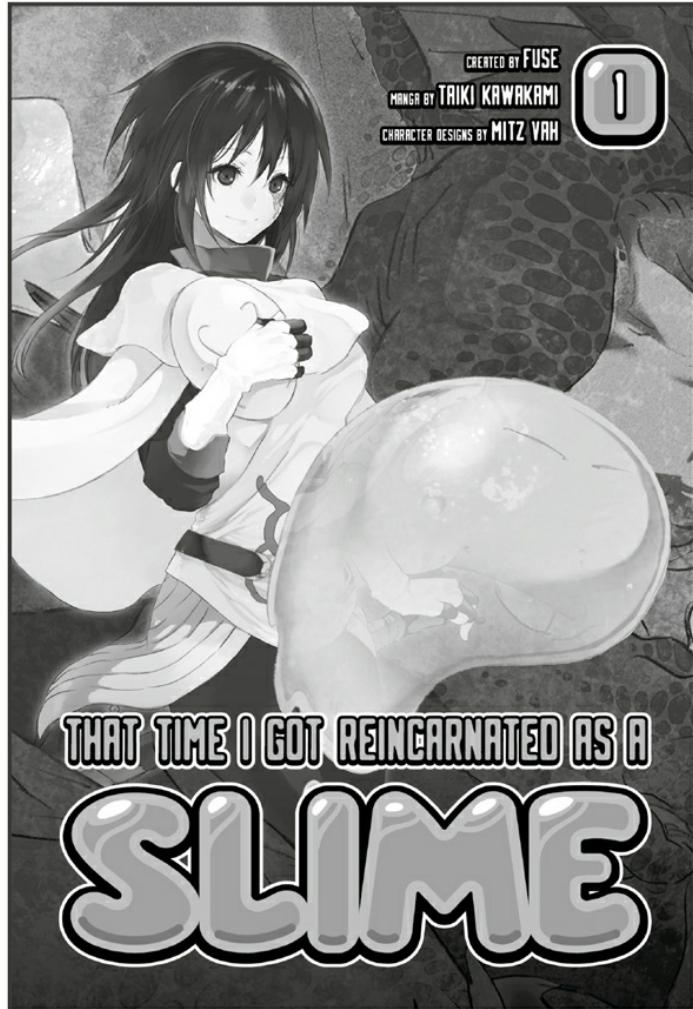
Here's hoping you'll keep joining me along the way!!

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