

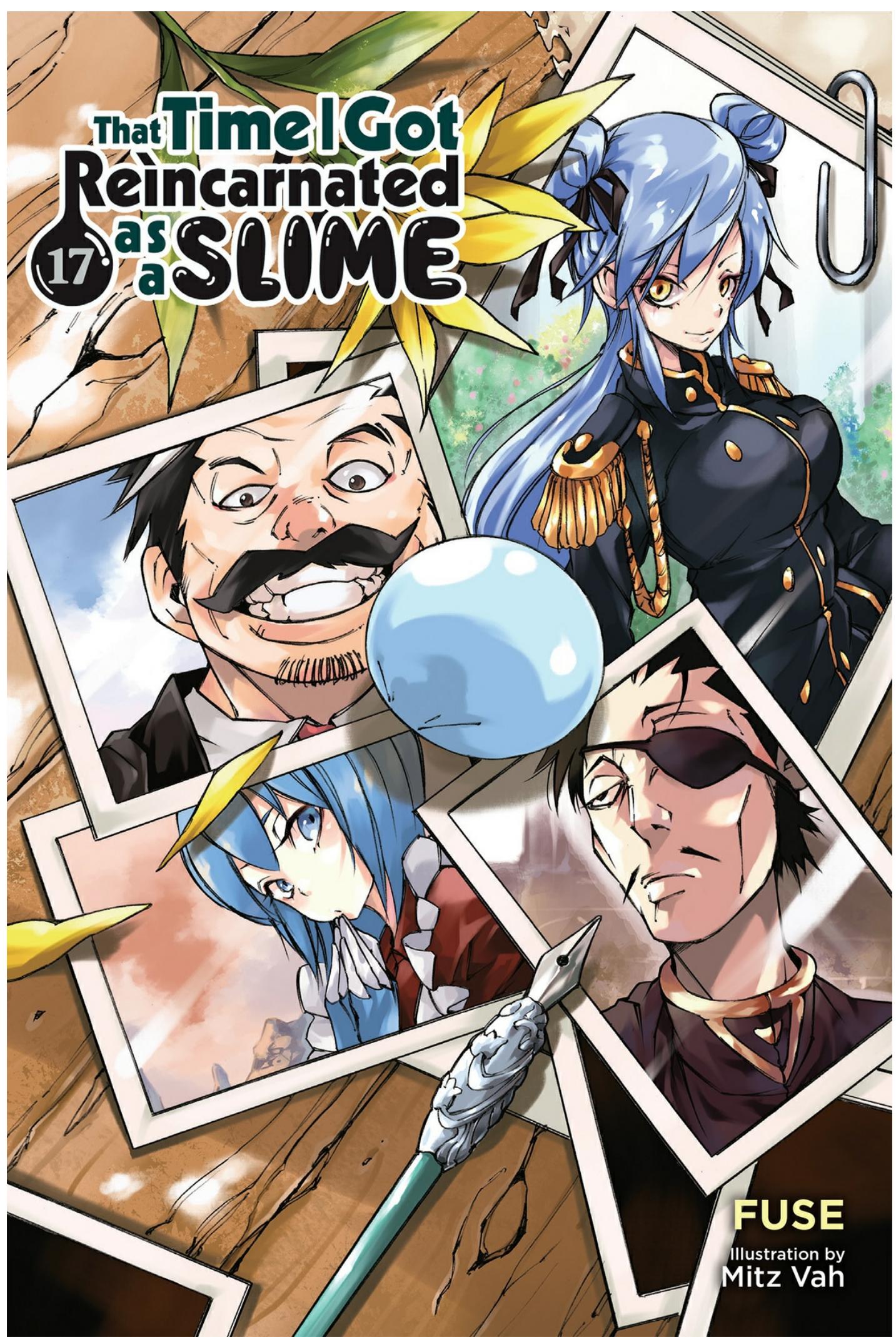
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

17

FUSE
Illustration by
Mitz Vah

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FUSE

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Mitz Vah

Mumbleings of a
Blue Demon

“It’s all
such a pain,
so count me
way out.”



Days of Upheaval
“You’d better be
ready for it.
Their inquisitors
aren’t nearly as
nice as me.”



Faraway Memories

“If you wish for it,
I will offer you
this entire
world
as a present.”



Mjöllmile’s Ambitions

“Perhaps I should
have given you
the discipline
you needed from
the start.”



**"My, what a
regrettable way
to put it. I'm
not into *that*
sort of play
at all."**

The two beauties
exchanged smiles.
Their gazes smashed
into each other,
creating a fearsome
pressure in the
room.

**"Oh?
What are
you doing,
making
Masayuki
cry like
that?"**

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 17

FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by Mitz Vah

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TENSEI SHITARA SLIME DATTA KEN volume 17

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First published in Japan in 2020 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

English translation rights arranged with MICRO MAGAZINE, INC. through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: December 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Rachel Mimms Designed by Yen Press Design:
Wendy Chan Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Fuse, author. | Mitz Vah, illustrator. | Gifford, Kevin, translator.

Title: That time I got reincarnated as a slime / Fuse ; illustration by Mitz Vah ; translation by Kevin Gifford.

Other titles: Tensei Shitara Slime datta ken. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen ON, 2017– Identifiers: LCCN 2017043646 | ISBN 9780316414203 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301118 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301132 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301149 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301163 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301187 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301200 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975312992 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314378 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314392 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314415 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314439 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314453 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314477 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314491 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975369750 (v. 16 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975375539 (v. 17 : pbk.) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

Classification: LCC PL870.S4 T4613 2017 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017043646>

ISBNs: 978-1-97537553-9 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7554-6 (ebook)

E3-20231024-JV-NF-ORI

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
1

MJÖLLMILE'S AMBITIONS

CHAPTER 1

MJÖLLMILE'S AMBITIONS

My name is Mjöllmile, and yes, I'll freely admit I've had more than my fair share of luck in my life. But you know what? The stuff I've experienced lately—well, "luck" doesn't even *begin* to describe it.

Looking back, I suppose my luck turned unshakable once I accepted Sir Rimuru's invitation. Sir Rimuru, in so many words, is my boss, but let me tell you, he's a lot more than just some faceless master I serve. After all, he's the head of the Jura-Tempest Federation—its king, in other words. A *demon lord*, to boot. Not joking. I mean it.

Since the day I met this Sir Rimuru, I've instinctively known that he wasn't one to be trifled with. Even now, I see him as this god (or goddess?)-like figure, and frankly, they say he's far stronger than I could ever imagine. I mean, think about it. He saved my hide once by defeating a Sky Dragon, a monster powerful enough to destroy entire cities—maybe even overthrow a small nation or two. That alone makes him a hero and someone I owe well near everything, but not long after that, I heard he joined the Octagram. Just about fell out of my chair, I did.

And that's hardly all. He's close friends with Lady Milim, the kind of demon lord you'd hear about in legend—or fairy tales, really—and he even recruited Sir Veldora, one of just four True Dragons in the world, to his side. You know, I'm so exhausted from all these surprises that whenever I hear something new about him, it just makes me think *oh, neat* and that's all.

But enough about Sir Rimuru. Let's get down to business.

My principal ambition in life was to become a great merchant, one big enough that nobody would dare make light of me. I ran an enterprise in a small nation called Blumund, with another branch in the much larger kingdom of Englesia. I

became fairly well known in my field, and just when business was really starting to boom, I received a rather large-scale proposal. Fuze, the guild master serving Blumund, reached out to me, and that was how I wound up meeting Sir Rimuru for the first time. Next thing I knew, the newly crowned demon lord was visiting me—and even inviting me to assume a rather lofty position in his monster kingdom.

In essence, I'm now serving as Tempest's finance minister. My exact title tends to change pretty often, but the nature of the job doesn't. Basically, I take all the vast fortunes the kingdom accumulates and transfer 'em over to whatever department needs it, at my discretion.

Back when I was still a merchant, part of the sales from my multiple businesses would come back to me as remuneration. From that I deducted investment purchases, labor costs, and what have you, and funneled what remained into my operating expenses. That was hard, but what I do now is hard in a different sort of way. The *amounts* of money I work with, I mean.

My gross salary once upon a time was a proverbial drop in the bucket—or a drop in the ocean, really. As for what it is now...well, why hide it? It's fifty gold coins a month, and that's *after* taxes. And, lest we forget, that doesn't even include bonuses, assorted stipends, and the extra credit I get to cover my housing costs. As if *that* weren't enough, I also have people from Tempest's job training center working as maids at my home, so the kingdom's largely covering maintenance and so forth for that as well. It's simply an unheard-of deal. In fact, I could hardly contain myself when they offered it to me.

Of course, I *do* still have to take care of the people who joined me from my old home office in Blumund, but most of them are still working under me anyway, so *their* salaries are covered by the Tempest government as well. The only folks I directly employ around here are Bydd and the guys I hired to watch my house—and twenty gold coins are enough to cover that.

But that's not even the *real* surprise. You see, I'm not a single-income type of person. I have certain *other* passive income streams, too.

One is the profit earned from my old trading firm. I've been helping Sir Rimuru implement all his wild ideas, starting with the fast-food stalls he

suggested for the Founder's Festival. We've been deploying these in Blumund and at the rest stops along the highways, but I'm the general manager of all these new locations. Day-to-day operations are handled by Tempest, but for reasons I don't understand (though I'm certainly not complaining about it!), they pay me a salary for that as well.

As Sir Rimuru is fond of saying, "*he and I are bound by fate.*" "*Mollie,*" he told me, "*when you make money, that fills my coffers as well. Doesn't it? It's money you earn, after all, by making my ideas happen, so you deserve to share in the benefits, don't you think?*"

I have his full support, in other words. Plus—I wasn't aware of this—apparently the contract between us stipulates that Sir Rimuru and I each get an equal share of the profits. By "contract" I don't mean anything written down on paper, but it sounds like Sir Rimuru is absolutely willing to comply with this agreement.

So, you see, I have quite a bit of motivation to live up to Sir Rimuru's expectations, and I do a very good job at it. As a result, I receive a good hundred gold coins per month from all the storefronts I'm involved with. There was a great deal of up-front investment, mind you, so my overall profits aren't staggeringly high yet, but we're both certain that they'll increase going forward.

Our current locations are expanding their reach, and we've also received requests for more branches from all manner of different countries. I'm thinking that we'll have more variety to the restaurants we offer as well. There are so many dishes, so many types of cuisine, that Sir Rimuru has enlisted Gobichi to create for him. I receive the side benefit of getting to sample all these delicacies first, too, and overall it's an investment opportunity I'm not going to turn down.

The burger places and ramen shops are all going gangbusters, let me tell you. The hibachi locations are starting to make a name for themselves as well, and we're working on a concept for something called "ice cream" that I'm rather excited about. We're also providing all our latest culinary inventions to the inns along the highways, and if these concepts prove to resonate with our audience, I'm sure we'll be adding even more restaurants.

Thus, realistically speaking, I think I'm all but guaranteed to see profits

commensurate with my investments. At this rate, I'm no longer excited to learn how much I make per year—I'm more *terrified* to learn the number. You have to keep in mind, after all, that in the space of under a year, I've stashed away enough coin to live like a king for the rest of my natural life.

It's an absolutely unbeatable business arrangement, and that's not even all of it. I have another income source, you see, and that lies in that little REG organization I'm a member of.



REG refers to a group consisting of Sir Rimuru, Her Excellency Elmesia of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, and me, Gard Mjöllmile. It's our initials, you see.

Elmesia, the Heavenly Emperor, is truly a divine being. Nothing at all like me, to be certain. It's said that if you want to meet with the nobility of the world's more powerful nations, the waiting list can be several years long. When it comes to royalty, you may never receive an audience, no matter how hard you try. It's a simple matter of power. Folks say Thalion is as powerful as all the Western Nations combined, and *they've* been supporting Tempest since its founding, so we've been able to bask in the glorious light of Emperor Elmesia for a long time now. I'm led to believe that Elmesia is treated as a god in her home country, and considering that Sir Rimuru's made her his drinking partner, one can only guess how mighty a leader *he* is.

Why am I part of this little social club of adult beverage enthusiasts? At this point, I honestly can't remember. But thanks to that, here I am, sitting around with the Heavenly Emperor and even referring to her as "Big Mama" for reasons that, again, I don't recall.

So people have come to refer to us as the Three Pranksters and the like, but nobody knows exactly what REG is involved with. It's the very top among top secrets, so only a select few are allowed to be clued in. Within Tempest, that's Benimaru, Soei, and no one else—just those two. Soei's been lending us personnel and support for our projects, so we can't leave him in the dark about them. Benimaru, on the other hand, came in on Sir Rimuru's introduction. I can recall the conversation vividly:

"Hey, you're gonna get married someday, aren't you?"

"I, er, I didn't have any plans..."

"Well, if you wanna prepare for that, you need to save up a little stash, y'know? Like, some spending money you can hide from the wife so you can go out and have fun."

"N-no, my lord, I'm already well compensated—"

"Oh, quit acting so dumb! You gotta hide at least your official yearly salary, or else you'll have a lotta trouble keeping up with all your male friends' drinking outings!"

"Er... I will, sir?"

"Oh yes. A man needs to be resourceful like that!"

I'm not sure if Sir Rimuru was giving him wholly sound advice, but it wasn't any of *my* business, so I didn't speak up. I just let it slide, wisely concluding that it'd be best to stay out of it. Besides, I knew that Benimaru—who, as our highest-ranking general, is Tempest's de facto minister of war—earns the same salary I do, and you'd have to be quite the tippler to spend six hundred gold coins a year on your bar tab. But anyway.

Oddly enough, Sir Rimuru seems rather petrified that Lady Shuna will find out about our REG plans. I'm sure he recruited her brother Benimaru in no small part to stand guard and ensure nobody got wise. Either way, though, we have Benimaru helping us out and Soei lending us staff. These employees serve as our people on the ground—executing the plans of REG, our little secret cabal.

The exact plans came from Sir Rimuru, who honestly had quite an insight. The core of them is to establish a sort of three-way deadlock. We retain full control over REG, this underground group that's not afraid to get its hands dirty (or bloody)—and at the same time, we also build a couple of "clean" firms that compete in public. If we built a single giant firm, it'd start to rot on the inside over time—and either way, we knew Tempest had already earned itself a lot of enemies. So we decided to divide our activities between two organizations, then have them compete against each other. That energizes the market, and as these two firms compete, they're also set up to work in tandem as needed. That—hopefully, anyway—will prevent any internal corruption.

This structure, of course, will take years to fully develop. Sir Rimuru is working on a vast timeline, and I gotta admit, I would have never come up with a thing like that.

Either way, my job was to put together one of these two public firms. Big Mama, meanwhile, was building her own, mainly comprised of former employees of the Rozzo family over in the kingdom of Doran. This resulted in something called the Western General Trade Company, a group filled with people openly hostile toward Tempest. In order to compete with them, I was forming the Four Nations Trade Alliance, and I needed to get it up and running pretty damn fast.

As we planned it originally, the FNTA was a parent organization overseeing major movers and shakers in Tempest, Blumund, Farminus, and the Dwarven Kingdom. The merchants I recruited after the Founder's Festival served as my ground team—we'd starve them of customers, ostracize them from their home nations, rob them of their support staff, and *then* we'd offer them a helping hand. “*Work for me,*” I'd tell them, “*and I guarantee you'll keep a roof over your head...*” Not many were foolish enough to refuse the offer. How could they? We made sure newspapers around the world reported heavily on us, so we were well known to people—notorious, even. Not many decent folk would trust an organization like that, so we positioned ourselves as their last resort, in a way. The journalists did *such* a good job for us, and it goes without saying that Sir Rimuru and Diablo's manipulation of them was downright scary.

Thanks to that, my work went almost laughably well. Some people picked up on what we were attempting, of course—and, really, I bet the majority did, actually—but we'd never recruit anyone useful unless we took this approach. We *did* pay the salaries we promised everyone, too, so nobody had any right to complain. People's pride got in the way sometimes, but we could deal with that. Merchants are very opportunistic people, you see, willing to allow just about anything if it means profit. We gave them better positions and salaries if they proved worthy of them, and in time, their complaints dwindled. Before long, they were swearing allegiance to me.

This group of employees, by the way, also included Bach, my former head clerk. He was faithfully paying off his debt to me as he grew into an excellent

manager, so I recruited him for this work in exchange for canceling his balance. He always felt like he owed me, if you will, and already he was working out better than I'd imagined.

We were finding talented recruits in all sorts of other places. When Fuze explained matters to the king of Blumund, the king promptly gathered his most trusted ministers and set off to train people for the future to come. The Dwarven Kingdom sent us a number of talented bureaucrats as well. As long-lived as they are, one has no chance at a promotion over there unless the person above them leaves. Those sharp enough to spot this opportunity from us were all but lining up to join. That sort of ambition is real important to see, you know.

I heard the Western General Trade Company that Big Mama was forming had a number of long-lived elves join them as well. We had dwarven staff pitching in for us, but elves would certainly be stiff competition for them.

Farminus, meanwhile, was an issue. We actually needed to intervene in order to get a branch built there. The Free Guild helped us as well, but I suppose keeping the kingdom stable was their first priority. This was all stuff we expected, however, so we were taking a long-term view on that region. That's why we pitched in for now, hoping that they'd train up their personnel for the future.

Beyond that, though, we faced a lot of other problems. If we were going to expand into the Western Nations, well, we had nowhere near enough staff for that. REG had been expanding this whole time, crushing other organized crime groups and absorbing them into itself, and I was honestly quite jealous of them. *Those* sorts of companies could get away with that, but what a company in the public eye needed was talented people you could rely on to get the job done. We're sending our recruits over to Tempest for education, but I'm afraid it'll be several years before we see them exercising their full potential.

Besides, in my business, trust is everything. That's my philosophy, you see. Leaving important work to someone you don't know well goes against everything I believe. That, of course, meant we needed to pick and choose our employees carefully—and, as I feared, we faced employee shortages as we expanded into other nations.

I decided to bring this up with Sir Rimuru.

"Hmm... That *is* an issue," he said. "The 'staff' in my country are all monsters, after all. Not all humans will like to see them walkin' around."

"No, they won't. As talented as many of those monsters are, I'm sure they'll become more accepted once people work together with them...but I fear now may not be the time to force the issue."

"I agree with you there, Mollie. If the monsters they look down on work *too* well, they'll become the target of envy next. I can't have the humans persecuting them. Working too fast here wouldn't be smart."

So we were on the same page there. But what should we do, then? As we pondered this, Sir Rimuru offered a potential solution.

"Well, so be it. I know someone who can help with this. She *seems* pretty talented to me anyway."

He called in Testarossa, who answered directly to him. Testarossa served as a diplomatic attaché, and an excellent one, too, by the sounds of things. I had already been introduced to her, but she was so beautiful, I could barely have a coherent conversation with her.

I didn't fare any better *this* time, either.

"You called for me, Sir Rimuru?"

That kind, affectionate smile, on that incredibly pretty face. The aroma wafting around her was so astounding, I was instantly cowed into silence. I just sat there, mouth wide open, as Sir Rimuru and Testarossa began to discuss matters.

"So, you know, we're running pretty short on staff."

"I see. Perhaps I can help you with that. I could have my own underlings assist you."

"Oh, you can? I'd appreciate that, yeah. Keep in mind, this is a secret operation, so don't tell *anyone* else about it."

"My. A secret between me and you, Sir Rimuru? Then I promise I won't tell a soul—and neither will my minions. If any one of them leaks it..."

She let out a low snicker. One look at that grin, and I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that our secret was safe.

That settled things for the time being. But then Testarossa smiled at me.

“Sir Gard, I will instruct them to obediently follow any order you give them.”

Her voice sounded like the trumpets of heaven to me as it made its way through my brain. Testarossa—*the* Testarossa—was addressing me by name.

“Thank you very much, then!” I couldn’t help but blurt out. I now had Testarossa’s support, and after that, things proceeded at a scarily fast clip.



In the space of a few months, we had Four Nations Trade Alliance branches in every member nation of the Council. Many of these were quite small, with perhaps ten employees at most, but it would suffice for now.

This alone was a great surprise to me, but soon I was greeted by an even more shocking event. It turned out that, somewhere along the line, 1 of all people had been picked as the FNTA’s director.

“We are leaving everything to you,” King Gazel told me. “If Rimuru places his trust in you, Mjöllmile, I certainly can as well.”

Hearing this high praise made even someone like me freeze up in anxiety. But if that was what the king was saying, none of our dwarven bureaucrats would be against it. If they were, they never betrayed it in their work.

Yohm was just as appreciative. “We’re the ones being helped here,” he said, “and I got no complaints about that so far. So hang in there, okay?” Then he brought his lips to my ear and whispered “Can’t be easy, huh, bein’ wrapped around Rimuru’s finger?” to me.

“Not for either of us,” I retorted with a grin. “But thanks to that, I couldn’t possibly be having more fun.”

Yohm smiled back at me, so I can only assume he understood.

Blumund, meanwhile, was a slog. The people over there might have *seemed* sensible and open to debate, but my instincts told me that Doram, king of Blumund, was not someone to trifle with. And of course I was right, you know.

The negotiations were an exercise in futility.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! The director of this trade alliance will likely wield untold power in the future...enough that not even a king could turn their head. If you were to take this position, Mjöllmile, that would put my mind at ease."

I'd been expecting the worst, but the way he put it, he was open to a wait-and-see approach.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, I'm quite honored. In that case, I look forward to—"

"By the way..."

Here we go! I steeled myself.

"Our nation is currently training people who will serve in Rimuru's plans. It seems natural to me that this staff would be guaranteed employment once their training is complete..."

"Ah yes, of course. I'm sure the plans would never work at all without their cooperation."

"You believe so? That's quite a relief to hear. I imagine you are aware, then, of the current situation in my kingdom?"

"The situation, Your Majesty?" I replied, unsure what he was talking about or how I should answer.

The king maintained a friendly smile as he told me something that sounded utterly preposterous.

"Let me be blunt, then. Our nation has completely abandoned all agricultural activity. We've released all the crops and provisions in our treasury, so our people will have something to subsist on. I would like to ask for some support along those lines, if I may."

"What?!"

I was stunned into silence. But protesting wouldn't achieve anything.

"Of—of course, we will do whatever we can, but I'm afraid my current post does not allow me to make such policy decisions..."

"Ohhh, I'm sure Rimuru would give his permission with a smile. We're letting

him build the World Central Station, the main nexus point for magitrains, in our lands. Given that contribution, I hardly imagine he would simply abandon us.”

That's crazy!

I wanted to shout at him about how unsound his logic was, but a part of me thought it made sense, too. This king had staked the entire future of his kingdom on Sir Rimuru’s plans. Would it prove to be a foolish mistake, or the work of a wise ruler? Or...isn’t it *my* job to ensure he’s making the right move? I think it is. If people decide the king erred on this call, it’ll mean Sir Rimuru’s plans have failed.

We’d been facing severe staff shortages even before this. If the whole population of Blumund was willing to work for us, it’d help us out in all kinds of ways. Really, I had just one answer for him.

“Ah yes, I’m sure he wouldn’t. You certainly have me there, Your Majesty! In that case, I promise you that I will endeavor to bring Blumund to a state of full employment!”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! How reassuring to hear, Mjöllmile! And I hope you’ll continue to let us rely on your good graces going forward. With that in mind, I would like you to call me simply Doram from now on.”

Whoa now. *This* was a surprise. A king wanted a common merchant like me to drop all formalities?

“Oh, that would be far too untoward of me...”

I motioned to turn him down, fearing a trap, but:

“Mjöllmile... Or actually, why don’t I call you Gard instead?”

“N-no, I’m simply here on behalf of Sir Rimuru. I’m a commoner, you see—”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! No need for modesty now. Besides, Gard, given your connections with both Rimuru and Emperor Elmesia, can one *truly* think you are a mere commoner? Because not even *I* am fully awarded that luxury with them.”

The king looked deadly serious. He and Sir Rimuru were acquainted with each other and I knew they got along well enough—but if he was stacked up against

the Heavenly Emperor of almighty Thalion, he'd look like the king of an anthill by comparison. It was written all over his face, and I couldn't deny he was right. I had been turning my eyes away from the truth, perhaps, but Big Mama was truly an invincible juggernaut.

No, the king of Blumund was undoubtedly trying to form a closer relationship with me here. Referring to me by my first name was an honor, something I certainly appreciated as part of building our ties. But how should I react...? Well, was there any need to hesitate? I mean, the king of Blumund's last name is, well, Blumund. Besides, we had his son Prince Figaro running the Western General Trade Company. I figured I was safe.

"All right... King Doram, then."

"Hold on, hold on. Let's refer to each other as equals, why don't we? You can even call me Dory if you—"

"N-no, no, I'm afraid that's simply too off-the-wall! Or dangerous, even!"

"You think so?"

"I know so! Phew... But all right. May I at least refer to you as the good Sir Doram?"

Carefully, I adjusted his title a bit, trying to satisfy his request. If someone saw this as too rude, I'd be deservedly thrown in the dungeon, but I trusted that wasn't going to happen.

But Sir Doram just smiled back at me. "Hee-hee! You've made me very happy. Building such a close friendship with someone like you, Gard, who has the demon lord's ear at all times, makes *me* feel more powerful than ever before. I look forward to continuing our relationship along these lines!"

Apparently I was Sir Doram's friend now. I looked around the throne room, wondering if anyone was going to voice an objection to this. However... although the king had all his dour-faced ministers standing behind him, not one of them made a peep. In fact, they were smiling at me in relief.

I could only take this to mean that Sir Doram was serious about all of it. He was investing everything he had into the Four Nations Trade Alliance, this multinational organization I was directing—really betting his entire nation on it,

and on me. What an unbelievable gamble! Even I would have had trouble making such a momentous decision. Looking at it that way, the king of Blumund was truly one of the world's boldest figures.

"Yes indeed, I look forward to building a long, fruitful relationship. And I'll try to prove to you that I'm not merely coasting on my lord's good name."

With all the respect I could muster, I bowed to Sir Doram.



After our meeting, I had some other practical business to handle in Blumund.

Veryard, who had lately been promoted from baron to viscount, gave me a briefing on current affairs. The kingdom apparently had a year's worth of food remaining, and its educational program was progressing well. The more talented students were already being sent across the land so they could contribute early in their careers.

"Of course, I don't think I'm delivering shocking news when I say that our nation is gifted in espionage. Our agents are currently deployed in many countries, handling work like price research for us. We're also training people for the bureaucracy, under the philosophy of 'wise people, bountiful country.' People young and old are coming together to learn about world affairs and economics."

The smile never faded from the viscount's face as he spoke, but this rather extreme political move he described left me speechless. I hadn't doubted Sir Doram's words at all, but I also hadn't thought they were going *this* far with it. The king's subjects sounded just as resolved to this as he was.

...Ahhh, but I can't sit here acting shocked forever.

"Very well, then. In that case, I will go over the current progress of our own plans."

No point hiding anything. I went over all the stuff we were up to.

First, the magitrains. Development was proceeding well with them. We had laid tracks from the terminus in Dwargon through the planned station at Farminus; construction had progressed to a point just a bit before Blumund in the middle. Crops and produce from Farminus were being sent to Dwargon, and

there the magitrains' loads were replaced with industrial goods. These would get sent off to Farminus, which would take what it needed before the remainder moved on to Blumund, which needed to become a great hub for goods in time.

"Of course. I suppose sanitation and storage for food commodities will become important work in the future, then?"

"Indeed it will. I'd also want to ask Blumund to work out where necessary goods should go, and who they should be sold to."

"Yes, naturally. I am stating as much to the employees we are deploying on the field."

Hmm. I had heard Veryard is friends with Fuze, but he's just as wily at the bargaining table, isn't he? And come to think of it, Sir Rimuru *did* tell me to watch for how sharp Veryard is. He certainly was right—Veryard's not someone I can let my guard down around.

"Excellent. So what are you doing with the land you're no longer raising crops on?"

"We have plans underway for that as well. We've already procured the necessary land for World Central Station, which we plan to build near the capital. Most of the land around it will be left empty in all directions so the station can be more easily connected to the highway system."

"Oh?"

"We also have land on the outskirts of the capital ready to serve as a logistical hub connected to World Central."

"You do...?"

They were so well prepared, I didn't even know what to say.

Soon, we were deep into frank negotiations, no longer trying to cow each other into submission. We in Tempest would provide a labor force to build the gigantic World Central Station and open a rail line to Dwargon. The plan was to then build new lines going to Thalion and Englesia. As this was happening, we decided that Blumund would build an array of warehouses on the empty land

they had prepared for us. Through this, we could already picture a future where Blumund was a vast, powerful industrial region. This would lead to a rise in land prices, no doubt, so it was vital that we secured the most favorable acreage urgently. Blumund was clearly going to become a trade hub in the future, and I planned to buy the best land possible before then.

"Now," I continued, "as for our Four Nations Trade Alliance branch, I'd like to build a new one for us, which would make the current location just a temporary site."

"No worries there. We have some prime spots for it."

I began to have a bad feeling about this. I tried reading into Veryard's intentions, but they were all too hidden by his villainous smile to make out.

"And you're willing to give us this land?"

The cost of the land needed for the rails and stations would be shared equally between us going forward. In exchange for the expertise and labor we provided, we wouldn't be charged anything—something we'd already come to an agreement on. The procurement of land for our branches, I had saved for later, and already I saw dark clouds on the horizon. And I was right.

"No, no, I'm afraid I can't offer that. In the kingdom of Blumund, we've adopted a new system where all land is the property of the nation, with the king lending it to his people as needed."

He got me! That was such a drastic, evil move, not even I would've come up with it. I mean, good heavens, how did they even get that law passed? Hats off to them for pulling it off. I can't even *imagine* how they convinced the nobles to give up their vested interests...

"And...how much are you charging for the use of this land?"

"Our current plans call for one silver coin per square meter."

It...wasn't outrageous. It wasn't *cheap*, either, but if you wanted to rent land in Englesia, you were looking at three silver per square meter, at least. We'd have to pay a de facto income tax every year on this land, but better to procure it now than later.

But we had a bigger problem. Profit didn't matter as much at this point. I was facing the looming threat of Blumund calling all the shots on this rail project. A disaster! Sir Rimuru could be strangely careless about this sort of thing, but Big Mama never gave an inch. I could already picture her frowning at me and saying, "Why'd you let them change their conditions midway, hmm?"

All would have been fine and dandy as long as we formed a good relationship, but the thing about people is that they come and go. That made it so important to gain permanent rights to the land we wanted. What if they decided to raise the rent on us, not that I thought they would? If the price hike was within reason, we could accept their terms following a discussion, but if they charged something extortionary, it might just turn into a national-level crisis.

And...well, I'm fully aware all of this is what-if territory. But Big Mama told me to always think about any possibilities that might come up. If we have control of the land, we can reject any unjust demands on their part—but if they have it and don't bend on their terms, we'd be in trouble. If conflict occurs, well, it's the landowners who have the upper hand, isn't it? We'd have to pick up our ball and go home. *That's* why I wanted those land rights. If having them wasn't possible, it'd make it damned hard to spend too extravagantly on that land.

But as I pondered my next move, Veryard grinned at me.

"Now, we planned to adjust the rent depending on the economic situation, but Mjöllmile, I happen to have some good news for you!"

Uh-huh...

He was starting to get under my skin.

"What news is that?"

"Oh, it's very simple. As a symbol of our good relations with your country, the kingdom of Blumund is prepared to offer you some concessions."

"Concessions, you say?"

"Yes. To be precise, regarding the 'prime spots' I mentioned, we are willing to negotiate a permanently binding lease agreement that will recognize the land as extraterritorial areas."

"You are?!"

I made my surprise known to him. It was almost too good to be true. And before I could even think about what ulterior motive he might have, Veryard seemed ready to explain it to me.

"Now, let me just say that there is no catch. His Majesty Doram Blumund made that proposal himself. I was against it, but it was accepted after the other ministers sided with him. The idea has certain pros and cons for us, you see. The obvious minus, of course, is that other nations might look down on us if we sell our land piecemeal like this."

"Yes, I suppose they might."

I was surprised he wasn't hiding more about this—but I had a pretty good idea about the potential pluses for them, too.

"As for the benefits—well, we fully expect that Tempest will aggressively invest in us if we commit to this. That, and we decided that Blumund can retain certain advantages through the exact conditions of our lease agreement."

"Meaning...?"

Those "conditions" were what I was worried about.

"Oh, nothing too intricate. First, we'd like you to hire our citizens as your employees. Second, we'd like you to build the headquarters of the Four Nations Trade Alliance in our nation."

Aha. Now it made sense. If we built the FNTA's main office in Blumund, they'd be more than just a logistical center—they could become the nerve center of the entire world economy. I could even conceive of them taking over Englesia's current position at the head of the table. Blumund's stock would skyrocket, really.

So would the cost of its land, no doubt—if nations around the world built embassies there, the real estate proceeds alone could be a potential profit center. That business, unlike the tourism industry, wasn't as vulnerable to dips and rises in the economy—and even better, it'd create more jobs for the Blumundians. As long as they were serious about casting their lot with the FNTA, it was a bet that could pay off in spades for them. It was honestly

impressive to see from Sir Doram. He's a natural-born gambler, ain't he? And besides, the idea of Blumund taking center stage in world economics had been part of Sir Rimuru's concept as well.

So, having no objections to any of this, I eagerly gave Veryard my agreement.

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Soon enough, after hammering out all the little details, we had a formal treaty in place. It was designed so that both nations retained their own vested interests—the agreement would be void in times of war, and so forth.

I was fairly happy with this treaty—or I thought I was anyway—but for future reference, I still wanted to hear Veryard's true feelings on the matter.

"Now, if I could ask you a question..."

"Yes?"

"You see, Viscount Veryard...erm, apparently, you were personally against signing this agreement. May I ask for your own thoughts on this, now that it's been ratified?"

The FNTA had received some pretty favorable terms, after all. They'd create some red tape for Blumund as it dealt with other nations. Maybe Veryard wasn't dead set against this, but I wondered if he wasn't the greatest fan, either.

"Oh, you're asking about that?"

Veryard paused to think for a moment. Then he stood up, not looking at me, and walked over to a nearby window.

"...?"

He coughed as I pondered what he was doing.

"I am going to talk to myself for a moment, so please ignore me," he stated gravely. "A noble is a creature that never reveals where their feelings truly lie. In fact, showing those feelings could be fatal for them. If a negotiation results in something less than desirable to them, they'll still bellow and brag about how it went just as planned. Anything else would be a sign of weakness, and weakness can too easily be used against you. So what I want to make clear is that I was

against this, past tense. You may interpret that to mean I am now in full agreement as of the moment I signed the treaty.”

I was a little shocked. *This* was how he felt? If so, I had a feeling Veryard had been aiming for this result all along. I didn’t think I’d necessarily *lost* this battle, but it reminded me just how arduous it was to bargain with the nobility.

“Boy,” I couldn’t help but mumble, “I see I have a long way to go, eh? And here I prided myself on my ability to deal with lofty nobles like you. Now I’m worried that I may lack the nerve to keep serving as head of the FNTA.”

“No, no, Mjöllmile, you strike me as quite a sly dealer, if I may be blunt enough to say so.”

“Ha-ha-ha! I will gladly accept the compliment.”

I chuckled a bit—and, much to my surprise, Veryard joined me. In a sincere, *human* sort of way; that cold exterior from before seemed like a distant memory now. So I couldn’t help but risk taking just one more step.

“I apologize if this is too forward of me, but I hope you will hear me out,” I began. “Do you have any interest in working for me?”

The answer would probably be no. I knew that before I asked—but part of me really meant it, too. If someone as talented as Veryard was part of my staff, I couldn’t have asked for a better ally as we expanded into Englesia, which was doubtless going to be an uphill battle.

“Hmm.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Ahhh, but look at me blurting out nonsense. You can just treat that as a joke—”

“Well, hold on. That’s actually quite an interesting offer.”

“Oh?”

Veryard studied my face. He didn’t seem to be toying with me.

“You mean that?” I asked.

“Yes. You see, I was actually considering a change of employer myself.”

Veryard went on to give me a rundown of how things were going for

Blumund, and what he saw in its future. As he reckoned, “wise people, bountiful country” was a double-edged sword. It’d provide peace and prosperity for the people of Blumund...but it could also weaken the position of the kingdom’s nobility.

“In Blumund, you see, the nobility do not hold vast parcels of land. In fact, numerically speaking, there are actually very few of us—perhaps one percent out of our population of one million. Of these, a little under two thousand are knights, and their families add eight thousand to the total. Based on that, you can see how only a small handful of nobles are actually involved in politics—fewer than a hundred, in fact. Which is fine for now, but I’m quite sure that our titles will be little more than ceremonial in the not-too-distant future. That is the direction His Majesty has indicated in his plans.”

Hmm. I see. Even a small nobility can still throw their weight around in a country of Blumund’s scope. But how could the nation so drastically reform itself while retaining the nobility’s interests? I’m sure there was at least *some* backlash—but here they were, reinventing themselves.

“And are you...personally against any of that, Viscount?”

“No, I’m not. To me, earning a profit matters more.” He grinned at me. “I *do* think, however, that I need to find other work before I wind up unemployed.”

That smile told me the whole story. This had all been orchestrated from the start.

“Heh-heh-heh... Now I see what you’re up to. This is your way of auditioning instead of answering my question, isn’t it?”

“Ha! I was expecting you’d see through that.”

Oh, I’m sure. If I hadn’t, he never would have deigned to work for someone like me.

“So you *are* indeed interested?”

“I am. I would be delighted to work for you, Mjöllmile...but it would need to be strictly in an adviser role for now, if that works for you.”

Makes sense. He still has his noble title, so he can’t make any major moves for

a while yet. What I wanted most was Veryard's knowledge and experience anyway, so his serving as an adviser was just fine with me.

"Of course it does! Thank you very much for your open-mindedness."

"And thank *you* for the offer."

We defiantly smiled at each other as we shook hands.

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With Veryard providing me his full support, the Four Nations Trade Alliance began to grow more steadily. Before long, our company would need to face off directly with the land's most powerful merchants, our biggest competitors in business.

"And that's what brings us to Englesia for the first time in a while, Gard?"

My bodyguard Bydd and I knew each other well enough by now to be on a first-name basis. He had been training in Tempest, and that had boosted his strength from a D-plus to an even B in rank. He had a new set of gear as well, and I now trusted him enough that he accompanied me on all my extended business trips.

Gob'emon was with me as well, of course, and by this point, he looked like a battle-hardened hero, one whose presence left people awestruck. He was easily an over-A in strength, and I think he had even evolved into an ogre mage on me. An ogre mage! They were the stuff of legend, I'd been told, but Tempest was positively overrun with them. It was so absurd, I just accepted it as fact lest I lose my marbles.

"Right you are. I have a very important meeting today, and it will bring me into, er, *slightly* dangerous territory."

"Oh? Sounds like you'll need me, then."

"Aw, c'mon, Gob'emon! Not when he's got me right here, y'know!"

"Heh. We'll see."

Now Gob'emon was openly laughing at the hyperconfident Bydd. He was an ogre mage, but his skin color was the same as before—I supposed that varied from ogre to ogre. He had horns as well, but they were small enough that he

could hide them with a hat or bandanna. Today, he had a hat that matched the sharp business suit I'd had tailored for him. At first sight, he looked like any other hobgoblin, which made it easier for him to take his enemy by surprise. I hate to downplay Bydd too much—he's been very good to me—but he still had a ways to go; it was really Gob'emon who helped me out the most as a bodyguard.

So I had two guards with me, but today, not even that felt like quite enough. After all, I was going to meet with the merchants that more or less controlled all the Western Nations. Not that I should have had cause for concern. Sir Rimuru, after all, knew about my plans for today. Whether our negotiations paid off or not, I knew I was as good as secure with him watching.

Instead, I could sit back and be in my element—a meeting hall full of top businessmen and women from across the world, all here at my invitation. How much more exciting can it get for a man like me? And that, you see, is why I had myself and my guards dress in snappy business attire. A form of bracing ourselves for what's to come, kind of.

“So are we ready?”

Bydd and Gob'emon briskly nodded—and so, steeling our resolve, we headed for the hotel hosting this conference.

The automatic doors opened. “May I have your name, sir?” the man at the front desk asked with a refined, practiced gesture.

“Mjöllmile.”

“...!! My pardons, then. Just in case, would I be able to have a look at your personal identification?”

Hmm. Not that anyone would attempt to impersonate me—but no reason not to cooperate. The hotel was being just as careful with all the other guests, I'm sure, so this was actually a relief.

“Will this work?”

Bydd took a letter of introduction out from his pocket and gave it to the hotel staff. Once everything checked out, we were patted down to ensure none of us were carrying weapons. In the midst of this, some of my employees jogged up

to me.

“Sir Mjöllmile, we’ve been expecting you!”

“Everything has been set up. The meeting hall is this way.”

Chasing away the front-desk man, my underlings guided me over to the site—a large chamber this time, suitable for noble balls and such. Quite a number of people were already there, their eyes fixed on me as I came in.

“That’s the head of the FNTA? The man who proposed this?”

“Hmm... He looks familiar to me. I seem to recall the particular streak of cruelty he brought to his work...”

“I heard the man achieved his current position by currying favor with the demon lord Rimuru.”

“Indeed. But best not to look down on him. I heard he’s at the core of all the business conducted in that monster nation. He’s taking in the smaller merchants who’ve suffered as a result, and now he’s got a decent amount of power in the region.”

“Hmph! Who cares about some upstart like him? With the Rozzo family out of the picture, I know King Doran has been positioning his kingdom for a potential comeback...but none of the other Five Elders have shown an interest in a takeover. It’s over for all of them, I’m sure.”

“Yes, and Prince Johann of Rostia was arrested by Englesia’s magical inquisitors. Nobody else is strong enough to restore their former glories.”

“One story I heard was that Margrave Cidre is in custody as well. Apparently he was ordered to defend Englesia, only to wholly abandon the request. He’ll be lucky to see the outside of a cell ever again, let me tell you.”

“So whoever can seize the initiative at today’s meeting can expect to wield enormous influence in the next generation, then?”

“Heh-heh-heh... Not that I’ll hand *that* throne to any of the other attendees. And *especially* not a mob of country folk like the Four Nations Trade Alliance!”

“But Tempest is nothing to trifle with...”

"No, it is not. Their fighting power is formidable, and one of their diplomats—a talent by the name of Testarossa—has all but seized the Council for her own."

"Well, let's just see what they bring to the table."

"Absolutely. If that man proves to be talentless, we can step right in and take over his position. Simple."

"And what demon lord *wouldn't* pick the most powerful candidate for the job? I'm sure *this* one will as well."

They weren't even trying to be secretive about this. I could hear the excited rumormongering from all across the chamber. Everyone was intensely curious about whether I had the acumen to back up my reputation, talking loudly to ensure all their frank opinions reached my ears.

And who could blame them? I had far more than Rozzo's former allies here today. I even had some crime lords from around the world, each with an iron grip on their local underground mobster activities. These were the kind of people who held a monopoly on the world's fortune, the kind of lofty leaders who'd normally never confer with each other. Indeed, the kind I'd never gained an audience with back in the day. The fact they were in on rumors about the Five Elders showed just how vast their networks spread.

These were the sort of people who'd spent their lives constantly outwitting and outfoxing their competition. Their greed was endless. Rozzo's decline didn't scare them; they all saw it as an exciting new opportunity. I braced myself once more—I couldn't let my guard down for a moment around these guys.

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In the midst of this furor, someone decided to directly address me.

"Well, look who's here. Mjöllmile, huh? You've sure gotten too big for your britches, haven't you? Not even gonna say hello to me?"

Gehhh. This was Alecchio, bodyguard of Don Gabbana; a huge man in the prime of his life with equally huge muscles. He was clad in full-body leather armor that made him stick out like a sore thumb at this event, not that anyone dared to bring it up. They'd have been foolish to. Alecchio, after all, was a retired A-ranked adventurer with such a reputation for sheer violence that

nobody in organized crime wasn't aware of him.

We were acquainted, of course, although given the choice, I'd have preferred never seeing him again in my life. He's like a ferocious beast, is the only way to put it, one who's constantly starving and stalking his prey. Ever since I met him as a young man, he's been constantly pestering me for food and money and such. I'd like to yell at him about it, but he's a living personification of brutality, you know?

And even worse, he's got Don Gabbana behind him. A towering figure; of noble blood despite not owning a title, and someone not even the Englesia royal family can hope to defy. When Alecchio went too far one day and killed this wannabe street enforcer, the military police wrote the whole affair off as a suicide—and ever since then, nobody's even thought about crossing that maniac. I was certainly not going to rattle my saber against Alecchio, not when I was supposed to be discussing economics. As the man convening this meeting, I had to weave my way through this situation, even if I came out of it looking bad. So, with a smile, I faced up to Alecchio.

"Well, well, if it isn't Alecchio! What a surprise to see you in a place like this."

"Huhhh? Who said you could talk to me like *that*? You really *have* gotten cocky while I wasn't payin' attention, huh?"

Oof... Scary. Alecchio wasn't raising his voice, but the sheer intimidation resonated down to the pit of my stomach. I almost wanted to pee myself, I tell you. People call me the "emperor of the underground" over in Blumund, but faced with the real thing like this, I was reminded all over again just how low on the ladder I really am...

"A-Alecchio, this is s'posed to be a happy event for us all, okay? Maybe you could talk this over later—"

Bydd was just as awed by him. I guess he knew about Alecchio, and that knowledge made him quake in his boots, not that I'm one to talk. If anything, I was impressed Bydd dared to speak to him—I don't think he ever tried opposing him in the past.

Still, I can't say it was his best idea.

"And who the hell do you think *you* are? Thinkin' you can just step up and address me... Who gave you permission for *that*, huh?"

Now his ire was pointed squarely at my bodyguard. Just as I'd thought, Alecchio had no memory of Bydd—I doubt he saw him as anyone worth remembering anyway. Someone as small-time as Bydd trying to speak to him was probably an unforgivable affront in his mind, and even if it wasn't, it certainly did little to improve his mood.

Back in the day, I would have paid Alecchio some coin and shooed him away. That wouldn't work today. I was the director of the Four Nations Trade Alliance, and I couldn't afford to look like a pansy around my business rivals. The people around us were just standing and smiling, nobody lifting a finger to help me. They likely saw this as an amusing diversion, but if I let it slide without comment, it would ruin my reputation with them. They'd see me as incapable of handling even *this* level of trouble, and *ohhh*, how they'd sneer at me afterward!

"I fear, Alecchio, you might be laboring under some incorrect assumptions. Right now, I happen to be director of the Four Nations Trade Alliance. As we've known each other quite a while, I will be happy to let this slide, so would you mind promptly leaving my sight, please?"

I tried to act as composed as possible. Keeping my voice from shaking took a lot of effort, but fortunately, I managed to keep it together.

"What?"

Is—is this what they mean when they say you can *feel* murderous rage in the air? The very atmosphere seemed to change around Alecchio as his gaze hardened. It was beyond terrifying.

"M-Mjöllmile..."

Bydd was calling for me now, knees shaking as he sounded almost ready to cry. But how could I find the time to acknowledge him? I couldn't. I had to keep my eyes on Alecchio no matter what.

"Whoa, whoa, Mjöllmile, you sure *you* aren't makin' a big mistake? Or, what, you think I wouldn't lay hands upon you with all these folks around?"

“Ooh...”

Well, yes, I *do* think that! Anyone with even a modicum of intelligence would never think of resorting to violence at a place like this. A magical beast who lived purely on instinct was one thing, but no normal, sensible person would dream of it. Besides, Alecchio was Don Gabbana’s personal bodyguard. If he started a fight in here, it’d cause untold strife for his boss.

So I believed I was safe...but just as I did, I felt like I saw Alecchio make a motion with his left hand. *Huh?* I thought—and then Bydd was pulled down to the ground, as Gob’emon promptly stepped in front of me. One moment, it seems, was all it took for Alecchio to try throwing a punch at me, and Gob’emon had taken it in my place. Gob’emon was the one who’d thrown Bydd aside as well; I supposed Bydd would have been in too much danger if he’d stayed there—and in fact, the concussive force of Alecchio’s fist had torn poor Bydd’s ear right off.

“You all right, Bydd?”

“Y-yes, sir... Sorry I, ah, couldn’t help...”

“Don’t worry about it. If you die because of something like *this*, Sir Rimuru’s going to be enraged.”

“H-he would care about me, you think?”

“Of course he would. And *I’d* be just as mad!”

I reached out to Bydd, helping him up...and even as we spoke, sparks were flying next to us, as Gob’emon and Alecchio engaged in a tenacious war of words.

“Were you attempting to kill him?”

“It was an accident—an accident! I was just trying to give him a little love tap. It wound up toppling *him* over just because *you* decided to butt in.”

“Don’t give me that. He may be inexperienced, but Bydd is my brother-in-arms. I stood by so as not to shame him, but you went *much* too far.”

“Ha-ha! It’s *his* fault for being such a pushover, ain’t it? No weapons are allowed in here anyway, y’know. What kind of bum dies after gettin’ jostled a

little bit, huh?"

"...Oh?"



Um... I think the air's shifting around Gob'emon, too. Now I was concerned we weren't going to hold a business meeting at all...but the next moment, Don Gabbana strode in, as if on cue.

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"Alecchio, *what* are you doing?"

"Oops. Sorry, boss. I was just saying hello to an old acquaintance of mine."

"You were? Hmm. But isn't that man over there hurt? Here, use this."

What a farce. The bad guy kicking up the dust, and the good guy swooping in to calm things down. Gabbana's trying to make me owe him a favor, ain't he? And keeping my head underwater all the while, I might add.

Alecchio, no doubt having picked up on this, sprinkled the healing potion on Bydd without further complaint. That was bound to leave a stain on his suit—but, whoa, it immediately repaired his ear. Only a Full Potion could have been *that* effective.

"Ohhhh! Just imagine, using an invaluable Full Potion on someone *that* low-born!"

"Sir Gabbana never fails to amaze! Why, I suppose even a secret elixir worth a fortune in itself is a trifling matter to him!"

"Indeed, indeed. With Alecchio's muscle and Gabbana's riches, they make a practically invincible team, no?"

Hearing all this chitchat from the gallery was doing little to lift my spirits. I felt a pall over my mind. Things had suddenly grown very ominous, like I had just awoken from a nightmare.

I shot a glance at Bydd, and he was frozen in place. I could only guess he felt the same way I did. I mean, come on! We had grown used to having Full Potions around, mind you. Whenever Bydd had some spare time, he'd go up to Gob'emon and ask for a little training, and I couldn't tell you how many arms and legs he might lose in the process...in a single day, no less. No way he'd be alive without our Full Potions.

Thanks to that, we couldn't imagine life without these potions, really. Only

when I overheard the conversation around me did I realize all over again just how lucky we really were.

"Ah, and look! Look at the shining badge on Gabbana's breast!"

"Yes, I can see it, too. That seal on it is glowing a little."

"It is! That means it's made of real magisteel, you know."

"No doubt about it. It's just like the rumors say. That up-and-coming group, absorbing one criminal mob after another. That's who that seal belongs to..."

Pulled in by the appreciative crowd, I stole a look at Don Gabbana. What I saw shocked me. There, shining on his left breast, was a familiar coat of arms—three snakes intertwined with each other.

How would I not recognize it? We only spent three bloody days bickering over its design. I think Sir Rimuru kicked it off by saying, "*Why don't we go with snakes? Better to keep it simple, I'd say, instead of bothering with dragons and whatnot. Snakes symbolize knowledge, and greed, and eternity and stuff, so it'd be perfect for REG.*" Then Big Mama countered with "*That's right, and snakes can signify drunkenness as well, which we certainly identify with,*" and then I was all "*Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! In that case, let's have three entwined snakes, all entangled like we are after the eighth refill!*"

Yes, this was clearly the seal of REG, and while I didn't know all our employees personally, should I have taken this to believe that REG had absorbed Don Gabbana's group...?

Instantly, I felt like a fool for acting so scared. This was a chance, not a threat—I could use old Gabbana here as a foil to show people exactly what sort of position I was in.

"You, I believe, are president of the Gabbana Merchant Group, right? How do you intend to atone for this incident?"

"Pardon me?"

"Ah, you're oblivious to the facts, then? You gravely injured one of my bodyguards. Bydd here, you see, refused to play along with that rabble-rouser because this is meant to be a serious business meeting—and look what your

man did in response!"

"...*What* did you call me?"

Heh-heh-heh... This is *so* wonderful. Both servant and master were befuddled by my return salvo.

"Wh-who's that man daring to defy Gabbana?!"

"He's affiliated with REG—you know, that shadowy group!"

"That's right. And I hear REG's even brought a certain well-known armed group into its fold. But look at *this* man!"

"He's certainly in a hurry to die, I assume. Or does he have something up his sleeve?"

"Are you telling me this Four Nations Trade Alliance has the power to openly compete with REG?!"

Our audience was getting on my nerves, but being the center of attention wasn't a bad thing for me right now. Not that I had time to bask in it.

"...You're a dead man."

"Hold on, Alecchio, hold on. Not here. Besides, there's no fun in *merely* killing anyone."

"If you say so, boss. I'll tackle him later..."

Better do something about these two men threatening me before handling anything else. "Quiet, all of you!" I shouted—my voice smooth as butter, not quavering at all. I could sense that I was back in my element.

It hardly seemed believable that I'd feared Alecchio a moment ago. I mean, I spend all day discussing matters with people (and monsters...actually, mostly monsters) far scarier than this. Don Gabbana would seem like less than a flea to Sir Veldora—he could release just a little bit of his aura, and the man would be a pile of dust. Perhaps Alecchio could withstand that, but it'd still be no competition. Anyone who even thought about bringing harm to Sir Veldora would immediately cease to exist.

That's how scary he is, and I deal with him on a near-daily basis. I've even put

my foot down with him, steadfastly refusing his requests for a raise in allowance. Besides, the town I now call home is practically crawling with magic-born rated a Calamity-level threat or higher, and I'm managing all their finances, aren't I? Here they were, these titans who could single-handedly level a smaller kingdom, and they were sheepishly plodding out of my office after I yelled at them for demanding a budget increase. *That's* what my regular life has become.

This reminded me of a chat I had with Cien a fair while ago.

"I tell you, Testarossa's talented, she works fast, and she couldn't be more help to me. Beautiful, too. I'm rather jealous of you, Cien!"

"Huh? Oh my... Ha-ha-ha. You're a very funny person, Sir Mjöllmile. I haven't laughed this hard in a while!"

That was a hearty laugh, considering how calm and levelheaded he usually was. After that, we managed to strike up a friendship for whatever reason, enough so that we'd go out for drinks now and again.

The way he put it, Testarossa was a truly fearsome demon. I suppose she doesn't let on much with me—she's usually so elegant, with that lovely soft smile, so I never thought of her as scary at all. But I knew all about the events leading up to her takeover of the Council, so I always tried to be prudent in my behavior. *Sexual Harassment Is a Crime!*—that's one of our office's slogans, you know.

Regardless, I say all this to show that I have numerous kinds of crazy and amazing people constantly knocking on my door. Now that I'd recalled that, I had no reason at all to fear Don Gabbana or Alecchio.

"You damned—!!"

Both of them were fuming, faces red with fury, but I couldn't have cared less. And I think even Bydd was picking up on this reality, too.

"Hey, look, Mjöllmile's too much of a gentleman to say it, so lemme spell it out for you—you better not talk to him like that, okay? Because I'm one thing, but *he's* the sort of person you'd never *dream* of speaking to that way!"

Look at him, egging them on. But the entire room's eyes were on us now. We

had the perfect stage. Let's take Don Gabbana down and establish exactly where I stand around here.

*

I flashed the room a bold smile. I'm not exactly useful in a fight, but I get a lot of compliments about how threatening I can make myself look.

"Yes, Bydd is exactly right. Perhaps I shouldn't have let things slide at first. Indeed, perhaps I should have given you the discipline you needed from the start."

"You're absolutely correct, Mjöllmile. Then I wouldn't have had to take his abuse and get my soddin' ear talked off."

"Indeed, sorry about that. So, again, how should we settle this, Bydd?"

"How about we start by receiving an apology, huh? Maybe we can reconsider if they show us the right attitude!"

"Fair point, yes. So—Alecchio and Gabbana. If you apologize right now, I will pretend none of this happened. But if you insist on stirring the pot with me, well, that changes things, doesn't it? Because by my name as Gard Mjöllmile, finance minister of the Jura-Tempest Federation and director of the Four Nations Trade Alliance, I promise you that I'm not afraid to fight! So what'll it be, you two?!"

I tried to grandstand as much as possible. Their faces stiffened.

"God damn you..."

"Hold on, Alecchio. Calm down. I think there might be a misunderstanding at work here, but if we did something to anger you, I will gladly apologize. You said your name was Gard?"

"*Gard?*"

"Ah, I mean, Sir Mjöllmile..."

Don Gabbana didn't like being corrected like this one bit. But so what? I'd already beaten him. This meeting hall was full of powerful merchants, supporting the financial fortunes of Englesia and many other nations—and now, in front of all these power brokers, Don Gabbana had to acknowledge who I

was. I suppose he expected me to back down long ago, but he'd have to be disappointed. He was staring me down, his snakelike eyes full of murderous rage, but I wasn't scared in the slightest. The old me might've given him a tearful apology, but I've grown since then, haven't I?

"Very good. So what am I misunderstanding, exactly?"

I tried throwing Don Gabbana a life raft. He responded by bowing his head, exposing the throbbing blue veins on his temples.

"It seems my bodyguard was out of line with you, causing you trouble. I think he was a little too excited for his own good, so if you could overlook his behavior for me—"

"Pardon? You think you can just smile and say sorry after seriously injuring someone? My man Bydd here suffered the shame of having his ear torn off, you realize?"

"Yes, and I provided a potion so he—"

"*Ha!*"

I tried to scoff as loudly as I could.

"And you think that cheap drug can smooth all this over? That tells me all I need to know about you!"

Sir Rimuru, worrywart that he is, provides me with enough Full Potions that I actually carry several on my person as a habit. They *were* cheap to me—that much was no lie—so I kept going on the offensive.

"Indeed, if *that's* all the talent you have, I don't think you have what it takes to join the vast project I planned to propose. Leave this chamber at once!"

My thunderous voice made Don Gabbana wince. Then, in a cold, penetrating voice, he rumbled, "I hope you don't regret this"—softly, so only I heard it—and took Alecchio out of the meeting hall.

Complete victory was mine. The hall was deathly quiet, but the moment Don Gabbana disappeared from sight, cheers erupted—some for me, some not as much. The common sentiment, I'm sure, was that nobody expected someone like *me* to kick Don Gabbana out of this event.

While I had people's attention (and momentum was on my side), I decided to go right into my opening statement. I followed it by revealing the "make Blumund a logistical hub" plan Sir Rimuru and Veryard had discussed with me, successfully earning the interest of most of the audience.

...Interest, yes, but I didn't expect anyone to volunteer to join our plan right this moment. The reason was simple. I had just picked a fight with Don Gabbana, one of REG's most public faces, and I'm sure they all expected a hit man would rub me out soon enough. If the main organizer was gone, well, they could all aim to become his successor afterward—and besides, if the core of this plan was no longer breathing, the entire project itself was in danger of collapsing. It was nothing the merchants here would jump into that easily, I suppose.

But that actually worked in my favor. Simply surviving today built people's trust in me, after all. Plus, I was publicly pitting myself against *the* REG, and given that I was the "G" in that acronym, victory was all but guaranteed. So I gave them my pitch as fervently as I could, and saw my audience react with just the kind of excited enthusiasm I was hoping for.

*

The next morning, as we left our hotel, we spotted a carriage parked nearby, painted entirely black. Pretty gutsy move. This was a public place, you know.

"Get in," Alecchio growled at us. I grinned back at him as I climbed up, Bydd and Gob'emon leading the way. "...You sure got guts, you know that?" he said, blustering as he hopped in last, but he sounded like nothing but a sore loser to me.

"So where are we going?"

"Somewhere good. Enjoy the trip. It'll be your last."

Alecchio said no more to me after that, so I followed his lead as the wagon clattered on.

We reached our destination after around twenty minutes. Judging by the distance from the hotel, we were likely in the city's more affluent neighborhood—just as I thought. I breathed a sigh of relief. If I had been taken into Don

Gabbana's territory, that would have been cause for at least a little distress, but now there was nothing to fret about. No, we were at the location the Sons of the Veldt used as their Englesia headquarters. I had assisted with its renovation, so I knew the site well.

"Okay, get out. You've got people more fearsome than you could imagine waiting for you. Ahhh, I can't wait to see you piss your pants as you grovel for your life before them."

I turned a piteous eye on the ranting Alecchio. Honestly, I felt a little bad for him.

"Hold on, you. Why're you lookin' at me like that?"

"Mm? Well, fine, I'll tell you. After all..."

After all, it'd be over for him soon.

"After all what, you bastard? What're you talking about?"

Even Alecchio had sensed something off about my attitude. I saw a little bit of concern on his face, even.

Several men were milling about in front of the building before us. They ran up when the carriage stopped.

"Alecchio," one of them said, "I have a message."

"...What?"

"We have some pretty high leadership waiting down below."

"High leadership? The Seven Blades?"

"No...higher."

"Don't tell me the elders from the Sage Cabal are here? Or the shadow forces of the Darksky Horde..."

"These leaders are serving as guides."

"...The three bosses, then?!"

Alecchio sounded pretty surprised, but I had never heard of any of these groups, so I couldn't imagine who they referred to. I inferred they were all part

of the Gabbana family, and probably new recruits, too. Not even I have a full grasp of all the groups REG now has under its umbrella—which is partly why we end up with unhappy events like these. But it's not like the Western Nations had *this* many powerful gangs in the first place...

“We’ve already guided Gabbana inside.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

So Alecchio, looking more tense than before, took us into the building.

We were going into the basement, and it was actually quite luxurious down there. The Sons of the Veldt used to have an altar, but we took all that out and converted it into an audience room. Sir Rimuru wanted a place with a lot of atmosphere, something befitting a shadowy secret cabal, and so we made no compromises on any little detail. This may even be fancier than the chamber Sir Rimuru uses in Tempest to receive his finest guests. As that nation’s budgetary overseer, it’s my job to ensure we’re not wasting vast sums of money—but as REG, we’re just a bunch of criminals, and we can use our filthy lucre any darn way we like.

“...And why are *you* so calm right now?” Alecchio asked, perhaps a tad anxious.

“Well, who knows?” I replied.

He clicked his tongue at that and said no more as we proceeded three floors down, finding ourselves in front of a large door.

“Come in.”

“V-Vigan? Of the Seven Blades? *You’re* guarding the door?”

“Pfft. Alecchio, eh? I used to respect you, you know. I even thought about recommending you for a position in the Blades the next time we had an opening. Damn idiot.”

“Wha—? Vigan?! What did I—?”

“Just get your sorry hide in here!” Vigan glared at Alecchio’s servants. “And all of *you*, wait here for me. I’m only letting Alecchio and our guests in.”

That was valid. Best to keep the number of people who knew I was one of the

bosses to a minimum. I silently followed his orders.

"...Here we go," Alecchio said as he came in, the rest of us following. Vigan joined us at the rear, closing the door behind him. This door was magically enhanced, ensuring no conversations leaked out of this room—no matter what happened in here, no one on the outside would ever know.

Despite being so deep down, the room was filled with dazzling light, the flames from an untold number of candles dancing around us. The candles were key, Sir Rimuru insisted, even if magic would be far easier. That kind of extravagance, he said, only adds to the allure.

There were no real dividing walls down here, so it was more of a vast chamber than a room, really. That was why it could work as an audience chamber, but as a rule, only our top leaders ever went inside—in other words, the sort of people who knew my real identity. Right now, though, over half of the people occupying this chamber were unfamiliar to me. There were nearly a hundred of these leaders, and they all kept their gazes on me as I strode into the chamber.

"Hey!"

Alecchio shouted to stop me. I ignored him. He attempted to place a hand on my shoulder, but Vigan kicked it away even before Bydd and Gob'emon could act. I suppose he had been briefed on me when he was assigned door-guard duty.

The reaction from the management I didn't know ran the gamut—some were surprised, while others looked simply befuddled. The leaders I *did* know all promptly took a knee in reverence, and seeing that must have made the truth dawn on the others, because they quickly followed suit.

"N-no... S-Sir Mjöllmile is one of our bosses?!"

Don Gabbana's flustered yell rang across the quiet chamber. We kept the air cool down here, but with us being in such a vast underground room, his voice had an echo to it. Apparently he had just been delivering a speech to some of the people here, people I knew well. No doubt he'd been trying to convince them to kill me as a lesson, in order to show the Four Nations Trade Alliance exactly where it stood with him.

"That's right. The man you've just spent this entire time impassionately pleading with us to kill is one of our very own head honchos."

He was answered not by me, but by a figure in an eye-catching, revealing dress. This was Glenda Attley, an extremely talented woman who posed as the REG boss in our place, and what she just said confirmed all my suspicions about Gabbana. Funny how it seemed like they were talking about someone else, though, not me.

"G-gehhhhh?!"

The normally composed Don Gabbana could barely remain upright. Once upon a time he was a godlike figure to me; I never thought I'd witness him in such a sad state.

"Well done, Glenda. Thanks to you, everything's going well with our project. Our conference yesterday was a smashing success."

"Thank you very much for the compliment, boss! If you could bring my merit points into consideration as well..."

"Certainly, certainly. I'll provide you with double the usual."

"Well, how kind of you. I'm glad you're so understanding!"

Glenda guided me toward the platform that used to house the altar. We had three seats in a row up there, and I sat myself down on one of them.

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After seeing Glenda's reaction to me, nobody in the room voiced any concern about me being their boss. That's how much they all feared her, I suppose.

And now, before my eyes, Don Gabbana and Alecchio were being held down, ready to be whisked away to their fates. One of them had publicly voiced a desire to have a boss killed; the other had treated me with the most abject of rudeness; and now we needed to figure out what to do with them.

The other leaders were apparently unanimous in their agreement that the two of them should receive the death penalty.

"There is no way to compensate for this arrogance except through death."

"We'd better not kill them quickly, either. Let's torture them for a week first,

to teach any other disloyal members a lesson.”

“Yeah. Sacrificing them to a demon could be interesting. That, or using their corpses to create a chimera.”

“You’ll recall how that man so gleefully described all the ways we could kill our own boss. Why don’t we try them on him instead, I say?”

It was a downright brutal conversation, let me tell you. The color drained from Don Gabbana’s face, his breathing growing ragged. I could see a wet spot in his pants, but I pretended that I didn’t.

Alecchio wasn’t looking much better. I was sure, now that he’d realized his impending doom, he was trying to work out whether to attempt resistance. But we had the strongest of underground leaders in this room. If I’d been alone, he could certainly have killed me in a few seconds, but many of these other leaders were formidable fighters in their own right. It’d be impossible to overpower all of them—he stood no chance against Glenda alone, in fact.



Enthusiasm grew in the chamber as the leaders tried outdoing themselves with new and innovative torture methods. What should I do now, then? I pondered the question as I looked at the downtrodden duo in front of me.

Honestly, both of them had made serious errors, but I wouldn't have called them guilty of a crime. Acting macho and browbeating some new organization horning in on your turf is part and parcel of being a mobster. Being so openly defiant against the man who runs your group is a problem, but how could he have known when he had no idea who I am? And that attack on Bydd was infuriating, but even that all got worked out with no permanent consequences.

Sir Rimuru was aware of the conference I organized, besides, and I'm sure he had someone there watching us to ensure nothing serious happened. In fact, several of Soei's troops were stationed in the room right now. If things *really* went awry, I was confident it would be stopped at once before anyone was truly in danger.

Along those lines, I was starting to think capital punishment for Don Gabbana and Alecchio was going too far.

"Order!"

I quieted down the room, now that I'd collected my thoughts.

"They will not be punished. Gabbana is no traitor to our organization; he simply didn't know I was the boss. If he betrays our trust in him again, that is a different matter, but I am going to overlook this particular event."

I was still annoyed about a lot of things, but I needed to restrain myself. That was my decision, but not everyone was for it.

"You're being too lenient! It'd be a terrible precedent to set!"

This was greeted with applause from many people.

"Boss," one of the extremists in the room said, "don't tell me you're an amateur in this field? Because to lifers like us, saving face is more important than almost anything else. If you let people screw around with you like this, nobody's gonna want to serve you any longer."

Indeed, some of the group were starting to openly question my authority. I

didn't mind dissatisfaction about the decisions I made, but I really couldn't have this.

"Whoever said that just now, come forward."

A young man took a step toward me, a fearless look on his face.

"This is Yang from the Black Nails. We fought together in the same mercenary army before, and I can affirm that he's a stern, severe man who never shows mercy to his enemies. He is talented as well, equivalent to an A in rank."

This was Girard filling me in. He was the leader of the Sons of the Veldt, and somewhere along the line, he'd taken position next to me here. Smart fellow.

I nodded at him and turned to the man before me.

"Your name is Yang, then?"

"Yeah."

"And you call me an amateur?"

"Am I wrong? Because if you show mercy *that* readily, in *this* business..."

"You think I'm letting people screw with me?"

"...Again, am I wrong?"

Good grief. Does Yang realize how much contempt he's showing with every remark?

...Well, maybe he does. Maybe he's using this chance to plant seeds of doubt in everybody's minds so he can stage a coup someday. They say that "those without power can never thrive in the darkness"—that you have to constantly show your strength, lest someone dethrone you—but I didn't want REG to become *that* kind of company. I needed to explain reality to him, and fast.

"Who's screwing with me?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking you who could beat me, Yang. Do you think *you* could?"

"N-no..."

Yang shot a glance at Glenda. I guess it was she, and not the Sons of the Veldt,

who had taken down the Black Nails.

"You said saving face is important. Shouldn't *you* be taking responsibility for addressing me with such contempt?"

"I, er..."

"Glenda, I take back what I said about your merit points earlier."

"Aw, come on..."

"Silence! Because it's become *clear* to me that Yang's far from the only one of you failing to treat your boss with respect! You have no right to criticize Gabbana at all!"

Don Gabbana and Alecchio gave me surprised looks. That made something else click in my mind. Were they being used?

"Glenda, you've been putting ideas into their heads, haven't you? Setting things up so someone would challenge me to try giving themselves a boost?"

"Oh, you noticed?"

"Of course I did. And you should be glad it was me here. If it was one of the *other* bosses, we'd have some serious problems..."

"No problems at all. I already discussed this matter with Lady Elmesia. She advised me to proceed and hide it from you."

"Oh..."

Big Mama's mean streak can cause me so much trouble sometimes. Things were working out well with this in the end, but still.

"Yang, I'd love to meet the person who tries screwing with me just because I'm letting Gabbana off the hook. That applies to all of you here. I'm not going to demand that you stop thinking about overthrowing me, but you better be ready for the consequences. I might be too weak to survive any attempts on my life, but let me make this clear: If I go, all of REG goes."

I meant this as a clear warning. It made Yang visibly shiver. I wasn't bragging or bluffing, he knew. It was the honest truth.

"S-so...does this mean the other two bosses are...?"

"You don't need to know."

"You said it. Why are you so keen on learning things? People get killed for knowing too much."

Girard and Glenda answered before I could. It silenced the other leaders, who had sweat dripping down their brows. I decided to give it one final push.

"Now! I will not try Gabbana and his bodyguard, and I assume none of you have complaints about this? Let me hear you!"

""No, sir!"""

They all bowed before me, showing their allegiance.

"Well, Yang, you should rejoice. I'll let your insolence go this time, but you won't receive another chance."

"Of course! Thank you very much. I promise I will work harder than ever to repay the favor!"

"You will? Good. That's the kind of spirit I like to see."

I smiled, satisfied. I was now confident in my full control of REG, and based on this experience, I decided to enact a core set of regulations for our firm:

1. Do not betray your friends.
2. Be gracious enough to forgive the mistakes of others.
3. Do not punch down or bring misfortune upon anyone.

Those three should suffice.

Not betraying your friends went without saying; we would sentence anyone who broke that one to death. Forgiving others' mistakes was trickier, but we were positioning REG as a last resort for people who were down on their luck. We weren't gonna receive the cream of the crop, in other words, so I was asking our people on the ground to try and make up for any errors. Nothing was going to change unless the higher-ups carried out systematic reform, and I wanted to get this nailed down now, while all the top managerial staff were in one place.

Finally, rule number three was the most important one. REG was going to be

an amalgamation of all the big forces in organized crime, but if we constantly tried pulling each other down, we'd never be able to take on our public merchant competition. I'm sure some people had made a lot of money with that approach, but going forward, it was completely prohibited.

I wanted everyone here to realize that we wielded far more influence than before, and that meant we had to contribute to society in a fair way. We weren't a lawless mob; we were a chivalrous group, one that helped the weak and crushed the powerful. That was my wish, and it was Sir Rimuru's, too. Given our underground position, we certainly couldn't whitewash everything we got involved in like that, but I didn't want us to abandon our pride. If the top management is corrupt, the guys at the bottom have no way to defy them. That applied to me as well, and I wanted to be sure I didn't forget it.

"I know it's hard to change your ways immediately," I said to wrap things up, "but you should see these as the rules REG expects you to follow. Give our younger kids time to learn. They need to know there's more than one way to survive out there."

The leaders meekly pondered this. They were used to doing all kinds of dirty things—it was impossible for them to change their thought processes that quickly. But with the right use of my (or, really, Sir Rimuru's) authority, I didn't think it was impossible.

I suppose this is silencing the opposition with my power, but I'm dealing with people who believe that power is everything, so I think it's the right move to make. Hopefully it'll help foster change in everyone else, too.

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So the Gabbana family was set to be dismantled, its members reassigned to other organizations. Gabbana would be treated as my personal adviser; he'd work at our Blumund headquarters under a different identity. He was good with financial matters and certainly talented in other ways as well, so I'd hate to leave him idle.

I decided to let him oversee our magitrain project, which was a constant, aggravating thorn in my side. It's really Sir Rimuru's fault, you know—he's at the core of it all. He comes up with these wild ideas, and then he pushes me to

implement them. And that's fine! It's my job, and I won't deny that it's an attractive project to work on. But he really needs to remember that I've only got two hands. I'm an average human being, not at all like him; I need to sleep at night. It's hard to turn him down whenever he says, "It's all yours, Mollie!" to me, but when I call off a project due to budget concerns, it's often for the sake of my own health. Of course, with *this* much money on the line, that excuse is gonna stop working pretty fast—and that's why recruiting Gabbana was a stroke of luck for me.

Gabbana, by the way, complained to me on a daily basis. "Damn it," he'd grumble, "I'm thankful for this, but look at all the work you've allowed to pile up in here! I had no idea it would be *this* much of a trial!" Said "work" was all stuff Sir Rimuru had irrationally demanded from me, so I really wished he'd complain to Sir Rimuru, not me. (I *did* feel just a tad guilty, though, so I took measures to ensure he was generously compensated for the job.)

As for Alecchio, I left him in the hands of Gob'emon. The ogre mage himself requested this—he wanted to settle matters with Alecchio, apparently, after the whole thing with Bydd. So we arranged a fight...one that Alecchio had no right to refuse, but I dangled a chance at upper management in his face to sweeten the deal. It ended, as you'd expect, with Gob'emon dominating.

"Do you understand now? You're always going to find someone stronger than you. And even *I* would be considered merely above average in my homeland. Strength is not something to show off; it is hidden within your heart. It must be used for just causes, to protect the things you must never give up. That is what I was taught, and it is not too late for you, either. You ought to take this moment to reevaluate yourself."

I'd like to think that speech—plus the trouncing he received—opened Alecchio's eyes a little. And I was right. Soon he was volunteering to serve next to Gob'emon.

So things ended rather quietly for the two men who'd tried picking a fight with me. But we announced something quite different to the general public. We needed to leverage REG to give the Four Nations Trade Alliance the flashiest debut possible, but we also needed to find some happy compromise to keep REG from losing face in the process.

Thus, for starters, we took the mansion we had purchased to serve as the FNTA's Englesia branch and blew it to cinders. All the staff was evacuated in advance, but the fallout led to a lot of gossip among the general public. That, and the journalists Diablo introduced me to wrote some truly wonderful coverage for us. They portrayed REG as this fearsome, ominous entity, while singing my praises as someone who can't be intimidated. And why would I bow to mob activity like this? I'm the finance minister of Tempest, for goodness' sake.

The breakup of the Gabbana family made for big headlines as well, and between all the coverage, I think we got across to people that the FNTA's a lot bigger than they thought. On top of that, we spread rumors that REG and the FNTA had declared a truce to rest and regroup their forces. This theory came to be generally accepted by the public, and with that, the whole thing was over.

So that was how we safely got the FNTA off the ground...but looking at the earnings reports from our branches, even I was left speechless. Between you and me, these branches were earning the equivalent of several dozen gold coins an hour—more than my yearly salary as a Tempest minister in the space of one day, I suppose. In the eyes of the public, I was earning more in an hour than most of them could expect to make all year.

By the way, we also gave Benimaru and Soei payment for their services helping REG—I think around fifty gold coins per month. Soei's agents working directly for REG were earning vast amounts more, though, and all their necessary expenses were covered, too. The same went for Glenda and Girard, the people we had posing as bosses—a boss needs a lavish lifestyle, after all, or else their associates will get suspicious.

Finally, we also received compensation from our respective governments. Essentially, Big Mama, Sir Rimuru, and myself were each entitled to 2 percent of the profits. This was paid yearly, but even now, my account was growing at a shocking pace. I consider myself a lucky man, yes, but *this* lucky? It's all so scarily unreal to me.

But my ambitions don't end here. I've got big dreams, you know. I'm not about to stay satisfied with these little successes.

My name is Gard Mjöllmile, the man whose destiny was changed after I met Sir Rimuru. I want to run hard, climbing as high as I can my whole life, so that I have no regrets later on. And until death finally visits me in the end, I'm never going to stop trying.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
2

FARAWAY
MEMORIES

CHAPTER 2

FARAWAY MEMORIES

The first place Velgrynd set foot in was a rift in faraway space. Exactly where, she didn't know, but she was unbound by the limitations of time, giving her a chance to face up to herself. That enabled her to fully make her ultimate skill, Cthuga, Lord of the Fire God, her own.

Cthuga included the ability to trace the soul of Ludora. To be exact, it could track down the location of any object its master specified. Using that ability, Velgrynd was able to discover the pieces of her beloved Ludora's soul, no matter how far away they were—even beyond time and space.

After that, all she needed was a way to "jump" toward them. This was provided by Dimensional Leap—the complete, full combination of Control Dimensions and Trans-Dimensional Leap, made possible only by the powers of an ultimate skill that far transcended most others of its kind.

However, not even this skill could calculate the exact coordinates of the destination, making it impossible to leap to the time and place of one's choice. That took extra targeting—but if one was leaping within the same timeline, that ceased to be an issue. In fact, Dimensional Leap even let the user travel any distance in an instant, making de facto teleportation a reality.

So Velgrynd relied on this ability to chase after Ludora.

The first place she came to was a large landmass on one planet or another, a location where civilization was only beginning to form. Here was the leader of a tribe of dark-skinned people—a man with blond hair, still young. This man housed a piece of Ludora's soul within him.

This band of hunter-gatherers had, over time, built a permanent home for themselves in the basin of a large river. Velgrynd didn't hesitate for one moment to help them, conjuring rain and taming the river in order to create a

bountiful land. The people began to practice agriculture, doing away with hunting exclusively. Their food situation vastly improved, letting them feed more mouths than before. Their small settlement grew into a town, one that struck fear into the other villages around them.

It was inevitable that the blessed would face foreign threats in time. So Velgrynd prepared her next move. She gave them a furnace, one hardy enough to melt metal—a very out-of-place piece of technology in this world. The young man and his tribe jumped straight from stone tools to bronze ware, finding themselves gifted with tools and weapons of iron.

Swallowing up the nearby villages, the tribe grew until it became a kingdom. The throne was passed down to the king's son, and then his grandson. Velgrynd stopped directly aiding the kingdom at this point, preferring instead to sit back and nestle up to the person she loved so much. No matter how much she was asked, she never exercised her skills for the kingdom's sake. Because that was what her beloved wanted.

"If I were you, I'd make 'em owe me far more than they could ever pay back. But no, I don't need any more than this. If I retire from the throne, it'll be far too much power for those fools to handle."

"Yes. I understand fully, Ludora."

The king's sons and grandsons had no soul fragments within them, so Velgrynd had no reason to give them aid. She could have done it on a whim anyway, but the king wanted his descendants not to be dependent on anyone else, and Velgrynd intended to respect that.

"Pfft! My name's 'Ludora' again, huh? ...Great. As long as you love someone else, well, no wonder you give me the cold shoulder."

"Hee-hee-hee. Jealous? That's so cute."

"Ah, shut up. I have this first-rate woman in front of me, too. It's like being stuck in eternal limbo."

Just as he'd said, the man—who'd gone from a tribal chief to the first king of Arcia, a riverside pioneer in civilization—never enjoyed a romantic relationship with Velgrynd, despite treating her as a goddess. Velgrynd was fine with that.

Her job, she thought, was to oversee things. All she needed to do was wait for lovers to have children, pass down their bloodlines—and for one of them to have a piece of Ludora's soul.

That was how she lived her life.

An age of development evolved into an age of prosperity. Happy times passed all too quickly. The young man grew old, was robbed of his faculties, and soon the day came when he was simply waiting for death to arrive.

"I've led a happy life, my goddess. You called me your husband, but have I lived up to the role well enough?"

"Yes, you did. I was happy."

"Ah. I'm relieved to hear that. May you be eternally blessed."

Those were the great king's final words, and then his silent voice handed over his soul to Velgrynd. She had the soul fragment she wanted—but this was a tiny, tiny piece. The journey had only begun, and so Velgrynd took her next leap.

The kingdom continued to swallow up the nations around it, growing into an empire. Those left behind wrote historical records for later generations—and thus, mythology was born. And in the lands of the Holy Arcian Empire, ruled by members of the young man's bloodline, Velgrynd the fire-wielding creator goddess was worshipped for years and years to come.



Velgrynd went through a cycle of encounters and partings. Through them, she came to understand that Veldanava had created more than one world. Many of them, in fact.

A single world was self-enclosed; there was no such thing as parallel worlds, but there were so-called “other worlds,” residing in alternate dimensions. That much Velgrynd already knew thanks to the otherworlders she had met, but she hadn't imagined the sheer number of other worlds out there, and their sheer diversity. They could run on completely different laws, or be unbound by the rules of karma.

Indeed, a wealth of civilizations could intermix in the physical worlds

contained within vast spiritual realms. They could look familiar, all magic and swordfighting, or they could be bereft of magicules and locked away from all types of spells. Civilizations could be driven by a thing called science, and some of the less common realms featured human beings transformed into machines. Some worlds were small enough that a fully unleashed True Dragon could wipe them from existence; others were wastelands, fought over constantly by angels and demons with the powers of awakened demon lords.

Velgrynd traversed all of them—but not by her own free will; rather, she simply took the path she was guided to. They were all at differing levels of civilization (if they had any at all), and she couldn’t conjecture what dimension they were in, or what timeline.

No parallel worlds overlapped each other in the universe, so there were never duplicates of the same existence within the same timeline. In other words, just because she’d gone somewhere once didn’t mean that she could revisit it at any time. She *could* produce accurate space-time coordinates for herself within a single given timeline in the dimension she existed in—but that was simply the point where she existed at that moment in time, and not even Cthuga’s Dimensional Leap ability let her make precise jumps.

As a result, the knowledge Velgrynd possessed consisted of *all* memories of *all* Ludoras in *all* worlds. There was a fleet commander serving a galactic empire. In a more magic-oriented world, there was the vizier of a small kingdom. In a magic-less realm, there was a globe-trotting swindler. In a civilized world, there was a scientist living in poverty.

Velgrynd would often be “called” toward people bearing pieces of Ludora’s soul at a moment when they encountered considerable danger. Only when they were staring death in the face would their soul emit the necessary shine. She wasn’t always on time; sometimes they died as children. These were very sad scenes, but Velgrynd accepted them, chalking them up to fate. (Such tragedies, besides, let her gather the victim’s soul fragment more quickly, so she saw no need to weep for them.)

Despite this, she never tried to accelerate the march of time with her abilities. Watching over all these disparate Ludoras was how Velgrynd found happiness in life.

She discovered early on that the bloodlines of these Ludoras didn't matter much. There was no pattern to their appearance, either; one would have black hair, the next red. But in Velgrynd's eyes, all of them were Ludora. So she spent untold numbers of years living this way. The number of soul fragments grew and grew, slowly regaining their beautiful whole. Velgrynd could instinctively sense that only a very few remained—either the next one, or the one after that, would be the last. So she kept on leaping, going wherever she was called.

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Here was an empire, and after her latest space-time voyage, Velgrynd appeared in an ornate chamber. Silk robes appeared to be the standard clothing in this era—in deep blue hues, which suited her well.

Now Velgrynd regarded the other man in the room, the empire's wizened emperor.

"...Who are you?"

The emperor had lost his stamina to old age. He was lying down on a large, magnificent bed, and having this strange woman appear suddenly in their bedchamber would have surprised anyone. The fact he hadn't screamed in terror indicated that much of his courage, at least, remained intact.

But Velgrynd paid him little mind.

"Oh? It's an old man again, is it? Ah, that brings me back. That look reminds me of that tribal chief."

To her, old age didn't matter. It was just one of the many forms human beings took, an indication of their physical status. So she affectionately reached out to the old man's cheek, bringing her lips close to his ear.

"Velgrynd. That is my name. What's yours?"

"Hmph. You do not fear me? And your power... Is it divinity?"

A sword had been thrust against Velgrynd's throat. She blocked it with a single wispy finger, not bothering to even move her eyes. Not a single drop of blood was shed; the demon-destroying strike was fruitless.

The attack hadn't come from the emperor, of course, but one of the

guardians attending to him. His name was Gensei Araki, and as the imperial guardian who protected the land from man-eating fiends and evil spirits, he bore a blade with the power to dispel evil. He was the best swordsman of the present age, the current master of the sword style known as Oboro Shinmeiryu. Still in his early thirties, he had been named guardian of the emperor despite his youth.

But not even Gensei's blade could hurt Velgrynd. The reason why might have been obvious, but to Gensei, it was beyond the realm of comprehension.

"...I never thought my blade would be stopped. Minamoto, guard His Majesty for me."

"Yes, sir!"

Gensei was speaking to Saburo Minamoto, a man in his early twenties. Much like Gensei, he was guarding the emperor from the shadows. He was a talented student who was third-ranked among Gensei's pupils.



"Oh? You don't need to be that wary of me. I'm sure you're both masters of your technique, but to me, it's more cute than anything."

"Nonsense. Perhaps I can't stack up to you, but I will at least earn us some more time."

"Perhaps so." She shrugged. "I'm sure asking for your trust is a bit much yet. But all right. Can you just keep him here for me, please?"

She didn't mind being maligned, but if it led to a greater burden on the emperor, she wouldn't stand for it. By her estimation, His Majesty had only a short time left, and she couldn't bear the thought of her presence causing that last ember to be extinguished. At the very least, she wanted to care for him in his last moments, bringing tranquility to them.

It was Minamoto who suffered the worst in all this. Just one glance from Velgrynd, and he was frozen to the spot. The sheer dominance in that gaze made him realize the insurmountable difference in their skill. Actually, things went even beyond that. They now understood that this was something completely inscrutable, a foe that made all the demons and mystic beasts they'd engaged in the past seem like children. If Gensei's sword—a blade he held the utmost of respect for—had failed, Velgrynd was clearly no one to trifle with. But even *that* was failing to fully grasp the situation.

Minamoto was frustrated. He had a duty, and there was no way to fulfill it. Still, he at least tried to summon what little mettle he had left to glare at Velgrynd.

"Are you one of the *yohma* leaders, then? Striding forth yourself to put an end to all this squabbling?"

A great deal of lip-flapping to hide the cold sweat. He hoped to at least uncover the identity of this assailant, but Velgrynd understood that well enough.

"You call them *yohma* here? They exist in this world, too, then? You really *do* find them lurking everywhere, don't you?"

"Are you saying you're not?"

"That's right. Besides, the *yohma* you speak of... I can't be sure they're the same as the creatures I know."

Velgrynd could instantly analyze any language from any world and speak it fluently back at its people. This wasn't dependent on any skill of hers; it was more of a latent bodily function, reading the thoughts that bounced between people in this world. But since similar concepts could sometimes be mixed up, she needed to carefully avoid making any mistakes.

The term yohma needed to be addressed, she thought. In her mind the term translated directly to "mystic," and the mystics she knew were the ones led by Feldway, the mystic lord. They were part of the so-called Aggressors, races that exist in any and all dimensions, and they were an enemy Velgrynd had clashed with many times in her long journey. The idea of running into them yet again made her groan, but she still held out hope that these *yohma* were something else.

"*Yohma* are *yohma*. That is the only way to describe them. Not even I know what they truly are."

The emperor, not Minamoto, answered the question.

Realizing that Minamoto was immobilized, Gensei opted for a change in strategy. While Minamoto occupied Velgrynd's attention, he would move to evacuate the emperor from the room. The way the two of them instantly switched roles on their feet with no previous instruction indicated just how deeply they trusted each other. The attempt to extract the emperor was all but doomed to fail, but it was still a strategy worth trying.

It was the emperor himself who put an end to it.

"Your Majesty?!"

"It is fine. Somehow, this person fills me with a sense of nostalgia. And I am already in the safest location in the capital, protected by layers of defense. Where else could I possibly flee to? This person avoided all our security on her way here. I doubt I could ever fully escape her."

He was right. The empire—the Conquering Empire of Japan, to give its full name—was currently at war with a vast, powerful enemy, hence their current

state of high alert. If someone had actually penetrated *this* far past their strict defenses, that was as good as being defeated. But more to the point, the emperor couldn't find it in himself to fear Velgrynd. Like he'd said, she reminded him of old times—times that filled him with a sense of relief.

So he decided to trust in Velgrynd. They would go over what was happening, and if possible—he thought—he could recruit her as their ally.

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They were still in the bedchamber, enjoying some tea and light snacks brought in by attendants.

"First, let me introduce myself. I've already given my name, but I am Velgrynd."

"My name is Gensei. Gensei Araki. I am tasked with guarding His Majesty."

"And I am Saburo Minamoto, captain of the Imperial Palace Swordsman Guard."

"I see. Good to meet you. And you, Ludora?"

Velgrynd demonstrated little interest in the bodyguards. She promptly turned her attention toward the one she loved.

"I never expected such a beauty to be attending to me at my advanced age. I don't dislike it, but I can't help but wish I were even a little bit younger."

"My. Even *you* can give out flattery, Ludora? What a rare experience."

"Heh-heh... I didn't mean it as such. But very well. My name is Oharu. I thought I was better known than that in this realm, but perhaps old age has made me grow conceited."

His name was renowned far and wide, as was his reputation as a wise ruler. But Oharu was his real, non-regal name, and not one normally spoken in common circles. Not even those relatively close to the emperor used it to refer to him...but it was still a name known and respected by every one of his citizens. Still, to Velgrynd, he was Ludora. Even if it wasn't considered taboo to call the emperor "Oharu" to his face, she had no intention of doing so in the first place.

"Hee-hee-hee! You'd have no way of knowing, of course. I only came to this

world at the very first moment I met you here. The ‘you’ that I know is named Ludora, and I will keep calling you that.”

It was a shockingly rude way to speak to royalty. But one smile from the emperor indicated that this was fully allowed.

“That is fine.”

“Your Majesty?!”

“I don’t mind. A small price to pay, if it earns me the favor of this goddess. However, I’m afraid I cannot allow you to stand by my side in public.”

“No? Why not?”

“I have my own position to uphold. If I am waited upon by someone who calls me a name no one’s heard before, it would cause needless worry for my retainers.”

If Velgrynd were to exercise her powers in front of everyone in the empire, that would likely lead to chaos. The emperor was making this request merely to keep things simple for himself. Velgrynd, understanding that, resolved not to push her personal will on him any further. She wanted to meekly accept any requests Ludora had for her, so for now, she went along with it. That wasn’t as important as learning what was going on here anyway.

“In that case, we’ll need to figure out how I should present myself at times when I need to be in public. Can you explain to me exactly what the current situation is in this place?”

Velgrynd was never one to beat around the bush. If Ludora was facing a crisis, she was ready to provide any help needed. Seeing this transcendental being act like that around the emperor immediately gave his two bodyguards headaches.

This Velgrynd is boundlessly powerful, I am sure. Perhaps divine, just as His Majesty said. Wiser to seek her assistance than get on her wrong side, then?

Such were Gensei’s thoughts. But Minamoto was more conflicted.

She seems remarkably reverent of His Majesty. Why is that? It’s almost like everything is entirely natural about this. We completely failed to guard him, but His Majesty is allowing this, and I am in no position to intervene. But what about

Her Majesty the Empress, and the imperial prince? How will we explain this to them...?

Minamoto's mind was pondering real, concrete problems. In some worlds, it would have been a given that someone as lofty as a king or emperor would keep one or two mistresses without anyone batting an eye—but not here. The emperor's spouse was always expected to come from the right sort of pedigree, since any child they produced would become a member of the royal lineage. The women surrounding the emperor were obliged to stay in highly stratified positions; an impenetrable wall was in place at all times between the empress and the concubines. They would have to present Velgrynd to the court as a concubine; there was no other option.

But will this woman be satisfied with that? If she demands to be installed as empress, there's nothing we can do to stop her...

The worry-prone Minamoto was already thinking well into the future. His duty was to guard the imperial palace, but if the emperor, his wife, and Velgrynd fell into a conflict, the fallout could be disastrous. Perhaps, he thought, he wasn't worrying too much after all. There was a large burden on his mind, for he was constantly thinking about the safety of the entire court—as opposed to Gensei, who only had to protect the emperor.

Still, Minamoto thought, Velgrynd deserved an answer to her question just now.

"Allow me to explain. Our empire, the Conquering Empire of Japan, currently finds itself in an extremely tense situation. In terms of the enemies we are aware of..."

An empire usually refers to a large group of states ruled by the supreme authority of an emperor, but in the Conquering Empire of Japan, that wasn't quite the nuance. Here, "empire" was more of a respectful term, passed down unbroken across generations, to refer to the island nation located in the eastern part of the world. Its emperor, and the guardians who served him, protected this nation's citizens from those who sided with evil.

But outside the country's borders, the world was in a deep state of chaos.

The empire lay to the east. To the south there was the United States of

Azeria; to the north, the Greater Rossiam Dynasty; to the west, the Holy Arcian Empire; and in the center, the Republic of Chinese Fiefdoms. These five forces had arisen to become the great leaders in their respective regions.

Until a few decades ago, they had ruthlessly competed with each other for global dominance, but over time, a sort of equilibrium had established itself. As they carefully watched each other, waiting for their rival forces to decay, they'd wound up building mature international economic relationships. On the surface, war no longer existed, and an era of peace seemed ready to dawn.

But national discontent over neighbors never fully vanished, and if someone earned a profit, someone else needed to lose out. This dissatisfaction built up over time, smoldering out of sight, and four years ago, it exploded.

The trigger came when the Republic of Chinese Fiefdoms suffered a large-scale drought. The lack of water led to starvation and rampant disease outbreaks. This unavoidably led to a dissident movement, but the Republic's government manipulated this discontent, pointing it outside its borders in order to protect itself. Now the entire world had gotten involved.

For their first move, the Chinese turned their attention southward, to a large grain-producing region. The National People's Council voted unanimously to invade the United States of Azeria, and that signaled the beginning of war. In a flash, the entire world was in conflict.

The Greater Rossiam Dynasty up north was the next to react after witnessing the Chinese military moves. They staged their own invasion of the Chinese mainland, and their mission was clear—to obtain land for agriculture and a warm-water port. The region was suffering from an extreme drought, but that would no doubt fix itself in a few years...and so Rossiam returned to its old habit of conquest.

Naturally, the Chinese weren't taking this sitting down. All their remaining forces gathered to fight back, plunging the entire nation into a state of war. This was when the Conquering Empire of Japan got dragged in. They relied wholly on these Chinese fiefdoms for their food supply, and so were forced to deploy their military to the Republic on a "humanitarian mission." That was done in the hopes it'd bring the war to a quick end, but Greater Rossiam was incensed, and

Japan's relationship with Azeria suffered. Japan had been forced to pick a side between Azeria and the Chinese, and it chose its main food lifeline.

The Holy Arcian Empire made no moves at first, but the relative peace there didn't even last a year. It was soon the empire's turn to face severe famine, forcing it to cut off the support it had been giving other countries. The bad news continued with an accident at an oil storage facility, and the resulting fire cost the empire three years' worth of fuel. The evidence left on the scene indicated that it was the work of saboteurs from Rossiam. The mood among the people took a sharp anti-Rossiam turn, and the momentum finally drove the empire to start a military operation.

One person had suspicions about all these events. This was Pulcinella, the Mad Priest and leader of the Holy Spiritualist Church. Spiritualism was one of the world's three major religions, alongside Buddhism and the Free Path—and Pulcinella, its most prominent figure, had spoken of a vision that told him of a great, evil presence behind the scenes. Affiliated churches across the land began to investigate this, and they managed to track down a *yohma* that had allegedly played a major role...but by then, it was too late.

"So this *yohma* manipulated people's greed and set off a bunch of old grudges?"

"I'm afraid so," Minamoto replied. "Looking back with a clear mind, it's simply too convenient a series of events. But once the anger of the people is ignited, it's not easy to douse the flames."

"And it wasn't just the Spiritualist Church," added Gensei. "All the world's leaders picked up on this anomaly within a year's time. But there are a lot of extremists in the military. They took action in response to the enemy's sabotage, and by the time we were aware of it, there was no way left to stop the war."

The other nations were in a similar state. As things stood, matters were proceeding not at all the way the upper brass wanted them to. The forces that had been deployed were nearly out of their control entirely. Just the other day, out in the ocean, a massive fleet from the United States of Azeria waged an epic sea battle against the Conquering Empire's proud imperial navy. The result was

defeat. The preliminary reconnaissance indicated that the two sides were evenly matched, but once the conflict was underway, they'd found that the Azerian force was three times the size they'd anticipated.

"It was all the work of the Chinese fleet. They betrayed us...and unfortunately, their intentions are nowhere close to what we want."

Not even the Chinese commanders were aware of this betrayal, so there was no way for Japan's intelligence apparatus to have detected it. It was already too late by the time they realized what was up, and now their military was severely damaged. But the defeat wasn't a total waste, either.

"There's a certain piece of intelligence my student risked his life to obtain. There is a man named Kondo who staged a brave, glorious suicide attack on the enemy fleet, but just before his death, he sent a telepathic message that the enemy commanders have been taken over by an unusually fierce *yohma*."

As Gensei put it, Azerian supreme southern fleet commander David Reagan and Chinese eastern fleet commander Li Jinlong had both tapped into strange, mystical powers to interfere with Kondo. Realizing all hope was lost, Kondo kept gathering intelligence until the very end, when contact was finally lost. "But now," Gensei somberly said, "I fear he lost his life in vain."

Hearing this, Velgrynd immediately understood. The Kondo that Gensei spoke of had to be none other than Lieutenant Tatsuya Kondo, a man she knew well. Chances are, she thought, Kondo was so concerned about Ludora because Ludora felt the same as the other emperor he'd once served. Perhaps he'd instinctively realized that Ludora and Oharu shared the same soul. It was the first time Velgrynd had ever felt any affinity for Kondo—and now, she could firmly believe that Kondo's loyalty was the real thing.

Now Velgrynd had to wonder about not just Ludora's lingering regrets but Kondo's as well. Thinking back, Kondo had seemed frustrated about not being able to protect his home country. That was why he'd done what he did for Ludora, stopping at nothing; it was so he'd have no regrets this time. It made Velgrynd ask herself if there was anything she could do for Kondo, as late as it was. There was only one option. She had to atone for his regrets.

So Velgrynd, her mind made up, focused on the conversation, taking it more

seriously as Minamoto continued unaware.

This *yohma*, wielding the power to possess people's bodies, was swiftly reported to the world's top leaders. These leaders weren't on the front lines, however, and so they had no way to determine exactly who was being controlled. You could suspect someone if they began to act abnormally, of course, but it was hard to recall officers while they were engaged in an operation. The leaders considered publicizing these findings, but it was sure to cause general panic. Soldiers would start wondering if their commanding officers were *yohma*; the entire chain of command might fall apart. It could also lead to witch hunts within their borders, which would be a disaster. That much, at least, needed to be prevented, and so their investigations continued in secret.

In the end, they found that these *yohma*, unlike your average *mononoke* ghoul, engaged in organized group behavior. They were clearly looking to conquer, and they were active behind the scenes across the world.

"And also, they're incredibly strong. In our empire, we use what's called a *kaikyu*, an apparition scale, to measure the strength of mystical creatures. Even the weakest of these foes rank on the high end of this scale. It's unbelievable. These are truly fearsome foes, the type even an advanced swordsman or spellcaster may have trouble holding his own against."

The apparition scale, from top to bottom, consisted of six ranks: *shinbutsu* (gods and buddhas), *kiryu* (demon dragons), *ten'yo* (heavenly ghouls), high *yokai*, mid *yokai*, and low *yokai*. Those in the bottom two ranks were called *chimi-moryo*, evil spirits associated with rivers and mountains, and everything between high *yokai* and *ten'yo* were *akki-rasetsu*, the man-eating fiends. With these *yohma*, even the weakest foot soldiers were *ten'yo* class. Kondo and the soldiers serving him had discovered this during their suicide strike on the enemy fleet, and while they'd been defeated by the ringleader, their intelligence had made it through.

"Kondo estimated that Reagan and Li both ranked as *kiryu* or higher on the apparition scale...and I firmly believe that is the right call."

"Why is that?"

"Because Kondo was easily one of the most powerful fighters in the Land of the Rising Sun."

Even at the time of this final attack, Kondo's skill was first class. Mastering the Oboro Shinmei-ryu's ultimate move—Battlewill—gave him fighting ability on the level of a *kiryu* class. If that still wasn't enough to earn him victory, that was likely because the battle was two against one.

"Yes, that man certainly *was* of that caliber."

"...?"

"Huh?"

"Did you know Tatsuya, perhaps?"

"I did, Ludora. Kondo personally served you in my world, too."

"Me? And...ah yes, you did say this Ludora possessed the same soul I do."

"Exactly. And even over there, Kondo fought for you...and died a noble death doing so."

"..."

The emperor fell silent. He looked unsure what to say. The loss of such a faithful servant filled him with a deep sense of disappointment.

"Oh no, not Kondo..."

Minamoto stood there blankly, like he couldn't believe it. That was how exceptional a swordfighter Kondo was. Part of him had wondered if Kondo was alive after all, if he could serve as their final option against the *yohma*. Being faced with the truth made him unsure what to do next.

"A pity. I was hoping that Kondo was alive."

Gensei, Minamoto's teacher, retained his calm, detached demeanor, but on the inside, he was fighting hard to hide the sadness of losing that last little bit of hope. It was out of the question for a man in his position to act flustered, unsure what to do with himself. He kept himself disciplined, because he of all people had the greatest obligation to remain tranquil.

Everybody believed what Velgrynd told them. It was a funny thing to think,

but as she told them all about Kondo's final moments, they could just sense she wasn't lying. But as she spoke, Velgrynd also tried to gauge the strength of this current foe.

If they could beat Kondo before his trip to our own world, then perhaps this "ten'yo" rank isn't all that strong at all? I'm fairly sure that they mean mystics when they say "yohma," but this sounds like it'd be no threat at all to me...but, ah, I shouldn't let my guard down. I can't make judgments if I have no scale to work with, so let's wait and see how this works out.

Velgrynd was extremely confident, like any all-powerful True Dragon should be, but having been defeated by Rimuru had taught her how to be watchful as well. She thought it almost impossible that these *yohma* would pose her any challenge, but she reserved her final judgment for when she had more information.

To tell the truth, however, her estimations at this point in time were both right and wrong. The magicule concentration in this world was low, so there were no particularly powerful monsters residing in it. The *shinbutsu*-class menaces were often monsters who happened to traverse here from some other world, and not even they could win against a force large enough to overwhelm them. Swordsmen or casters working in tandem had cut their numbers down to the point that one hardly saw them at all anymore. This meant monsters of that caliber couldn't survive long enough to build their magicule counts. The environment just wasn't conducive to the natural creation of strong monsters.

At this point, Velgrynd, unlike Veldora, could maintain a steady cycle of magicules entirely within her own body. She didn't need to replenish them from the air, and they were never expelled from her body. That was a skill she'd learned as she traveled through all the diverse worlds she had seen. As a result, she wasn't paying attention to this world's magicule concentration, so she hadn't picked up on that fact yet. It was normally impossible, after all, to go back the way you'd come when traversing worlds. Even if you had an Underworld Gate handy, you'd still be limited by the size of the portal. Someone like Velgrynd, who could use her Dimensional Leap skill with no limitations, was a blatant exception to the laws of nature.

Therefore, compared to the magicule-rich environment in which Velgrynd was

born, the standards for “strength” in this world were quite low. She did not have to wait long to see this for herself.



After this conference with the emperor and his guard, Velgrynd had a general grasp of what was going on. The Conquering Empire of Japan had no chance of staging a miraculous comeback; before much longer, it’d fall into the hands of its invaders. All the world’s leaders were aware of the truth, but they were helpless to stop the rampage of the people—and the military that represented them.

“So what is the enemy currently doing?”

The enemy’s unified fleet, fresh from decimating the imperial navy Kondo belonged to, was currently an unknown, their movements a mystery. At least some of the empire’s ships should have survived, but all contact with them had been fully cut off.

“Normally, our fleet would have surrendered the moment its defeat was clear. The news of that should have reached the homeland by now...but still, nothing.”

“By my estimation, I think they might have been seized by the *yohma*. Our enemy is not bound by the laws of humanity, though, so perhaps they did not accept our surrender...”

“I am wondering about Kondo’s phrasing as well. He described it as a ‘takeover’ of their bodies, which indicates this *yohma* can possess people from the inside. If so, we’re unlikely to have any survivors.”

Personnel had been assigned to bring back intelligence, but there was virtually no contact from them. If every single sailor had been possessed by the *yohma*, it would certainly explain this situation.

“They’re in the Great South Sea, where there’s no escape route. We’ve asked the other nations to try reaching out to them as well, but nothing. They’d have no reason to lie to us about that, so it seems fairly clear that our war power’s been taken from us.”

It was just one possibility, but if true, it would be disastrous. Even the greatest

swordsman in humanity hadn't been able to take on the enemy's leader, and their elite, well-trained military might have all just been sacrificed to the *yohma*. They couldn't expect their military to retaliate going forward, and sending any further troops would likely just be more grist for the mill.

So Gensei and the others decided to focus fully on defending the imperial capital.

"All it'd do is buy us some time. You understand that, of course."

"Naturally. There's only one move we can make right now. We've deployed some dependable personnel to work out the enemy's moves. Once they're done, we'll gather the most powerful force we can from across the world and defeat the enemy's leader."

"I think the plan's unlikely to work, but we have no other choice. I mean, if we had Kondo, he could have defeated this enemy if there was only *one* of them! But now we have two ranking as a *kiryu* or higher, and he couldn't even make good his escape. If we can bring together myself, my master Araki, and Amari as well, and join up with the great heroes of all the other nations, then perhaps we *can* defeat the *yohma* leaders!"

Masahiko Amari was another student swordsman, a master who'd competed with Kondo for the title of number one. He was also an expert in spellcasting and an intelligence specialist, and he was out on a secret mission right now. And he was far from the Land of the Rising Sun's only hidden talent. Emperor Oharu didn't bring it up, but Gensei wasn't his only imperial guardian.

There were great talents from other nations to think of, too, people ranking *kiryu* or higher that worked both in public and underground. Pulcinella the Mad Priest was one famous example, as was Xienhua, the Holy Fist; based on what information had reached the Conquering Empire about them, they were both forces to be reckoned with. It would take heroes like those banding together to overcome this international crisis; fail, and all of them would fall.

Oharu knew all too well that this whole idea was a fantasy. And that wasn't even the end to their problems.

"The issue is that we don't know if these are just two enemy leaders we're dealing with. I hate to think otherwise, but..."

"But if there are more," said Velgrynd, "that's bad news for us?"

"Precisely," Gensei bitterly stated. In order to defeat a *kiryu*-level monster, he'd like to have at least twice as many fighters ranked equally to it or higher, but if they didn't have an accurate gauge of the enemy's size, it'd be impossible to assemble heroes from around the world. For Japan, the top priority was to keep their empire's key figures safe. There was a mound of problems to deal with.

Ideally, they'd be able to lure out these *kiryu*-class *yohma* one at a time. If that proved impossible, they'd need to fight as many as they could feasibly beat. If the enemy outnumbered them, defeat was unavoidable.

But then things began to change. Velgrynd, watching Gensei and the others fret over this, offered them an irresistible helping hand.

"Hmm... Sounds like you have a lot of problems. But all right. I'll help you out. For starters, I want you to show me the extent of your powers."

"Huh? What do you...? This is so sudden..."

"Well, we can't form a strategy if we don't even know our enemy, now can we? I want to know just how strong these *yohma* are."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's simple. Your name was Gensei, right? If you were Kondo's teacher, you have to be at least as good as he was, I'm assuming? I only arrived on this world a moment ago, so I don't understand what counts as 'strong' around here yet. So I'll start with you first, all right?"

"Ah... Now I see. Yes, I would outclass Kondo in terms of ability. I have special moves I have yet to show anyone in public, along with powerful finishers only passed down among my style's originator and his pupils. But I will say that Kondo was unwaveringly strong in his convictions. His spirit was amazing, and his drive to win was far greater than you'd normally see. If I had fought a serious bout with him, luck would have been a major factor in the resulting outcome."

So, long story short, they were pretty equal. Slight differences in power were too inconsequential to concern Velgrynd. She just wanted a yardstick to work

with, so she decided to test him out at once.



They moved over to a practice ground. Gensei had Minamoto leave them, as he couldn't show his student his most powerful of moves; the only outsider here was the emperor.

Velgrynd, unarmed, sized up Gensei. He had his beloved blade in his hand, but he began to feel concerned. His opponent's silk robe, while not restricting her movement, was clearly unfit for battle and unlikely to offer her any protection. The moves Gensei had could kill instantly if he put his heart into them. He didn't expect them to best Velgrynd, but he wondered if they might injure her.

"I want to ask a question," he said, steeling his resolve. "My pardons if this sounds rude, but are you sure you'd like me to use a real sword? Because the very best of my style's moves could perhaps be a threat to you..."

Velgrynd understood he only said this out of concern for her. She could have ignored the question, but thought it better to relieve his mind a little. That way, she thought, he wouldn't hesitate to show off his full force.

"How very kind of you. But don't worry. Your weapon—you called it an *uchi-gatana*, didn't you? It looks like a high-quality antique, but sadly, it won't work on me. So don't be afraid to come at me with everything you have."

Gensei's blade was actually run-of-the-mill, not even meriting a Unique appraisal. In a world as starved for magicules as this one, swords couldn't do things like evolve over time.

So, without further delay, Gensei took the invitation.

"Kiehhh!!"

Focusing all his explosive fighting energy, he broke out the mightiest skill in the Oboro Shinmei-ryu—Multilayered Blossom Flash. Unfortunately, nothing blossomed from it. The exquisitely honed move was stopped by a single one of Velgrynd's fingertips.

His blade whisked and swished through the air, almost looking like it was splitting apart into multiple weapons. Its speed was beyond what a regular person could perceive, but it was simply too slow in Velgrynd's eyes.



"If that's your full effort, then I've seen enough."

"I—I give..."

Simply calling it a "difference in power" seemed trite. It was like comparing heaven and earth, or perhaps even something beyond that, and the yawning gap between them was now obvious for all to see.

It was a grave disappointment for Gensei, but thanks to that, Velgrynd now had the information she wanted. Gensei's *Hakkasen* was a secret art, one passed down only through the main branch of his sword style; it had never been taught to Kondo. Doubtlessly it was at the very top of this world when it came to almighty force. In terms of the muscle behind it, *Hakkasen* let its practitioner surpass *kiryu* and make it to the *shinbutsu* rank.

"You truly are a god, then...?"

"Well, it was my brother who created my world...but no, I am not."

"Oh... We could certainly call that a god here, you understand."

"Yes, the term 'god' can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the time and place. You can think of me as whatever you like, but I will remind you that there are forces out there who could even destroy me."

Velgrynd recalled that happy-go-lucky slime. Losing to him still annoyed her, but she was no longer convinced that a rematch would go any better.

But I certainly can't think of Rimuru as a "god," either. Perhaps the correct way to think about it is that such things don't exist...?

That was all the thought Velgrynd gave to the question. It didn't seem like further consideration would provide an answer anytime soon. What mattered right now was the *yohma*, their enemy in this world.

"Thank you for confronting me. It was a painful reminder of just how immature and insignificant I truly am. I must use this experience to further improve myself."

Velgrynd paid little attention to this. A theory was quickly beginning to form in her mind.

Gensei and Kondo were pretty much equal in strength—but that strength was far below what Kondo had when she'd met him. When humans in physical space crosses between worlds, most will die from the resulting exposure to concentrated magicules. On rare occasions, however, the magicules can break down and reconstruct their bodies, making these humans tougher and more resilient.

Right, right, I forgot about that. The magicule counts on this world are so weak. It must be hard to cast any sort of spell, and magical body enhancement likely hasn't advanced much. If that was powered entirely by his natural strength, he honestly deserves praise for producing that much force.

She recalled the blow she'd felt on her fingertip. It would have been lauded as an A-ranked feat back in her home world—a very impressive one, considering his weapon was Rare-level at best.

Now she could picture the strength of their enemy.

The ten'yo class is likely somewhere between B and A-minus, I suppose. You'd have to jump up to kiryu before reaching over-A territory, perhaps? If so, I think my theory about the yohma being mystics is right.

"Mystics" was the term given to demi-spiritual Aggressor species. In physical space, they could only function for brief periods if they weren't incarnated in physical bodies. In a world with as few magicules as this one, possessing someone else's body was a must—you'd waste far too much energy otherwise. But when in possession of such a body, you wouldn't be able to fully unleash your latent power, not without tearing the human's body apart.

It must weaken them terribly. You can't expect magicule-based protection in this world, so if you use a ton of power at once, you'll destroy your body. And maybe they wouldn't care if they were just trying to kill their enemies—maybe they're holding back because their goal is invasion? That must be why the Kondo of this space-time period was a good match for them...

If the mystics wanted to exercise their full force, nobody on this planet could ever beat them. Reaching that conclusion, Velgrynd smiled, reveling in the knowledge that someone like *her* was on the scene. Even against Feldway, lord of the mystics, she was confident that she'd figure out a way to win—and there

was little chance Feldway himself was involved with this invasion.

And, in fact, it was exactly as Velgrynd predicted. The invaders of this world were a vanguard force of mystics under the command of Cornu, one of the Three Mystic Leaders. The Underworld Gate that had naturally manifested in this world was small, too small for Cornu himself to emerge through. Work to enlarge it was underway, but the world still had a little more time before it could be fully conquered. And while Velgrynd hadn't inferred all these facts yet, what she had now was sufficient.

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As composed as he seemed, Gensei was feeling rather down. And who could blame him? These sword skills he'd believed were the very best had done absolutely nothing against Velgrynd. Not even his most hidden of moves had worked. He intellectually knew she was a being from another dimension, but it was hard for his emotions to accept that.

Still, he labored to keep his heart tranquil, exercising his finely honed mental strength to its limits.

"You should be proud," Velgrynd said to him with a smile. "There are hardly any magicules in this world, and you still attained *that* much strength. I doubt many others here have come even close to it. If you could only take in more magicules to upgrade your body with, you might've made it to Saint level, to say nothing of Enlightened. That *is* a pity, certainly."

"Enlightened? Ah, that is a faraway goal for me."

"Oh, not necessarily... I know: As thanks for that demonstration, let me give you a little reward. Hopefully you're willing to accept it?"

"A reward?"

"Yes. If you are interested, I could perhaps reforge that *uchi-gatana* with my powers."

She smiled again. With her Create Material skill, she could conjure up a God-class weapon whenever she wanted. Here, she intended to charge Gensei's sword up with magicules, giving it what it needed to evolve.

"You can do...?"

You can do even that?

Gensei was bewildered by the idea, but nothing could surprise him at this point. This woman Velgrynd was far too lofty a being for him to fully comprehend; if she says she can do it, Gensei thought, she probably can.

This sword is a family treasure passed down from my ancestors...but perhaps I can trust Velgrynd with it.

Convincing himself this was the right choice, he bowed his head to her and passed his beloved blade over.

“Please, go ahead.”

“Certainly. Just leave this to me.”

Velgrynd nodded as she accepted the sword. Normally she'd just have conjured up an azure dragon sword at times like these, but that wasn't what this situation called for. She closely inspected the blade's internal composition, fine-tuning her approach as she began letting her magicules flow into it. It took time, and she looked far more serious and focused than she had during their battle. Half an hour passed. The skill and ingenuity of the ancient swordsmith, coupled with the magicules so expertly controlled by Velgrynd, came together to create a divine, glowing aura that enveloped the blade.

“All done.”

This sort of weapon evolution usually took centuries to millennia to complete. But in this short time, Velgrynd had recrafted Gensei's sword into a God-class wonder.

“Wh-what is this...?!”

“It's now the best weapon it can be, is what. Probably more so than any other blade in this world. I doubt you can make full use of its features yet, but...well, either way, the sword now has its own consciousness, so if it accepts you, I'm sure it'll lend you some of its strength.”

She chuckled a little, her radiant smile captivating Gensei.

“Of course, I can't say whether that'll happen for you or your descendants, but...”

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It was now evening—dinnertime—and Oharu was in his chamber. Velgrynd had been invited as well, and she was eager to accept the offer.

The palace's female attendants were all carefully selected, well-trained, and unfazed by unexpected events. Not even the sight of Velgrynd perturbed them as they prepared a meal for her like nothing was amiss. Minamoto took up guard duty outside the door, with Gensei positioned behind Oharu; only the emperor and his unannounced guest were seated.

"So what exactly are your plans here?"

"I'm going to stay here with you. I'll protect you."

"I am certainly happy to hear that, but should I take that to mean you are an ally to our empire?"

"That is correct, yes."

Velgrynd smiled. Just being able to share this space with Ludora made her content.

Oharu chuckled nervously, unsure how to take this. "In that case," he said, "do you think you could eliminate all conflict from the world and put my mind at ease for good?"

He was merely joking, of course, but Velgrynd simply smiled back.

"Very well, then. If you wish for it, I will offer you this entire world as a present. I will gladly do away with whatever countries you'd prefer not to have around, and I can shut down anyone who dares to complain about it. But before that, we really need to exterminate these pesky little *yohma*, don't we?"

Seeing that innocent smile on her face as she replied made everyone unsure how to respond. The attendant setting up dinner almost spilled soup all over the tablecloth. Everyone in attendance instinctively knew Velgrynd meant every word of it. But meaning it and actually being capable of it were two different things. This kind of talk was beyond the realm of sensibility; if anyone else had said those things, they'd have been laughed off as delirious rantings. But there was something about Velgrynd that kept them from dismissing the idea. Gensei knew what she really was; Gensei knew this was no joke, but something that

was realistically possible. And so did Oharu.

"Ha-ha-ha! Ah, I haven't laughed like this in ages. Telling a joke that even my attendants here take seriously... You've truly outdone yourself. I certainly enjoy how dauntless you sound, though! And I do appreciate the thought, too."

For now, the emperor opted to dance around the topic to avoid causing his staff any further alarm.

It wasn't news by now that Velgrynd was superhuman, a fact made even clearer by their dinner conversation. She wasn't just physically strong; her thought processes were equally fearsome.

Only then did Oharu come to realize that she really *would* do anything for him. If he ordered her to annihilate another country, Velgrynd would very likely carry it out. Concepts of good and evil were mere trifles for her; all that really mattered was Oharu's will. It made him feel more lost than he had at any previous point in his life.

He was born as the first heir to the throne, never wanting for anything. He never had any freedom, either, but that—as he was taught from a very young age—was his obligation as a future leader. He had access to anything he needed, but was also forced to give up on the things he really wanted. Things like romance were a fantasy to him. He was wed to the daughter of one of the princes who supported him in the palace. It was mostly a contractual agreement, and he had no right to refuse it.

As naturally intelligent as Oharu was, he realized by his teens that the only permanent thing in life is change. Everything is fleeting; the world is like a mirage. It's a good thing to pursue your dreams with all you have, as everything leaves you anyway—but if you choose not to resist fate, just going with the flow and tasting the little joys of daily life, that is just as beautiful a way to live. Oharu chose the latter. Even for an emperor with everything, the right to do what he wanted was an impossible luxury.

That was the main reason Velgrynd came as such a surprise to him. She had so much *freedom*, nothing and nobody keeping her down...and yet she swore to serve no one but Oharu.

Such a strange woman...or goddess, I suppose. Even if I'm nothing but a

substitute for this Ludora person, feeling this honest sort of goodwill makes me feel so...self-conscious, somehow.

Oharu pondered these feelings as he enjoyed the most relaxing dinner he'd had in quite a while.

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The next morning, a conference was held in the imperial headquarters. The main topic at hand: how to deal with Velgrynd. As Oharu had declared, she was prohibited from acting as his lover in front of any third party—but if that were the case, the first order of business was how to explain her position to the general public.

Beyond that, there was the issue of her clothing. Being dressed like a foreigner was out of the question; she needed to wear an outfit befitting her social position. The attendants all teamed up to bring in a vast variety of clothing, Gensei and Minamoto offering their input as well as Oharu contemplated how to classify Velgrynd.

“Perhaps she could become another one of His Majesty’s imperial attendants —”

“Attendants can’t participate in conferences, you fool,” Gensei said, cutting off Minamoto before he could finish.

“I suppose calling her a guard would be difficult as well?”

“We did consider that, Your Majesty, but Velgrynd’s appearance simply attracts too much attention. She is clearly not ethnically native, and I fear people may peg her as a spy.”

If her facial features were more Japanese, this wouldn’t have been an issue. But Velgrynd had a Scandinavian sort of beauty, which made her stick out like a sore thumb around here. When they introduced her to the rest of the guard and espionage corps, those individuals would no doubt ask why a foreigner had been granted such a lofty post. But at the same time, they were sure Velgrynd wouldn’t agree to be sequestered away from all the other officials—and they couldn’t let Velgrynd’s formidable fighting power go to waste when she was so amenable to being their ally.

But just as they were trying to figure out a solution, Velgrynd herself spoke up.

"Well, all right. I really don't like doing this much, and I *certainly* don't want to right now, but I'll change my outward appearance for you. Will something like this work?"

The next moment, Velgrynd began to transform. Her hair turned dark, as did her eyes, and her skin adopted a warmer shade, almost hinting at yellow, with a touch of red to it.

"Wowww... You can even pull off a trick like *that!*"

Minamoto never saw it coming. Gensei, on the other hand, had assumed she could do that much all along. "I see we had nothing to worry about," Oharu said, relieved.

A slight adjustment to the pigment of her skin did wonders to change the overall impression she left. It still wasn't exactly pure Japanese, but it was close enough that they could explain away the remaining difference. Then, without further ado, she was given the same uniform as Gensei and officially appointed to the Imperial Patrol by Oharu, providing her the right to attend the necessary meetings.

It is worth noting here that the emperor had no fewer than three different organizations charged with guarding him.

The first was the Imperial Palace Swordsman Guard, the sole force permitted to carry weapons within the palace—however, only Minamoto, their captain, was allowed to personally enter the emperor's chambers. The second was the similar-named Imperial Palace Spellcaster Guard, which magically protected the emperor from hostile spell-driven attacks and the like. Their main work was keeping a spiritual protective barrier up and running at all times; in terms of individual fighting strength, they were inferior to the swordsmen. Like their sister force, only the captain could personally attend to the emperor—but that captain was occupied with defending the capital and hadn't been seen over the past few days.



Finally there was the Imperial Patrol, composed of the Court Guardians that generally operated individually. Gensei was one of them, a highly public figure, but not all of them were listed in the official annals. Some lurked in darkness as they worked to dispel evil; many had so-called supernatural powers, while others operated separately from the imperial chamber, so they could serve as body doubles for Oharu. The Imperial Patrol gathered together people that worked in a variety of ways to keep the emperor safe, and it was generally known that not all of them kept a public profile. Thus Oharu thought that the Patrol would be the best fit for someone like Velgrynd.

"Right. I hereby name you a member of the Imperial Patrol. And with your current appearance, we likely won't have to explain much to everyone else."

"I will gladly accept the post. And I promise I'll act strictly as your servant around others."

Velgrynd, in her brand-new military uniform, sounded remarkably eager in her answer. A sense of doom pervaded among the emperor's advisers, but no one had any other bright ideas. Even if some problem came up, they all reasoned, as they began their preparations, it'd be trivial compared to the ones the *yohma* invaders posed.

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People began to gather in the imperial HQ's meeting hall. Oharu was in a dressing room, watching them.

This HQ was the emperor's supreme high command, presiding over the imperial army and navy—the two branches of the Conquering Empire of Japan's military. These were led by the minister of the army and minister of the navy respectively, who were obliged to attend meetings like this. They could send a representative instead, but it was very rare, as it was seen as insulting the emperor.

Over the past few days of conferences, the main item on the agenda had been reporting on the current situation. The decisive battle in the Great South Sea had ended with the imperial navy suffering a major loss. They weren't even sure what had happened to the survivors yet, something both branches were exercising all their powers to find out.

That being said, the army was acting a bit like this was someone else's problem. They didn't have a way to deploy in the water, they claimed, but Oharu reasoned that they were failing to truly understand the threat involved. *Damned fools*, he thought. *Now isn't the time to be competing against each other for glory!* But as emperor, he couldn't say it. When you have as much authority as him, your words take on intense weight. He could say what he wanted in private, but in a public place, he had to be careful with every word he spoke.

Even now, an army officer in attendance was wailing out loud, unaware of Oharu's inner conflict.

"Who are *you*?! And how dare a woman enter this sacred imperial conference?!"

Ahhh, I knew it, Oharu thought, feeling a headache coming on. These people with far more pride than talent, constantly whining about manners and who's above whom. It was self-evident something like this would happen, but if Oharu had personally introduced her at the meeting, the backlash would've been even worse—all his advisers had agreed on that. So he'd left Velgrynd to Gensei instead.

Just as I thought, these men with more hormones than brains are whining about it. Even though she'll kill them if they rile her...and probably raze the capital while she's at it...

Oharu heaved a heavy sigh. Perhaps it was the fate of anyone bearing Ludora's soul to have their hands full dealing with Velgrynd their whole lives.

"Are you talking about me, perhaps?"

"Do I need to spell it out for you, you dunce?! This is exactly why— *Grnh*!?"

Suddenly, the officer's grating voice stopped cold. In a move faster than anyone could catch, Velgrynd had grabbed the man by his collar and thrust the barrel of a handgun straight into his mouth.

"It'd be one thing," she stated with a thin smile, "if we were fighting with swords and lances like in the past. But at this point, when a single pull of a trigger can kill a person, I *really* don't think whether you're male or female

matters so much. The *important* thing in this era is analyzing the situation and making calm, rational decisions, not letting your emotions do the talking. If *that's* how you carry on, though, do you really deserve to be here?"

The man wouldn't have been able to overpower Velgrynd in the first place, but the sight of a gun, a symbol of violence anyone could instantly understand, sparked a furor in the meeting hall.

"H-hey! Let the chief of staff go!"

"Guns aren't allowed in here! Security! Someone call the palace guard!!"

Velgrynd laughed, paying them little mind. "Why are all you idiots carrying on over a little toy? You call yourselves honorable imperial soldiers, acting like that?"

Several of those who heard this turned red with anger, openly glaring at Velgrynd. She paid them no mind as she threw the chief of staff down, pointed the toy handgun at him, and pulled the trigger. A plume of water landed right on his crotch.

"Hee-hee-hee! Looks like you wet your pants, didn't you? Better go home and get changed."

"H-how—how *dare* you—?"

The chief of staff was now quivering in humiliation. But the moment he looked into Velgrynd's eyes, he lost his voice. Her eyes terrified him. He felt them telling him that any more childish carrying-on would result in his death. The blood drained from his face.

"Ha... Ha-ha-ha... My pardons. I think I let my emotions get the best of me. Y-yes, those water guns certainly bring me back. I feel like a child again. Much calmer."

"Oh? Well, that's good to hear. If you want to participate in this meeting, mind your manners a little more, would you?"

The chief of staff eagerly nodded. He was hot-tempered and a little arrogant by nature, but he was no idiot. He might have messed up their first encounter, but he would make sure never to repeat that mistake. If he started grousing at

her again, the next sinister glare from her would likely give him a heart attack. All that mattered to Velgrynd was Ludora, and the thought of these talentless hacks serving him did nothing to please her.

For now, at least, she would let the chief of staff go. Having a temper and discriminating against women wasn't enough to warrant eliminating him from existence.

Heh... I've gotten kinder over time, haven't I? Perhaps because of all the things I've experienced.

This was, to say the least, giving her too much credit. Being close to Ludora kept her in a good mood, and that's about all there was to it. If he hadn't been there, things would've turned out differently.

Her life over the past long while had seen her jumping from world to world in search of soul fragments, but she wasn't guaranteed to find one at every destination she was thrown to. If none existed yet, it meant she had to wait several years or decades for the next incarnation of Ludora to be born. To Velgrynd, who saw her lover off at the end in every world she came to, this was akin to torture—and if anyone riled her then, their fate was as good as sealed. The chief of staff, in other words, had been lucky.

Once the meeting hall settled down, the minister of the navy attempted to move on.

"Now, Araki, can I ask who this woman is?"

This minister, a naval general in his fifties, looked at Gensei with a careful eye.

"Ah yes," Gensei replied. "I still haven't introduced her. This is a fellow guard of mine, and she received permission from His Majesty to participate in this imperial conference. Her name is—"

"You may call me Ryu-oh. It is a pleasure to be here."

The name Velgrynd casually handed out, interrupting Gensei in the process, was Ryu-oh. "Ryu" meant "dragon," as befitted a True Dragon like her, and "oh" came from *ho-oh*, or phoenix, the mystical creature that ruled over fire in this world. This, however, proved to be a major problem.

“Ryu-oh? As in ‘dragon phoenix’?”

“Using the character for dragon in your name... What an arrogant thing to do around His Majesty the Emperor!”

“Or are you perhaps related to him in some way...?”

Another furor in the meeting hall, just after the last one had subsided. It made Gensei roll his eyes.

Is she doing that on purpose? ...No, it's not that. Velgrynd simply doesn't care at all about how matters work around here. We prepared that disguise for her, but we honestly should have thought of a name as well...

He saw that as his mistake. And Oharu, in his waiting room, was sighing just as hard. In all his life, he had never experienced anyone causing him this much trouble. In a way, the sheer novelty entertained him.

So he stepped into the meeting hall.

“We are facing a severe emergency. What is strange about myself revealing one of the cards I will play?”

He smiled at the attendees that noticed him. All of them were shortly bowing their heads. If these were the facts their leader laid out for them, they had no choice but to accept them. If they had any complaints, they certainly weren't about to voice them. So, with that stroke, Velgrynd's name in this world was Ryu-oh.

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“Let us begin.”

With those few words from Oharu, the imperial conference was underway.

“I will start with my report,” said a man as he stood up. This was a naval intelligence officer, and while his briefings had changed little over the past several days, today offered more of a surprise.

“The enemy fleet has reportedly stopped at the port of Atlantis.”

“You're sure about that?”

“Yes, sir. We received the report from our operatives on-site, so it has been

fully confirmed.”

“Indeed,” the chief military commander said. “That’s the largest military port out of all the resupply sites they have. But can we be sure this isn’t some deception on their part?”

“Quite true,” added the naval minister. “The Great South Sea is host to a number of archipelagoes, after all. We’ve heard reports that Azeria has set up secret bases on some of them, but do we have any operatives working those areas?”

“At the moment,” replied the intelligence officer, “we do not have people at all the many sites they have opened up. However, the size of the fleet that reached the Atlantis port matches the intelligence we had before their deployment, so I think it’s safe to say there’s no possibility of a detached fleet somewhere. We also have word that our imperial navy warships have been seized. I’m sure they want to take their time preparing this fleet so they can crush any further desire to keep fighting.”

The HQ was already aware of the imperial navy’s massive defeat. Nobody was too shocked about that now, but the idea of so many allied ships being in enemy hands made it hard for them to stay quiet.

“We’re quite fortunate to know where our enemy is going, indeed. So, um, did any of our forces succeed in fleeing—er, emerging unscathed by the enemy?”

“How could they?” the chief of staff brusquely pointed out. “If they did, they would’ve contacted us long ago.” He was calmer now, as he’d said, and his observations were wholly accurate.

“The chief of staff is right. It is safe to assume that all of our surviving fleet has been captured by the enemy.”

“Tch!” The army minister sighed. “It’s like giving the enemy more war power to fight with!”

“But what could we have done?” countered the chief commander. “We were dealing with *yohma*, a complete unknown of an enemy. Even if I were there, I’m sure it would have turned out the same way.”

"Yes... My pardons. I had no intention of insulting the navy when I said that. But it is honestly frustrating..."

"Your apology is most certainly accepted. We're all just as frustrated about this."

The tension in the meeting hall was oppressive. It was the greatest crisis the empire had ever seen in its history. Their force, allegedly the strongest in the world, had been taken out of the war by the enemy fleet. Even worse, so many of their ships—including their newest and most technologically advanced—had fallen right into the enemy's hands. The danger was unprecedented, and filled everyone present with anxiety and concern. It was pointless to whine about it, but it was also only human to want to. The chief commander needed to behave more maturely, lest this meeting be thrown into further disarray.

As the atmosphere simmered down a little, Oharu seized his chance to speak. "Does that mean," he began, "that our imperial forces were taken prisoner?"

The question alarmed the naval attendees. These were valued soldiers, many of whom they knew personally; of course they'd be worried about them. They were also important allies to the ground army, and their fate was a major issue impacting the military's entire future direction. In a normal war, international conventions would have guaranteed that prisoners would be kept safe and out of harm's way, but considering they were dealing with unknown invaders, that whole assumption could crumble. If things worked out like they always had, then fine—but if not...

All eyes were on the intelligence officer.

"Well..."

"Well, what? Won't you answer us?!"

"According to eyewitnesses," the hesitant officer said after his superior snapped at him, "the troops and officers of the imperial navy are manning the very ships that were captured. Some enemy troops were sighted among them, but only a very small number, and they weren't threatening our forces with guns or anything else. It was described as looking like...our troops had changed sides in the war."

Now everyone understood why the officer had been so hesitant. So did Oharu. It was unthinkable for their proud, courageous soldiers to have abandoned their duties that easily, much less defect en masse like this.

“How will we ever explain this to Kondo, and everyone else who risked their lives...?”

Minamoto’s low muttering echoed across the silent hall. Everyone there believed—prayed, really—that their men had had their minds taken over by the *yohma*. And Velgrynd was quick to confirm it.

“Hee-hee-hee! Oh, quit being silly. All of you need to take a deep breath. None of your friends have betrayed you at all.”

Her statement, delivered with a nod and affirmative smile, provided hope for her audience. The circumstantial evidence they had been presented with made all the naval officers fear that their friends really *had* betrayed them, but Velgrynd gave them a ray of light to cling to.

“Ryu-oh? What do you mean by that?”

The naval minister asked the question on everyone’s mind.

“It’s simple,” Velgrynd cheerfully replied. “I believe the *yohma* have the ability to possess people. They’ve only just appeared in this world, and they can’t have much power to wield at all, so instead they’ll build it bit by bit via taking over people’s bodies. They don’t have much supply of the magicules that drive their power, though, so I think it’ll take a long while for your friends to be completely assimilated.”

Hope now reigned across the room.

“Ah, so they *are* being controlled against their will!”

“If the process takes time to complete, does that mean we can still rescue them?”

“How dare they make a mockery of our fighting men?! Damned *yohma*... We must be sure we defeat them all!”

“We have to stage a rescue operation at—”

“Wait, wait! It’s not that simple!”

The hall was raucous once more. Everyone was already taking Velgrynd at her word. Some of the audience wondered why this woman knew so much about their foes, but if she was some manner of trump card played by the emperor at this vital moment, perhaps it was only natural she did.

So the call was made for a rescue, but everyone quickly settled back down when they recalled how difficult an operation that would be. The Conquering Empire had just staged a battle that could potentially decide the fate of their homeland, and they'd been routed. A rescue that'd work under the current circumstances was hard to picture.

First, there simply weren't enough ships of war left in the empire. They had lost six carriers, four battleships, four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and eighteen destroyers. Even if all the remaining ships in the fleet could be cobbled together quickly enough, it wouldn't amount to even half of those figures. And even if they had all of them running at once, it'd add up to a single fleet at best. Send them on the rescue mission, and it'd cripple homeland defense.

"But all the world's leaders are aware of what's going on. Couldn't we forge a secret truce and band together to focus on the *yohma*?"

"Yes, everybody knows that's what should be done. But their militaries are all off the rails. It's impossible."

"It's terrible to see how weak-minded other nations are, but we're hardly any better, are we? We don't even have a full grasp of what our ground forces are up to in Chinese lands."

"And we've just lost a decisive number of them..."

Even if the world's presidents and leaders signed a peace treaty right now, it wouldn't solve anything. If the militaries supposedly loyal to them continued to run amok like this, any announcement of a cease-fire would ring hollow. If they wanted a permanent solution, they needed to do something about the *yohma* first.

And even before that, there was another concern beginning to dawn on the audience's minds, even though nobody had voiced it yet. What was it?

"You don't think anyone *here's* been possessed, do you?"

It was the minister of the army who finally came out with it. And given how his eyes were transfixed on the meeting's naval participants, his thoughts were clear as day.

"Wha...?! Now you're suspecting us?"

"No, no, I said nothing like that. It's just, based on what I'm hearing in the report, one can't help but have that doubt in their mind, can they?"

"Utter nonsense! If you're going to bring *that* up, would you care to explain why your own army's running out of control over in the Chinese Fiefdoms?!"

"Ah...that..."

The conference was hurtling into perilous territory. Oharu saw fit to intervene.

"Ladies and gentlemen... It is good news indeed that our brave soldiers are safe. I think it's clear to all of us that they need to be rescued, but do you think we can manage that if we spend all day squabbling in here? As great and wise as all of you are, I'm sure you understand the correct path to take."

"""Yes, Your Majesty! My apologies!"""

Everyone fell silent. Oharu's dignified air was as honed as it was supreme, but to the man himself, he felt like he was walking a tightrope. He had to rebuke his audience; letting them stew like this wouldn't solve anything. But he fully understood his officers' anxieties—which made Oharu all the more frustrated that he couldn't do anything to help.

"Ryu-oh, the army minister has a valid point. Are you able to tell whether someone is a person or *yohma*?"

It was Gensei who brought up the question. They needed a way to tell friend from foe, or they'd never get anywhere. The hall fell silent again, everyone waiting for Velgrynd's response.

"Oh, how could there be any of them in *this* room? If there were, I would've told you all long ago."

Everyone immediately relaxed.

"Ah... Yes, that's true."

It made sense to Gensei as well. If a *ten'yo*-class *yohma* could simply transform into a human being, all hope was lost for them. Now, he thought, *they still had some hope*. But Velgrynd wasn't finished.

"Good lord. You're telling me that you can't even tell whether someone's on your side or not? The *yohma*—I call them 'mystics' myself—don't transform into people. They possess them, because they have to in order to survive in this world. And once they fully assimilate their carrier, they transform into something that no sane person would ever call human."

If that assimilation wasn't finished, the barrier covering the imperial capital would be enough to root them out. They might *look* human, but they'd be something quite different on the inside. They were highly unstable in this state, as Velgrynd explained to the crowd, and until they found more stability, they wouldn't try walking around and mingling with humans.

"And also, the 'privates' among the mystics—the lowest of their ranks—have intelligence, but no free will. They're lackeys capable of nothing but following orders, so even a little interrogation would expose them in a flash."

A mystic could read the memories of whatever it possessed, but only those that resided on the outer layers of the brain. If asked about something deeper, they'd be left clueless and fully exposed. The explanation from Velgrynd left everyone in the meeting hall feeling much more secure.

But she still wasn't done. The grave, somber atmosphere of the meeting came to an end here. Now Velgrynd was monopolizing the event.

"I suppose none of you have a clue about any of this, so I'll tell you, but the mystics have a clear hierarchy, or ranking system, to them. The 'privates' I mentioned are truly the lowest of the low. Even when they assimilate with someone, the resulting creature is a level weaker than what you'd normally see from a *yohma*. None of them are beyond a high *yokai* at best, to describe it with your scale."

She made it sound simple, but a high *yokai* was normally a threat that called for a specialized task force to solve it. Except Velgrynd didn't seem to care at all.

"B-but Ryu-oh, if one of these so-called 'privates' did complete an assimilation, could they advance into the *ten'yo* class?"

"Well, aren't you a smart kid?" Velgrynd told the army minister. "You're exactly right."

"Wha?!"

The minister wasn't shocked by Velgrynd making fun of him. If even the enemy's lowliest ground troops could transform into a *ten'yo*-class menace, the situation was beyond hopeless. It was almost sad, how unaffected Velgrynd acted compared to him, and nobody in the audience could laugh at either of them. They all felt the same way.

"What's the big surprise? Even Gensei over there can beat someone at *that* level. The 'commanders' leading these privates might give him more of a challenge, but they wouldn't be insurmountable for him."

These "commanders," the higher-ranked among the lower classes of mystics, would rate an A rank in other worlds...but until their bodily assimilation was complete, they could only unleash power equivalent to just over a B. Once the process was done, though, and they became a *kiryu*-class creature, fighting them would be tough. Tough, yes, but Velgrynd thought Gensei could beat them.

"I am honored by the praise, but Kondo lost against two of them at once. I wouldn't expect anything better from me."

"You really need to stop acting so timid, you know. Kondo stuck to *his* convictions until the very end."

Only then did Gensei realize how fainthearted he was acting. That, and how narrow-minded. He could palpably sense a certain warmth to the sword by his waist. It roused him, restoring his confidence.

"Yes... You're right. Being too timid can cost you battles you could have won."

"Doesn't it, though? Not that we'd lose if *you* fell down that trap. Not while I'm here."

So Velgrynd wasted no time kicking Gensei's resolve to the curb.

*

Now the imperial conference was taking quite a different turn.

"So mystics grow stronger the more high-level they are, but it'll be hard for them to manifest themselves in this world if they have too much energy. I think it's likely that the toughest ones here right now are the 'generals,' the lower ranks of the high classes. And that means we—"

"Wait! Wait a minute!"

"What's wrong?" Velgrynd asked, miffed at being interrupted. If Oharu hadn't been right in front of her, she likely wouldn't have let this affront slide.

"Um... You speak of ranks among these 'mystics,' but should we interpret these to mean the same thing as our military ranks?"

"I'm sorry, are you doubting my linguistic competence?"

"No, that wasn't my intention. I was just wondering if there are, for example, other staff officers between the commanders and generals..."

The minister of the navy was asking this question, and everyone else was just as curious about the answer. The faceless crowds that Velgrynd didn't see as worthy of her attention were life-threatening menaces to the people of this world.

"If Gensei would struggle against a 'commander,' would that place them at *kiryu* level?"

"That seems valid to me. I believe those were the ones who defeated Kondo."

"Then how strong would their generals be?!"

A "high-level" *kiryu* might just make it into the *shinbutsu* class—the point of divinity, impossible for any mortal to defeat. If that's who was attacking them, all resistance was futile. Everyone's faces grew pale as the truth dawned on them.

"Is there a chance, then, that Kondo lost to these 'generals,' perhaps?"

"Maybe, but I don't care. It doesn't matter anyway."

Exactly who had lost to whom wasn't a priority for Velgrynd. All that mattered was that her side had lost.

"...Oh, right, I just remembered something else. There are only two ways for

mystics to reach this world. Either they come through an Underworld Gate, or they're summoned by a superior class of mystic. I doubt there are any Gates in the sea, so I think we're dealing with summons here. One general could probably summon ten thousand of them or so, I think?"

Velgrynd made it sound so casual, but to her audience, the information was devastating. They all fell silent, just staring at her, because they couldn't do anything else.

"But you think you can, um, beat them, Ryu-oh?" the naval minister asked.

That was the last hope for them all. He almost wanted to laugh, because he knew how ridiculous a question it was. An individual "general" would be enough to wipe out mankind, and if it had an entire army working for it, there was nothing to be done. No matter how powerful this woman calling herself Ryu-oh was, she couldn't take on an entire army alone.

"Because we're dealing with a divine force with powers beyond our imagination, aren't we? And the idea of man beating god is something you only see in mythology..."

"All we can do is pray the world isn't destroyed, can't we?"

The chief commander and the ministers all felt the same way. Velgrynd just snorted at them.

"You all really *are* a bunch of sillies, aren't you? The only mystic who could beat *me*, and even then only maybe, is Feldway, their king. Not that I'd go in expecting to lose, and I doubt he could manifest himself here anyway."

Why did she know the name of the enemy's king? The questions never stopped coming, but no one was brave enough to point it out. Given what they knew about this woman, nothing seemed strange any longer. But there was one thing they needed to confirm.

"I...certainly would never doubt your strength, Ryu-oh. That's why I wanted to ask you..."

It was finally the commissioner of education who drummed up the courage to speak, after having remained silent this whole conference. He was one of the three chief directors of the army, often playing a mediator figure whenever

meetings like this fell out of order.

Velgrynd looked at him. “What is it?”

“Our nation is on the verge of total collapse. I was wondering if you would... um, step up to take on this foe?”

“No. I’ve only got one body, you know.”

That was a lie. With her Parallel Existence skill, she could easily protect the emperor while engaging his enemies. But there was no reason to tell anyone that. She was appointed a Court Guardian, and that meant she was dedicated to protecting the emperor. She had been given that role as a way to gauge the response to her presence. Relying on someone else to swoop in and save you would stifle all future growth; any country acting that way was doomed to fail sooner or later. It’d just be a matter of time.

Velgrynd was a caring person, and she hadn’t abandoned this country or mankind in general. Velzard wouldn’t have bothered keeping such weak-spirited creatures alive. Velgrynd wanted to take care of everything here until Ludora died, but what happened after that didn’t matter to her—or at least, that would’ve been her thought process before she’d embarked on this journey. Now, though, she had gained a broader perspective, another change brought about by meeting and interacting with Rimuru.

What mattered to Velgrynd now was protecting Ludora, the people he loved, and the bloodlines they kept passing down over time. So, with each cycle, she took pains to ensure the people she left behind after she departed weren’t totally helpless. It was hard news to give, but she was declaring to the audience here that she wouldn’t move at all for them.

“But don’t you worry. I promise you that I will keep His Majesty protected, so you guys just try as hard as you can, all right?”

In other words, prove you’ve got some guts in you.

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Now that they knew the enemy’s strength, the conference moved on to their future measures.

With Velgrynd’s cooperation, the emperor’s safety was assured. The officers

in this meeting, being no fools, understood what she was saying between the lines. They would all try figuring out what to do themselves, not asking her for any more than that.

"I want you to keep a careful eye on the enemy fleet's movements."

"Understood. I will redouble our efforts to ensure we don't lose sight of them."

"How much time do we have until the *yohma* fully complete the takeover of their hosts?"

"Well, if they had a lot of magicules, it wouldn't even take a week, but over here, I'd assume a good couple of months."

Given her Ludora-appointed post, Velgrynd was obliged to truthfully answer the questions presented to her, not hiding anything. It helped the conference reach a valid consensus instead of flailing around for ideas.

"I imagine the enemy fleet will need at least a month before they can finish the resupplying and repairs required to leave port. Given how the timelines match up, is it safe to assume they'll go on the move one month from now?"

"Hmm, you think so? It may take time for them to reorganize the crews they captured, but the Azerian and Chinese fleets currently in operation could go out to battle right now once they're refueled, couldn't they?"

"If that's all they need, it's a bit under two weeks from Atlantis to our empire. They might be hampered by weather, but—"

"No they won't. Being able to control weather conditions is a given. You can assume they'll travel at maximum speed for us."

"Ri...right!"

By this point, the officers were beginning to grasp Velgrynd's personality. She was incredibly pompous with them, but also very helpful and caring, in her own way. She gave honest answers to their questions, offering advice as well. If they could work out just how far she was willing to go for them, they could avoid stoking her ire. Really, she was a valuable ally, and the more astute in the audience showered her with questions, trying to make the best use of what

they had. Thanks to that, a basic plan of action was in place before much longer.

"Ahem. We could try to meet the enemy on our homeland, but then we wouldn't be able to help our brave allies being held against their will. We need to go out there and defeat the enemy leaders ourselves."

"Quite true. I agree with you, but then the question becomes who to send out."

"If Ryu-oh is protecting His Majesty, I have nothing to worry about. I'll do it."

"Ah, Araki, if you'll join the effort, we couldn't ask for much better."

"Allow everyone in the Swordsman Guard to join him!"

"We would be honored to have you, Minamoto!"

It looked like they had their basic plan formulated. But Velgrynd once again cut into the conversation.

"...Are you people serious? Or just suicidal?"

"How do you mean?"

The army minister looked at her, eyes aglow. He was hoping she might join in after all, but that was too wishful a thought.

"I appreciate your drive to do this all by yourselves, but that won't be enough. You're facing a large, powerful enemy, so you need to exercise *all* the force available."

Most people there had no clue what she was talking about. But some had already arrived at the answer, the chief of army staff among them.

"Are you saying our nation alone won't cut it?"

This surprised Velgrynd a bit. He'd been the first man to try picking a fight with her, so she'd assumed he was a lot more careless than that. *Good thing I didn't give up on him from the jump*, she thought as she nodded.

"Certainly," the naval chief of staff added, "now is no time for countries to be fighting each other in the face of this worldwide crisis. All of us here understand that, but as we went over earlier, militaries are going out of control worldwide."

It's frustrating."

"I think we really need our rival nations' support!" Minamoto replied. "If we go in with a half-hearted force, the *yohma* will just possess us anyway. That's why we're using a small team of elites. We'll need other nations to provide only their elites as well."

This was met with broad agreement.

"It's the only way. This isn't a war any longer. It's a battle for survival against the *yohma*, and we can't afford to be choosy about our methods. We need to drive them away before we can work out our own war."

"Right. It's no longer just our empire's problem."

"Indeed. We need to reach out and get everyone on the same page."

There was no other approach to take—such was the feedback they gave.

"Good job. You're all weak, so you need to use your heads more."

Velgrynd, hearing that, gave them a satisfied smile. But to the bureaucrats in the room, the idea was preposterous.

"Wait just one minute! I'm sure every world leader knows that things can't stand as they are. But I just don't think they'd all suddenly want to reach out and join hands."

"Mmm, yes, that would be asking a lot. If we suddenly came out and proposed an armistice, nobody's going to give their immediate approval."

"I'm sure *we* would turn down similar offers."

This was sensible. If something were to happen during this armistice, it could send everything tumbling down. For any truce to stick, the involved nations needed to rein in their militaries. And that was far from the only issue, either. Would the citizens ever go for it? What if some nation took advantage of this to hatch some sort of scheme? Once you started suspecting your fellow man, there was never any end to it—and while some cautioned against being paralyzed by too much doubt, they needed to address these concerns before they could ever hope for everyone to come together.

As things currently stood, building a united front seemed beyond possible—

but Velgrynd just smiled at them.

"So you're just going to give up without even trying? Well, if so, that's fine with me. I'll protect His Majesty anyway, and the capital he rules over."

It was clearly meant to provoke. The diplomatic officer in the room had no defense.

"All right. Fine. In that case, I will begin to make contacts. Let's try to be as sincere as possible and at least set up an opportunity to discuss matters!"

He was almost rebelling against Velgrynd. But that was the whole reason she'd phrased it that way. And it'd worked.

"We need to, yes. We're all going down otherwise."

"We may go down anyway, but I'd at least like to show a little backbone here, yes."

"Right, exactly. Even if we lose, we have to resist with everything we've got, or I'll never forgive myself."

"I feel bad for our citizens, though. And my family."

"We need to deal with it. We're fighting the *yohma*, not a nation we can forge a peace treaty with. It's a battle for survival of the species, and if we lose, our nation's history is over. We must do everything we can right now, or we'll all have to live with the regret afterward."

Now all the officers were worked up, ready to do whatever it took, and Velgrynd couldn't have been happier.

There you go. You need to start taking action and stop debating whether it's possible. Besides, if you mess it up, I'll figure something out for you all.

She smiled a bit, keeping that piece of knowledge to herself as everyone else worked out what to do. So began the final resistance of the empire.



Atlantis was the smallest of the landmasses that formed the United States of Azeria. Located on the far east side of the nation, it had a tropical rainforest climate, with thick jungle taking up most of its square footage, but that wasn't

all that made it unique. It also had a metal-producing mine and an oil field, and these bountiful assets buried in the ground had turned Atlantis into the largest military base in Azerian territory.

That was the beginning of the tragedy. There had once been some ancient ruins near the military base, but they'd had the misfortune of having an Underworld Gate to another world open up right over them.

Long ago, the indigenous people of this land had conducted a ritual, a ceremony meant to help them communicate with the gods. It had created a slight rift in space-time, and the mystics that discovered it had stepped up to craft a stable Underworld Gate from it. These mystics possessed the locals, using them to welcome in the Azerians—and now they had seized the base the Azerians had built, using it as a beachhead for their own invasion.

A man in khaki camouflage was commanding a large, racially diverse crowd of people. His black hair was brushed back, his eyes squinted and cold, and there was a glint of intellectual drive behind his glasses. This was actually a former aide of Cornu's from back when they were in the heavenly realms; he had been a cherub, in the service of the angels, before he'd undergone an evolution into a mystic. He had no name, but called himself Masahiko Amari, which was the name of the man whose body he'd taken over when he'd appeared in this world. (Some of the Three Mystic Leaders bestowed names on those who served them, but Cornu didn't value his bonds with his own team enough to bother.)

Race didn't matter much to the mystics, but Masahiko Amari was Japanese. He was a secret agent sent into Azeria to investigate their military base, a figure powerful enough to challenge Kondo for the title of best in his native land. He was talented, but unlucky. He wasn't aware that Kondo had been defeated, and by the time he fully grasped the nature of his enemy, it was too late. Hopelessly overpowered, he was defeated and possessed—and given how his body had been strengthened through the use of Battlewill, he was a perfect vessel for a mystic. Over a hundred days had passed since this process began, and now Cornu's servant—a “marshal” class, on the high end of the mystics’ highest ranks—could perfectly exercise this body’s power. In terms of existence points, he was incomparable, easily reaching ten million, and with Masahiko Amari’s

own knowledge and skills, he had improved his powers even further.

"Hurry up with the expansion work. This Gate is far too small for Cornu to fit through."

Normally, a visitor from another world could only fully manifest themselves if their magicule count fit within the size of the Underworld Gate. If they couldn't, they'd have to keep their main body in their original world, send over a separate body connected by a soul corridor, and gradually build up their powers on the other side.

This, however, didn't apply to the Three Mystic Leaders. So power-laden were their souls that your average Underworld Gate meant little to them. You'd need a Gate rated for an EP of at least a million to even manifest them at all.

If you left your main body in the other world, by the way, you could revive your separate body even if it died—but since it had never fully manifested, it would lose a great deal of its strength, perhaps over half. The only things passed on to the new manifestation were its memories and experiences, and you'd need to find another physical body to possess.

Clearly, then, this mystic approach to world invasion had its pluses and minuses. But if they could expand the size of the Underworld Gate, this separate body could return to the mystic's original world with its physical form intact, simplifying the process for full assimilation. And thanks to a constant construction effort, this Gate was now much larger than Velgrynd had predicted. Its EP rating was at around a hundred thousand, allowing mystics at the "staff officer" level to fully manifest themselves without any problems.

Prisoners were lined up in front of this Gate, their minds fully dominated, and one by one, they were possessed by *yohma*. Taking on physical forms this way had one key advantage for the mystics—it let them seize the name granted to the body they took. As half-spiritual life-forms, they were inherently unstable, but taking on a physical body and name allowed them to establish a clear, unbreakable sense of self. The influx of knowledge they gained from the jump would turn them into decently useful pawns in war—even for the low-ranked "privates" among them.

"I'm not sure there's that much need for urgency, Mr. Amari. Everything's

going according to plan. We've thoroughly investigated the war-waging power of this planet, but there is hardly anyone that would pose a threat to us."

Amari was being advised by David Reagan, who was possessed by a "general"-class mystic—almost as powerful as potential demon lords. Like Amari, he had fully completed his physical manifestation, giving him an EP north of six hundred thousand. It was little wonder Kondo couldn't beat him.

"Come on," protested Li Jinlong alongside him. "How many times do I have to remind you? We still have Xienhua, the Holy Fist, on our side. And in *my* memories, at least, that girl could defeat our staff officers easily."

By "staff officer," he was referring to upper-middle-ranked mystics. In other worlds that would've made them as powerful as demon lord seeds. They had leadership roles here, overseeing regiments of a thousand or so and playing a key part of the invasion. Unlike the lower ranks, they were too powerful to trifle with, and losing any of them would put a major dent in their operations.

Li was right to be concerned, but David just chuckled. "Oh, we're fine. Pulcinella's been sent over to deal with her. Xienhua isn't even a threat to us."

It was a surprise to Li, but one that made him smirk. Pulcinella, the Mad Priest—the great, powerful hope of all mankind—had been traveling the world, investigating the vision he'd had earlier. He had wound up waging an intensive fight with the *yohma*, but had been sadly defeated and taken over...all so another marshal-level mystic like Masahiko Amari's could be installed. Now the tragedy was complete. He was a *yohma* ruler, on the same level as Amari.

"Seriously? I was planning to go over there myself. Guess I was too slow. It'd be easy to kill her, but we'd wind up breaking her beyond repair. Pulcinella probably won't have any problem, though."

It was rather an arrogant way to put it, but David didn't disagree. The humans in this world were weak. Still, someone as exceptionally powerful among them as Xienhua would serve as a good enough vessel for Cornu, their supreme leader. That's what everyone thought, which was why they were loath to let the troops serving under them handle this job. As mystics, they were just too strong against humans. It'd never be a fair battle, but at the same time, handling physical bodies they weren't used to was difficult. Along those lines, the work

was better handled by Cornu's direct aides, whose skills were on a whole other dimension. It made David laugh. Xienhua was as good as defeated already.

"Of course, if Cornu doesn't want a female body, we'll find a substitute and I'll take over Xienhua instead. I guess the man who used to own this body was infatuated with her, and now *I'm* getting pretty curious."

"What a small-minded thing to say. I hardly imagine Cornu will care about something like gender. You should banish the thought from your mind right now."

Li and David were half-joking with each other, as if the problem was already behind them. But Amari couldn't shake his own anxieties. It wasn't that he was dissatisfied with how things were going right now. He wasn't ready to call it done and rest on his laurels, either, but they had pretty much set up the entire board for their invasion. Four generals and two marshals under Cornu's command had completed their manifestations. The Underworld Gate was being steadily expanded, and plans were underway to procure Cornu's future vessel. Pulcinella and the other two generals were hard at work, and all things considered, this world seemed irrevocably headed for its downfall. The only major job left was to manifest Cornu.

Everything should be in place. There's no way for them to stage a comeback now. I'm sure I haven't overlooked anything...

His careful analysis let him conclude that there were no problems left to speak of. But Amari was right to be anxious. It was well near impossible to imagine someone like Velgrynd suddenly stopping by.

"Any human resistance here is barely worth paying attention to," he said, shaking off his concerns. "But that doesn't mean we need to let up. There are still the finishing touches left to consider, and I need everyone to fully devote themselves to them."



After the imperial conference wrapped up, Velgrynd made a beeline for the palace's great library. "Library" was the right term for the vast floor it was situated on, piled high with untold numbers of tomes. She was here because

she had some questions about things she'd heard during the conference—the names of certain countries, and people.

Take, for example, the Holy Arcian Empire—it certainly sounded related to the kingdom of Arcia she'd once guided. Then there was the United States of Azeria and its current president. His name was George Hayes, which perfectly matched that of someone she'd met before jumping into this timeline. If Velgrynd's memory served her, George's father, Laurent Hayes, had been a possessor of a soul fragment from Ludora; she had accompanied him from young adulthood to his peaceful final days.

That, among several things, had piqued her interest enough that she saw fit to research them.

If all these familiar-sounding pieces of trivia belonged to the same timeline, it'd be easy to conclude that these nations and people were indeed the same as those Velgrynd knew. But it was also common to see differing worlds that bore startling resemblances to each other. Their origins and rules of nature were clearly divergent enough that one couldn't call them parallel worlds, but for some reason, they'd share all these suspiciously similar names. This time, too, it might just be another funny coincidence, so Velgrynd thought it wise to explore this world's history a little.

Her investigations began with the founding of the Holy Arcian Empire, and through that she confirmed that there indeed used to be a kingdom of Arcia on this planet. The names of its kings and court retainers sounded familiar as well, making it clear that the legacy of the Arcia she knew was still alive in this world.

When her attention turned toward George Hayes:

"Ah, I thought so. His father's name *is* Laurent Hayes. The president from seven terms ago; there's no doubt about it. So little George got elected president, too, huh?"

She remembered George, the boy who respected his father so much, and smiled. He always talked about how much he wanted to be a great president, just like dear old Dad. Laurent passed away peacefully at age sixty-two; George had been twenty-seven then and fifty-two years old now, which meant that the leap Velgrynd had made put her into the exact same world as before, twenty-

five years later.

Oharu had presumably been alive a quarter century ago, too, which meant that two different people possessed parts of Ludora's soul at the same time. It was quite a rarity, but given how strongly the soul fragments reacted just before the death of their possessors, one couldn't write it off as impossible. That's why she'd gone to the library to ensure the names weren't mere coincidence.

There had been a moment in the past when Laurent Hayes was jumped by a gang of thugs and nearly killed. That was the point where Velgrynd had jumped into the world. She'd promptly saved his life, and that had been the start of their relationship. It was a fond memory for her now, but she didn't dwell on it for long before continuing her research.

"I think George had a young son as well..."

Velgrynd definitely remembered offering the baby her blessings—and looking at the family tree, she saw she was right. Emile Hayes was the name, exactly as her memory told her it would be, and now there was no doubting it at all.

She nodded to herself with satisfaction. Then she noticed something unusual in the family record.

"Wait... It's *my* fault he married late? Come on."

This was nothing less than slander in Velgrynd's mind. The biographical record she had open stated that Laurent Hayes was constantly shadowed by a mysterious, beautiful woman. That...wasn't far from reality, but Velgrynd didn't picture it that way, and she had hardly been a sinister presence in his life. She felt she had a right to complain. After all, she'd told Laurent that he was free to love whomever he liked; she had no intention of binding him down. But it was no doubt hard for a woman to approach someone who had a supermodel-class babe hanging around him all the time. All in all, it was pretty clear that Velgrynd was one big reason why Laurent had married so late in life.

"I don't know who wrote this, but I really wish I could send them a letter..."

But the author had passed away long ago—which, perhaps, was really lucky for them.

Velgrynd was done at the library, but still making the most of her free time. No one could stop her—no one except Oharu, that is, and he largely gave her free rein over the palace. His instincts told him that was the most moderate option.

Of course, not everyone welcomed her presence with open arms. The military officers who knew who she was gave her a lot of leeway—but the ladies of the palace didn’t.

The empress, Oharu’s wife, was among them. “It’s just repulsive, isn’t it?” she said the very first time they met. “For a woman to get *that* close with His Majesty when we don’t even know where she came from.”

She was fifty years old, the daughter of a prestigious noble prince. Medicine and sorcery had advanced to the point where the average life span in this world had reached around sixty, and the empress was still extremely active. To Velgrynd, though, she was like a cute puppy dog. Velgrynd had lived with Ludora in many forms across many years, so people like the empress were far from unfamiliar to her.

“Oh, come on. Your cute little face will go to waste if you spend all day scowling like that. I’m sure Oharu would wish for you to be beautiful for him all the time, wouldn’t he?”

So Velgrynd refused to play along. In fact, she even brought her hand up, caressing the empress’s hair. It happened quickly enough that the empress couldn’t escape—but the surprise didn’t end there. Before Velgrynd’s eyes, the empress’s skin began to regain a young, glossy appearance.

“See? Now you’re a lot prettier. But maintenance is so important for things like this. I’ll teach you some breathing techniques you can use for spiritual balance, so make sure you practice them, all right?”

“...Huh?”

The empress was speechless. She literally couldn’t find the words. The lady attendants were all staring at her, eyes wide open. They had just witnessed the empress fully regaining the beauty from her past. Anyone would’ve been just as surprised.

"It—it can't be... You can turn back time?"

Velgrynd laughed. "No, not turn back time. All I did was energize her skin cells to make her look prettier. She hasn't changed species or anything, and she's still just as mortal as before."

Everyone has a limited life span, she explained, and using spiritual energy to give her skin cells this jolt wouldn't lengthen her life. But Velgrynd didn't quite have it right. It might have been little more than a blip to her, but she *had* extended the empress's life. Her body was healthier now, capable of fighting off most illnesses. Her digestion had improved, giving her almost perfect antiaging traits. It would ultimately grant her over double her potential life span, and if she kept up the breathing methods Velgrynd taught her, she'd be able to make the most of all those years.

"I think I may have been mistaken about you, Ryu-oh."

Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, she instantly became a fan of Velgrynd, as did her attendants.

"Me too!"

"Yes, so was I!"

"Yes, so please, I would love it if you could teach me this breathing technique as well!"

None of them were going to turn down some free youth, either.



Velgrynd was now a few days into her stay in this world, teaching the palace ladies how to meditate, enjoying high tea, and living a truly elegant life. The military, on the other hand, was busy.

Talks with the administrations of all the other countries were proceeding slowly at best. There was still no sign they could arrange an international summit anytime soon, and without any progress to report, Oharu hadn't presided over any new imperial conferences. Pointless meetings just took up time; it was better for them to devote their efforts to something constructive.

Oharu agreed with that idea, and Velgrynd wasn't about to object. But she

was growing unhappy. She was losing valuable time. Even now, the *yohma* were likely working on their preparations; if they didn't hurry, figuring out how to hold a summit would be the least of their worries. It'd force Velgrynd to take center stage and fight before humanity could come together to fend for itself.

And, you know, that's fine and all. But if that's how it shakes out, me shooing away the mystics isn't going to end this war...

The thought depressed Velgrynd. Everything would become so needlessly complicated in that scenario. So she decided to lend a bit of a hand. In the end, she really *did* like being helpful, despite it all.

"Does it look like the negotiations are going well?"

She asked the question as she strode uninvited into the foreign ministry's intelligence office. It was just past noon, but things looked chaotic here, and Velgrynd's sudden appearance did nothing to mollify the bureaucrats that manned it. Not that she cared, of course.

"Ryu-oh, we really can't have this. Only authorized people are allowed in here —"

"No more talking, please. We're three days in on this. Have any countries agreed to talk with us?"

"That, um..."

As the ministry officer reluctantly explained, the Republic of Chinese Fiefdoms had agreed to a summit only if the other warring nations also participated. The Greater Rossiam Dynasty held the same stance—but this was the same as saying "no" in the most passive way possible, because the response from the United States of Azeria and the Holy Arcian Empire boiled down to "now's not the time." Given the current circumstances, it was unthinkable for the leader of a nation to leave its borders, and none of them were in a position to hold a summit anyway, whether conducted live or over the phone.

"That's how things are right now," the haggard-looking official said, "so we're trying to be as persistent as we can in reasoning with them."

Velgrynd rolled her eyes. "Well, I'm glad to see *you're* taking your time with this. But fine. I'll help you a little bit."

It was the classic hot-and-cold treatment people like Masayuki would have been well familiar with. But the stodgy bureaucrats here didn't take much of a liking to it.

"However—"

"Well, look who thinks she's the boss of us now! You might be powerful and pretty, but intelligence is our business, and I'd prefer if you didn't butt in."

As annoyed as he was, even this official had to admit the truth about Velgrynd's beauty. But while he might have had good reason to not want amateurs commenting on his affairs, his reaction was ill-advised.

"But if I leave it all to you people, you'll run out of time before the enemy starts to move! Just let me sit here!"

So the now-livid Velgrynd pushed the official away and took position by his communications equipment. A quick look around made it clear how it worked, so she promptly took action, reaching out to the United States of Azeria's intelligence department on the first try.

"You can hear me, right?" she began, not bothering to ask who was on the other side.

"Quit hounding us," replied a strained voice. *"We passed on your nation's requests to the higher-ups, but the president is a busy man. You have to understand that there's no time for negotiations."*

They might have been the enemy, but they were being used by the *yohma* just as much. That must have been why they were at least making an effort to respond instead of flatly dismissing Velgrynd. But they still hadn't set up a meeting, and the simple reason for this was that Azeria was in a state of internal chaos. Japan understood that well enough, so it hadn't pushed the matter very much. But Velgrynd didn't care about any of that.

"Whatever. Just put little George on the line for me, all right? Your president."

"You don't understand, do you? And you can't go around calling our president 'little George,' either. I keep telling you that we're busy—"

"Tell him Velgrynd is calling, and I think he'll come right over."

“What?”

The voice seemed a bit confused by this, but Velgrynd ended the call without further comment. She personally knew the president of Azeria, their enemies, and naturally she wanted to take advantage of that. Now she had to see how they'd respond. If they actually relayed the message to President Hayes, things would start to go quickly. If not, she was planning to make a personal visit. She knew where he would be—in the same spot as twenty-five years ago, although it only seemed like a few days to her. And since physical positions remained constant even in other timelines, she could move right over via Spatial Transport without problems.

I think I'll head over if they don't respond to me within one day.

Next, Velgrynd sent out a message to the Holy Arcian Empire. She had thought about how to negotiate with them as well. Precisely working the virtually magical communications terminal in front of her, she immediately opened up a channel, called for someone on the other end, and began making her one-sided demands.

“Give this message to your emperor for me. Tell him to agree to the requests sent by the Conquering Empire of Japan. Do it, and we'll provide you with another sacred treasure—a sword, a spear, a bow, you name it. Velgrynd herself has personally guaranteed it, so we want you to work fast.”

The recipient of this snippy message had no idea how to react. As far as he knew, he didn't take orders from anyone calling themselves Velgrynd. He had no reason to agree to this, but this was an official international communications channel. Ignoring her wasn't an option, but a communications officer like him couldn't meet with the emperor just because he wanted to. He honestly thought the request was ridiculous.

Still, he reported this call to his boss regardless. He did so because she had used the term “sacred treasure.”

The Holy Arcian Empire retained a fighting task force, a national power whose name was renowned even in other nations. They were called the Seven Sacred Treasures—seven people gifted with supernatural abilities in battle—and they were particularly famed for the weapons they possessed. These weapons were

conscious creatures, and only when someone was selected by them as their owner could they become part of this group. It was a story that had been passed down since the founding of the nation; no Arcian was unaware of it, and most of the rest of the world was familiar with the tale as well.

Casually stating that you could simply create another one of them was anathema. Doing so during international diplomacy was even worse. All communication records were kept on this channel, and what Velgrynd had said could be used as fodder to intensify the war.

So he had no choice but to report this. That was a negotiating tactic deliberately picked by Velgrynd. But the communications officer Velgrynd had just kicked out of his seat, along with his associates, had had enough.

"Wh-what are you...?! Look, I'll abide by what you did with Azeria. I *won't*, really, but at least I could blame all of that on you alone. But there's no way we can back away from what you told the Arcians!"

"Y-yeah! And how underhanded of you, using a false name like that. They're bound to find out the truth soon enough! This is going to be a *huge* problem!"

It certainly didn't seem like a false name to Velgrynd, but to someone who didn't know her, it must've sounded like she was trying to con the other nations. They had her wrong, but she didn't feel like explaining things to them, so she ignored their protests. Whining about it now was pointless. It was up to the other parties to respond.

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So Velgrynd finished making her moves. All complaints about them were cast aside, and she decided to have some tea made and enjoy an elegant break as she waited for word from those she had contacted.

Meanwhile, the head of the foreign ministry's intelligence department was silently fuming, ready to try Velgrynd for high treason depending on how the other nations responded.

That stupid girl... She's strong, I'll admit that. But she can't trick me. I kept quiet around His Majesty, but she's waiting for when we're at our weakest so she can swindle us with her lies.

She had pulled the wool over everyone's eyes at the imperial conference, but in retrospect, the things Velgrynd told them all were patently ridiculous. If she was telling the truth, there was no hope left for humanity. He couldn't tell exactly how powerful she was, but there's no way they could ever beat an army with mythical strength. The thought had begun to make Velgrynd seem like a villain in his mind—the "denial" phase of the grief cycle writ large, not that he was aware of it. His rage was ratcheting up his anxieties—and just when he was almost at the end of his rope...

"Velgrynd? Hi, Velgrynd! It's me!"

The message came from the United States of Azeria, and it came at startling speed. And who could it be but:

"Well, hello there, little George! I heard that you're president now, aren't you? I sure wish Laurent was around to see what a fine man you've become."

"Ah, it really is you, Velgrynd," replied President George Hayes. *"I'm so glad to hear your voice! I never thought I'd see you again."*

Everyone overhearing the conversation was stunned into silence. The department official Velgrynd had tangled with earlier, on the other hand, was simply confused beyond belief.

What? Velgrynd wasn't a fake name? Wait... No, that doesn't matter. Ryu-oh is personally connected to the president? This makes no sense to me...

He had looked down on Velgrynd as this impudent compulsive liar, but in an instant, he was almost feeling respect for her. Velgrynd herself, however, didn't care what any of them thought.

"Now, George, I'm sorry to ask you for favors out of nowhere, but is it okay if we catch up later? There's something really important that I want to take care of first. Have they told you about what's going on?"

"Yes. And you're right. I have things I want to discuss with you as well, though. Can you hear me out before we move on to this business of yours?"

"Of course. You're Laurent's pride and joy, you know. I almost feel like a mother to you, in a way."

"Thank you. I'm happy to hear that. Now, as for the current situation, I think we need to sit down and brief each other so we're all on the same page."

"I agree with you. Should I take that to mean you'll carry out my request?"

"That won't be a problem, no. When shall we hold this meeting?"

"I'll tell you once I check with Ludora—um, I mean His Majesty the Emperor."

"Oh, yes, you said there was one other person from my father's generation, didn't you? Well, all right. I can't remain on constant standby, but I'll arrange things so I can sit down and talk whenever you can."

And just like that, Velgrynd had secured a promise from the president.

It wasn't much longer before a call came from the Arcians as well.

"Is Lady Velgrynd on hand?"

"Right here. That's me."

"Thank you. My name is Bright, and I serve as leader of the Seven Sacred Treasures of the Holy Arcian Empire. I am deeply moved to receive the honor of a conversation with you, my lady, but before we begin, there was one thing I wanted to confirm..."

"...What is that?"

"Are you truly the goddess that we worship?"

"Huh? What's the point of that question?"

If they wanted to confirm whether Velgrynd was lying, she was awfully curious about how they expected to figure that out.

"Because don't tell me you have someone there that's old enough to know if I'm telling the truth or not."

"No, not that..."

"And I also have to say that I didn't think your king heard my name and decided not to reach out to me personally. Is this how small-minded the descendants of Shin have become?"

"Shin? Wait, do you mean Shin, our divine founding emperor?! Because if you

dare to insult the Arcian imperial court—”

“And one other thing—why are you people called the Seven Sacred Treasures? Because I’m rather sure that I left you with twelve God-class weapons, not seven. You haven’t somehow had any lost or stolen from you, have you? Because I’d hardly dream that you don’t even have twelve people worthy of being picked by those treasures. That’s certainly not the case, is it?”

Bright’s anger quickly vanished. At that moment, the leader of the Seven Sacred Treasures was convinced. The woman on the other line calling herself Velgrynd was truly the goddess he knew.

I recall my own master telling me that there were twelve treasures. It was a true story, one passed down orally across generations, and if she knows that, she has to be the real thing...

There had indeed been twelve sacred treasures. The imperial government, seeing a need to protect their arsenal for desperate times, decreed that only seven would be made public knowledge.

However, that didn’t mean there were twelve people possessing them all, either. Currently, just as Velgrynd had surmised, the number was only eight. Across the four-thousand-year history of the Holy Arcian Empire, three sacred treasures had been lost. One was taken away by a traitor, and two went missing after their owners went off to battle and never returned. As a result, the Arcians currently had only nine treasures left. One was kept in secret, possessed by the emperor’s personal bodyguard and assistant, and another one was masterless, stowed away in the national archives as an imperial treasure.

Having Velgrynd guess the truth like this unnerved Bright. But that wasn’t all that convinced him. Just hearing her voice put him in a state of awe. The sheer force behind it told him she was for real; that was most of the reason. So, regardless of what she had to tell him, Bright bowed his head to the communications equipment he was using. The fact she had no way of seeing this didn’t matter. It was respect for Velgrynd that drove him to do it.

“I sincerely apologize, my goddess. I will immediately report to the emperor of Arcia and give him your demands!”

“...Oh, you will? Well, no more time-wasting, then, all right? Get moving.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Velgrynd wasn't done complaining yet, but she let Bright off the hook for now. She had achieved her goals. Now she had two nations doing her bidding.

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“Well,” she muttered to herself, “guess I'll tackle the Greater Rossiam Dynasty next.”

Working her communicator, she opened a channel with the Rossiam intelligence department. However, the channel that should've worked was being blocked by some kind of interference.

“That's strange. Hey, you over there; when was the last time you made contact with Greater Rossiam?”

“Early this morning!” the official she'd pointed at hurriedly replied. “We make regular contacts with each other six times a day, in the daytime and evening.”

Being at war, they kept this window open regardless of the time difference. This was based on an agreement between all the countries involved, meant to speed up negotiations depending on the state of the war. Normally it'd be used to work out the terms of an armistice, but for now they exchanged information on the *yohma* over this hotline. Given that they had all let their militaries run out of control, they needed a firm grasp of current affairs so they could work out how to explain matters to their citizens.

“Was there anything unusual up to now?”

“Not in particular, sir...”

“No progress,” the hesitant official said, “but no abnormalities, either.”

The time was almost here for their regular afternoon contact. It was doubtful that the other side simply wasn't on duty, and given their dedication to retaining backup communications equipment, a mechanical error was hard to picture. As the official thought, it seemed fair to consider the possibility of an unfolding emergency.

But even in the midst of this, Velgrynd was her usual self.

This world isn't at the level where you can magically interfere with

communications like this. It's all but inevitable that the yohma are up to something. And of course they have to do it right when I've got business to take care of... Unlucky for them, I suppose. Or not? Perhaps this is Ludora's own luck coming into play. Ah, he never lets me down!

Her mind was bursting with optimism. And she was right—magic in this world was more the realm of offensive sorcery and energy-sapping curses, and it was hard to cast spells that could directly rejigger the physical laws of the world. But praising Ludora for this was going overboard. The Oharu of this realm had no such powers; all of this was better chalked up to mere coincidence. To put it bluntly, the mystics had luck going against them. The moment Velgrynd had begun to play an active role, their invasion was all but doomed.

Nimbly working the communicator, Velgrynd began to draw two intricate magic circles in the air, each about a foot in diameter and illuminating her equipment with an eerie glow. They transformed her magical force into electronic signals, transmitting them to the remote receiver in Greater Rossiam, where they acted against the mystics' jamming to destroy it in an instant. It was a trick that not even the master sorcerers of this world could comprehend, much less your average person.

"Is anybody there? Please respond if you are—"

"Ah, finally! Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, the yohma are attacking the royal palace! They cut off all links with the outside! We thought we were done for!"

"Oh, don't panic, silly. This is the Conquering Empire of Japan. I won't say that we're not going to help you, but I can't say that I appreciate being asked for favors out of nowhere like this."

She had a good point. It brought the soldiers from Rossiam who heard her response back to their senses. There was a pause as they discussed matters, and then the line was taken by a calmer voice.

"Pardon our alarm earlier. This is Sergey, director of the Foreign Intelligence Department of Greater Rossiam. It embarrasses me to admit this, but we want to ask for your support. We've been sending messages out across Rossiam, but we have yet to receive any other response. I apologize, but could you reach out to the rest of our lands for us?"

As Sergey explained, they would provide Velgrynd with ciphers linking her to Rossiam's military bases if she agreed to it. The royal forces were keeping up their resistance, but the *yohma* clearly had the upper hand. The Rossiam noncombatants were evacuated, but their hiding spots would clearly be rooted out before long, and after that the royal family's protection couldn't be guaranteed. That was why Sergey wanted to call for backup from across the nation and bring the royals to safety while the *yohma* were thrown into chaos.

The fate of Greater Rossiam was riding entirely on how Japan decided to deal with them. And yet:

"Didn't I tell you that I don't appreciate receiving all these demands from you?"

"Wait, wait, if you can assist us—"

"Calm down, won't you? It doesn't matter to me what's happening with you at the moment. I'm the one who deserves to make demands of you, all right?"

She was giving Sergey her terms, not the other way around, and she wasn't willing to take no for an answer. It was incredibly selfish of her, albeit undoubtedly much in character.

"But you can't just—"

"Here are my demands. We're going to hold an international summit to determine the future direction for the world, so I want your royalty or any other supreme commander from your nation to attend. Promise me that, and I'll assist you."

"How?" is what Sergey should have been asking, but somehow, he could take her claim at face value. He looked around the room he was in, taking glances at the nobility he was charged with guarding.

It's my duty to protect them all. For now...

He understood there was no other option. Trusting the words of some foreigner he didn't know would normally have been a terrible idea, something he'd never dream of doing. Right now, however, even if he wound up betrayed by her offer, it wouldn't delay their downfall anyway.

In terms of the risk, it doesn't matter whether I believe her or not. In the end, at least, I might as well dare to dream of some kind of hope. I hate to get all the royalty mixed up in this madness, but...

But Sergey was still ready to commit.

"Excuse me. I'm sure this must sound ridiculous right now, but the other party is demanding we participate in an international summit. Would it be possible for you to attend, Your Majesty?"

"...I will agree to it."

He was answered by the most powerful person in the room.

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Emperor Magellan of the Greater Rossiam Dynasty was thirty-five years of age—still young, but in his tenth year on the throne. He was thus an ambitious ruler, using his absolute power to invade the Chinese republic in order to gain a firm hold on all the northern lands. There were those against it among the military ranks, but many hawks as well, and so Magellan's will had taken precedent as the war began.

Now Magellan was facing a serious setback. Faced with an enemy unimaginable by human standards, he was plagued by how sheerly powerless he was. It was far too late now, but he regretted every decision he'd made. All had been going well until he'd undertaken his first operation against the Chinese, but now it had destabilized his entire nation.

He might have had the luxurious tastes of royalty, but he was not that inept of a ruler. Under normal circumstances, the citizens wouldn't have minded their emperor living an elegant, refined lifestyle if their own prosperity was assured. But the war had changed everything. They wanted to seize more arable land for their people; they wanted to obtain an all-year port for the sake of their defenses. Everything about the war was because of Rossiam's desires alone, and it had led to an invasion that wholly backfired on them—an explosive situation where they could neither take action nor retreat. And by the time they

realized it was the *yohma*'s work, things were just too chaotic to recover from.

It all seems so foolish now. I never should have lent an ear to that man...

Magellan's most trusted confidant at the time was the one who'd turned his interests toward war. They later found out that he had been taken over by the *yohma*. These were strange creatures; instead of simply overthrowing the world, they seemed to enjoy making humanity fight against each other, guiding them toward their own doom. That's why Magellan was still alive.

Those yohma are fiendishly powerful. We can't beat them. At this rate, even if we had Pulcinella here, we still would have lost...

He recalled that confidant of his, possessed by the *yohma* and laughing in his face. It made him shiver. Even worse, the Mad Priest he counted as his last resort was also on the enemy's side now.

Thanks to that, there was apparently rioting going on in the capital. The nation was at war, for certain, and the people couldn't be blamed for their anxiety—but there had been no fighting within Rossiam's borders, and the food supply had never given out. It was no time for rioting to occur at all, but things just kept getting worse. It was all being fanned by the mystics, the possessed people who placed their faith in Pulcinella.

By now, the court could no longer be protected only by the Imperial Defense Department. If it was dangerous outside the palace as well, it'd only be a matter of time before they were all caught. So Magellan, bereft of hope either way, had no choice but to agree to this request from an enemy nation.

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"Yes, sir!"

Sergey saluted Magellan before returning to his communicator and engaging with Velgrynd again.

"We accept all your demands. However, unfortunately..."

Greater Rossiam was in a state of emergency. Even if they wished to send

their king out to a meeting, there was simply no way to do so. That's what he wanted to say. If the offer was to help out if they agreed to the summit, that likely meant Japan was sending reinforcements. If those forces moved quickly enough, there was a chance they'd be saved. Or, really, Sergey didn't mind if he lost his life in the effort—he simply had to be sure the imperial family, the symbol of the dynasty, would make it through this.

But then something surprising happened. Velgrynd agreed to offer her aid—and that meant their future was assured.

"Very well. I'm glad you're not as stupid as I feared you were at first. I'm going to deploy a Gate over there, so go through and come over here, all right?"

Just as she stopped talking, the air began to warp in front of Sergey and his comrades. The other side of the rift in space revealed the place Velgrynd was sitting. This was Dimensional Connection, the supernatural ability to link two places together regardless of distance.

“No...”

Everyone there except for Velgrynd was united in shock. They now understood who held supreme authority here. No matter what, they must never get on the bad side of that woman.

*

“Wait... Why are people from Greater Rossiam here?”

“Whoa, whoa, am I dreaming? Ow...”

At least one person was pinching their cheek, unable to accept reality.

“I can't believe it. Our records talk about people in the *shinbutsu* rank who can cast teleportation magic, but...”

Others tried their best to analyze what was going on, but their brains just couldn't keep up. They couldn't be blamed. No one could imagine connecting two spaces so far apart from each other.

“Uniting three nations so instantly...”

Only the most resilient could realize what the meaning of this was.

“My goddess... You are truly a goddess!”

The staff at the foreign ministry's intelligence division were all astonished by Velgrynd's power and abilities. At this point, nobody dared to defy her. Even the top officials were busy cultivating newfound respect for her, no longer afraid to brownnose her if need be.

"That just leaves China, but if we have three nations agreeing to this summit, that satisfies the conditions, doesn't it?"

"Yes, my lady, it does!"

"Okay, so you guys can handle the rest of the negotiations yourselves for me?"

"""Certainly!"""

Nobody was foolish enough to refuse, of course, the officials all staking their pride on successfully reasoning with the Chinese.

Velgrynd nodded and turned toward the befuddled Greater Rossiam leaders in the room. "So is this all of you? I'm sorry, but anybody outside the room you were just in is beyond what I could agree to. If we destroy the *yohma* quickly enough, though, I think we can save all of them."

They could do nothing but eagerly nod at this. Not all of the imperial court had made it through the rift, but they cared more about saving their own hides than whoever was left behind. There was no way they could pin the blame for any of that on Velgrynd.

"We thank you for your assistance."

Sergey, overcoming his confusion first, thanked her. It made Magellan realize that he needed to do the same.

"Allow me to offer my appreciation as well. Once this is all over, I promise you may accept whatever you want as a reward."

Velgrynd snorted a bit, not sounding too interested in what he had to offer. Emperor or not, she acted just as arrogant around them all.

"I don't need anything, thank you. I'm sure you can't fulfill my wish anyway. Just help me out with this operation, all right?"

"We—we will, yes. Of course."

Magellan was put off by this flat refusal, but he wasn't small-minded enough to lose his temper over it. Here, the title of Emperor of the Greater Rossiam Dynasty didn't have that much meaning. Even he understood that his life had been spared mainly because she found him useful.

"May I at least ask the name of the woman I owe my life to?"

"Call me Ryu-oh, please."

"Very well. And again, Ryu-oh, I thank you."

"Not a problem. Now, I'll let you know once we have a time and date for the summit, so for now, rest easy here, all right?"

Velgrynd was acting every bit like an empress now. She was the law here.

A staff official quickly stood up and ran out of the room so he could order living spaces prepared for these unexpected guests. Another one bowed to Magellan and his entourage, ready to show them around. They would be waited upon in a reception room until their rooms were ready. All this role assignment was done without any previous discussion; their teamwork was a sight to see. Even Velgrynd was a little impressed.

Then the most self-important of the foreign ministry's officials decided now would be a great time to try buttering her up.

"Lady Ryu-oh, please, instead of black tea, try this top-of-the-line *gyokuro* green tea as well!"

No need to waste time as they awaited the Chinese response, he reasoned. Nor this chance to make himself look good around her.

"Oh, how thoughtful of you."

"Thank you very much! My name is Kanji Yamamoto, and your words alone fill me with supreme satisfaction!"

Yamamoto never let up for a moment—one of his greatest talents, his staff thought.

"This is very tasty. It has an airy sort of sweet aroma, but such a refreshing aftertaste."

"Yes, I'm very proud of it. It's provided by one of my favorite stores."

"I like it."

"In that case, I think you may enjoy some of the snacks here as well."

Yamamoto next took out some *fondant au chocolat*, an elegant sweetness exuding from it. This was an almost decadent luxury to enjoy during wartime. He had obtained this treat for himself, exercising his power and finances to the fullest, but he was offering it to Velgrynd now. The taste was more than satisfactory to her.

"Kanji Yamamoto, was it? I'll remember that name."

"Y-yes, my lady! I am tremendously honored!"

She was making this offer despite never having bothered to remember the name of any other human being in her life. She could be surprisingly vulnerable to brazen bribery like this. Perhaps Yamamoto deserved the victory, though, quick as he had been to realize that money wasn't likely to move her.

After a period of waiting:

"The Chinese have responded! They said they'll attend the summit!"

Good news rang across the room—and with that, the five-nation summit was a done deal.

*

"What? Is that the truth?"

"Well, of course. Why would I lie to you?"

Velgrynd's report came as a total shock to Oharu. A summit like this was thought to be impossible, but she had achieved it with the greatest of ease.

Once again, there's just no guessing how far she'll go. I'm lucky she's on my side, but if it's strictly based on her affinity for me...well, it's almost too absurd to believe.

These friendly terms could instantly change at Velgrynd's whim. The thought scared Oharu. A trusting relationship is something built gradually; normally, it involved spending lots of time with each other, working out what the other

party allows and what riles their anger. Nations worked the same way; if they couldn't share their values with each other, it'd be hard to get along very well. Invaders like the mystics were obviously enemies, since there was no reasoning with them. It seemed a pity to resort to violence against these clearly intelligent creatures, but the line had to be drawn somewhere.

And then we had Velgrynd here.

"Isn't that wonderful, Ludora? I'll work out a site for the summit, too, so what time works for you?"

Velgrynd was clearly exercising her full trust with Oharu—and that, he thought, was why he needed to stay on his guard. The conclusion he reached: fight kindness with kindness. He had no choice but to trust her, so there was no need to stew over it. All he had to do was express the gratitude he felt with all his might. It was the only way, he believed, that he could repay her.

"I thank you, Velgrynd. And it'd make me even happier if you keep helping me like this."

"Hee-hee-hee! Oh, don't worry about it."

Velgrynd laughed, expressing the joy deep in her heart. To her, Ludora's happiness was her own as well, so Oharu's decision had been absolutely correct.

It was decided that the summit would take place after lunch the next day. They needed to formulate a strategy against the *yohma* quickly, so there was no time for grand arrangements; Oharu decided it best to prioritize efficiency. Time differences, or any other business the other leaders had, were not at all a concern to him.

This was duly relayed to, and agreed upon by, the other nations. It was fully up to the foreign ministry's intelligence department to handle this, which led to some tense moments, but Velgrynd couldn't have possibly cared less about them.

"Ah, Yamamoto, right? Keep up the good work."

That compliment alone was the greatest consideration she'd give anyone. It was doubly unfair, since it was Yamamoto's staff working long hours while he

mostly sat around, but Velgrynd was already making her next set of demands to them.

"All right, so make sure you have a site set up by tomorrow morning. Something solemn and impressive, as befitting His Majesty the Emperor."

"G-gladly!"

It was beyond unreasonable of her, but Yamamoto had no right of refusal. In fact, he even seemed a little grateful for it. Perhaps this was awakening him to certain fetishes he didn't know he had—but, again, Velgrynd neither knew nor cared.

"Oh, and can you move a communicator over to a bit of a larger room for me?"

"What for, my lady?"

Given that this summit would take place over voice lines, Yamamoto was planning to place the equipment in the largest meeting hall they had, not "a bit of a larger room." He was wondering what Velgrynd meant by that.

"Well, because I'm going to have people from all the other nations here, too, like what I did with Greater Rossiam. That'll save people some trouble, and don't you think it'll eliminate a lot of wasted time, too?"

"What?"

What he thought about it was moot. This was beyond the realm of common sense. Yamamoto couldn't believe it—but if it was possible, some part of his mind told him, then yes, it'd be better that way.

"Or do you have a complaint about that?"

"N-no, my lady! I would never! I—I will promptly begin working on it! At once!"

"Oh? Thank you, then."

Velgrynd smiled, her anger quelled for now, and left. Yamamoto looked around at the ministry officials around him.

"What will we do, sir?"

"What do you *think*, you fools?! We'll do exactly what she says, of course! The site needs to be moved at once!"

"All right!"

"And move a communicator into meeting hall number two at the same time!"

"Roger that!"

So began a long, sleepless night for the intelligence department.

*

The fate of the human race was riding on this day.

Meeting hall number two had been transformed overnight, and Velgrynd was satisfied with the results. A communicator was in place, along with a set of ornate chairs and soft cushions for relaxing on. All the extraneous fixtures had been taken out of this largish meeting hall, and the refined decor matched the tastes of the world leaders due to visit. Some light fare and drinks were spread on a table against the wall, with several servants waiting nearby. Everything was first-class in make, ensuring that no one would question the Conquering Empire's finer tastes.

"I like this. Well done, Yamamoto."

"Yes, my lady! Thank you very much. Simply hearing that from you makes me feel like I, Yamamoto, am ascending toward the heavens!"

Kanji Yamamoto was nothing if not an erudite sycophant. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to curry favor with Velgrynd, and he had succeeded with flying colors. Velgrynd, after all, had always been a connoisseur of the finer things in life; impressing someone like her was a feat in itself, and the military officers who stopped in to look were amazed he'd pulled it off in a single night. Yamamoto's own staff held their heads high, just as proud as their boss.

"Right. We're short on time, so let's get started."

Velgrynd sat down on a chair. Elegantly, but with a sense of urgency, she nimbly worked the communicator. The first nation she reached out to was the United States of Azeria.

"Hi, George. Doing well?"

"Y-yeah. It really brings me back, seeing you act all crazy like this again. But... maybe it's weird to say, but I'm relieved you haven't changed at all."

President Hayes couldn't be blamed for his confusion. After all, the communicator had been dropped entirely in favor of a Dimensional-Connection-driven trip right into the room. The Azeria cabinet members with him could scarcely believe their eyes.

"Hee-hee-hee! Why would I ever change? I know it's been twenty-five years for you, but to me, we only left each other a few days ago."

"Ah yes, right you are."

Velgrynd and George chatted about the past a bit longer, Yamamoto making sure they weren't interrupted. With a casual look, he put the servants to work—and in a few moments, the befuddled Azeria cabinet members were able to relax and take in the situation a little more.

Meanwhile, Velgrynd's conversation was accelerating in pace.

"Oh yes, how I remember! There was never a dull moment around that man, you know."

"Yeah, he mentioned to me how you always put up with his big talk."

"I sure did. Like how he declared the day before a big hurricane that it'd be clear and sunny the next day."

"Oh, I know that story, trust me. He told it to me before bed lots of times. And it really *was* sunny, thanks to you."

"Mm-hmm. There was this baseball game that day, and the neighborhood kids were looking forward to it. He was always messing around with them, telling all sorts of lies like that. Perhaps that's why he said it to me, like 'Hey, what's the harm if something I say comes true for a change?' And I actually agreed to it. It was the dumbest thing, I tell you."

The idea of her single-handedly quelling a hurricane gave everyone in the room pause.

"You're kidding me..."

"She's not even trying to hide how abnormal she is..."

Some of them couldn't be bothered to conceal their surprise any longer. Velgrynd didn't notice, and wouldn't have cared if she had.

"Oh, was *that* why? Because Dad just talked about how hilarious it was when the kids got all freaked out about it. I didn't know *that* was the reason..."

"Hee-hee-hee! Oh, but the kids were really happy, too. Their team was excited to play that day. There was a really long home run, if I remember."

"I'm sure there was. My child loves baseball, too, you know..."

Then Velgrynd spotted the clouds forming over George's head. The change was slight, something most people wouldn't notice, but she was reading the emotions framing the thoughts around this conversation, so she could pick up on it.

"Actually, how is Emile doing?"

Emile Hayes, George's son, was the reason for his sudden melancholy, Velgrynd surmised. She deliberately brought up his name to George, hoping it'd make it easier to talk about.

"Ahhh, there you go again, Velgrynd. Nothing ever escapes your notice, does it?"

"Oh, that's not true. You're just like a son to me, is all. I worry about you."

"Heh-heh... Well, thanks. I really don't think this is the kind of thing the leader of a nation should be talking to anyone about...but you're really all I can count on. Can you lend me a hand, maybe?"

"Of course. You're Laurent Hayes's son, after all."

George shed a tear. "My son needs help," he whispered, as he explained what was going on. It turned out to be a very delicate situation.

Azeria's Department of Defense was already aware that the nation's military had been taken over by the mystics. That alone was terrible news, but as George explained, David Reagan, the fleet commander in the middle of the crisis, had sent an emissary over to central command to give them his demands. He'd asked them, in essence, to hand over the entire government to the *yohma*. They weren't aiming to wipe out mankind; they just wanted to rule over this

world and turn it into their personal paradise. Destroying any governments, they likely believed, would just result in a lot of annoying cleanup.

"So they're asking us to bow to their commands. If we do it, they won't rob our top officials of their free will, and they'll guarantee their personal safety."

"Hmm... Well, why don't you accept that?"

"Because it looks like they're deploying out into the Great South Sea to stage an attack on our capital. That, and they intend to tell the truth about this whole war to our people. It'd destroy any authority our government has, and it'd set off panic we'd never be able to control. Honestly, I'm at the end of my rope."

They had been offered a choice, and opinions were split over which option to take. Either one, though, didn't hurt the mystics at all. And besides, Velgrynd thought, the *yohma* wanted to enslave humanity, procuring the healthy bodies they'd need for the numbers of mystics they expected to immigrate here in time. A supply of fully controlled slaves would be ideal, and since this world had five different superpowers, destroying one of them would teach a lesson to the others. The humans far outnumbered the mystics; even a tenth of them would be more than enough physical bodies for the invaders' needs.

"I see. I'm sure the Chinese are in a similar situation, and I think Rossiam must have refused the offer, because the royal court's door is about to be taken down by rioters. I'd say Japan had it relatively easy by comparison."

"It's only a matter of time either way, I'm sure. The combined Azerian-Chinese fleet is coming soon, isn't it?"

"Yes. Not that it's a problem with me around. But you were going to tell me about Emile?"

The Azerians and the Japanese officials in the room, Yamamoto included, weren't so sure Velgrynd should just wave off the fleet like that. But they all opted to let George speak first, fearing the worst if they interrupted him and sparked Velgrynd's ire. Everyone had a common understanding at this point that defying this woman was out of the question.

"Emile was the emissary Reagan sent. He's got my son's face, my son's knowledge...but he had this incredibly evil look in his eyes..."

His son was grown now, serving in the military, and had unfortunately been deployed with the fleet at the center of this.

"It's okay, George. Calm down. What did I always say to you?"

Velgrynd gave him a reassuring, unwavering smile, the most ladylike of expressions. It had the power, they said, to assuage anyone who saw it.

"Ha-ha! Keep a cool head, right? Oh, I remember, Velgrynd."

George regained his composure, recalling his duties as president.

"Good, good. And don't worry. I'll save Emile for you. And while I'm at it, I'll protect Azeria's honor as well."

"Thank you. I have nothing to worry about now. Please, save our United States...and save my son, too."

"You can count on it. We have around two months until the *yohma* fully assimilate into their human hosts. Emile's just fine, all right? And so's the rest of the fleet."

"That's certainly a load off my shoulders. But they set off three weeks ago. We only have a few days left before the attack..."

"Oh, it's all right. That's what today's summit is for."

"All right." George nodded back. "I promise we won't hesitate to help in any way we can. I just hope this summit bears fruit for us."

He stood up, the rest of them silently watching Azerian cabinet joining him. Their conversation was over, and the guides opened the door at Yamamoto's signal.

"We will take you to the waiting room now."

Listening to Velgrynd's powerful words made everyone in the room feel relieved. They all voiced their thanks as they filed out.

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The next group Velgrynd summoned was the contingent from the Holy Arcian Empire. They had just crossed the ocean using Dimensional Connection, something they didn't understand at all, and one could only imagine how

flummoxed they must have felt.

"No," voiced one minister. "We were in a safe room only a tiny number of people know about. How did you...?"

"Well," the indignant Velgrynd said with a snort, "if you didn't want people to pinpoint your location, you need to isolate it as much as you can with a Barrier or whatnot and cut off all contact with the outside. Not that you can hide something like that at *your* level, but..."

"Contact with the outside...? Oh! Did you follow our transmissions to identify where we were hiding?"

A younger man in the group spoke up. He had a God-class bow on his back, so Velgrynd assumed he was one of the Seven Sacred Treasures. "That's right," she said, not too interested in him otherwise. The Arcians were up in arms about this, but she wasn't about to put up with it. Something like that was child's play for Velgrynd, and she wished people didn't carry on about it all the time.

"So you're Velgrynd?" a more arrogant team member asked. "I am Zangu, current emperor of Arcia. I understand you've been posing as the goddess Cardina, the one who bestowed her blessings upon our founder Shin?"

He was young, in his early twenties; a beautiful man with blond hair, blue eyes, and a well-balanced frame. His full name was Zangu Euran Dolte Arcia, Emperor of the Holy Arcian Empire, in the flesh.

"Cardina? Oh, right, they called me that, too. Something about how they were too lowly to call me by my real name or whatever. I had no idea my *nickname* was the one that stuck. Don't tell me the real one didn't survive in the records?"

"You refuse to admit it, then? What a farce! Or do you think your beauty gives you free rein to rant and rave all you want?"

Velgrynd was lying; he was convinced of it. But that attitude of his was a major problem. And if the leader of a group is in the wrong, it often takes more than an apology to make up for it. Some underling going on like this could have the blame pinned entirely on them, or someone higher up could show enough remorse for everything to be forgiven. But if the highest person on the totem pole made the incorrect choice, it could lead to events they'd never be able to

take back.

Bright, leader of the Seven Sacred Treasures, almost had his eyes pop out when he heard Zangu speak. *You idiot! After all the explaining I did, you still don't understand how fearsome Velgrynd is?! And before that, like, right after we had this wondrous supernatural thing happen to us, I think it should be crystal clear that it's the work of the gods!!*

He had reason to be so perturbed. Dimensional Connection was clearly nothing a bunch of puny humans could achieve. Whoever could conjure such a spell must be either a god or someone close to it. Angering someone like that was ill-advised at best, and it was his own emperor doing it, no less. Bright had no idea how to make up for this.

But he wasn't the only one reeling at this. Kanji Yamamoto was just as aggravated.

Whoa, whoa, was the emperor of Arcia that brainless all along?! What are we going to do about this? Because he's going to anger Ryu-oh before long, and then who knows what terrors we'll see...?

Yamamoto's mind raced. This was his problem, too. So the first thing he did was give a message to one of his assistants.

"Bring His Majesty here at once."

"But, sir, that's—"

"Say no more, fool! I know it would be disrespectful of us, but he's the only man who can stop Ryu-oh!"

The assistant stopped protesting. It was clearly the right thing to do. "Right away, sir," he softly said before zooming off.

Normally, Kanji Yamamoto was the worst kind of middle manager, acting like some supreme being while doing little actual work. But when it came to judging whom not to cross in his line of work, he was a born genius. He had leveraged that skill well, and it had brought him safely through this crisis so far.

But as everyone in the room sensed the danger, the emperor that had triggered all this remained as casual as ever.

"Heh-heh-heh... Cat got your tongue, now that you realize I won't be tricked that easily? Well, it's understandable, I suppose. I know a con artist like you wouldn't know this, but I'm not like the foolish rabble around me. You see, I too have been accepted by one of our Sacred Treasures! I have the seventh position among their ranks, in fact. And *that* is the man you were attempting to hoodwink!"

Zangu was tremendously proud of himself. And he was telling the truth. A God-class sword was hanging from his waist, and it was faintly glowing. Velgrynd had noticed it, of course; she just hadn't spoken until now because she was so aghast.

"...Are you kidding me? You have me right here, and *that's* how you react? Could someone this incompetent really be descended from Shin?"

But as she lamented over this, something dawned on her. Clearly, from the way he'd refused her when she'd first reached out, this Zangu hadn't trusted Velgrynd from the very beginning. It was in a king's nature to be very cautious, so she hadn't chided him for it at the time. But if Zangu still doubted her despite being told of these secret matters only someone there at the time would have known about, it was a real pity...in many different ways, too. Being so mistrusted despite her revealing these secrets was, well, unthinkable—and if these secrets were common knowledge, it showed the emperor wasn't keeping his confidential information very secure. Either scenario was unacceptable, and if the emperor was *this* slow to pick up on that, it was a serious issue that called all his qualifications into question.

"Incompetent? Are you referring to me?"

"You don't even understand that? What a pity. But you *have* gone through over four thousand years of history in the meantime, so I suppose any bloodline would deteriorate."

Velgrynd grinned. Zangu's outlandish behavior exasperated her, but she still wasn't petty enough to get angry over this much. But Zangu himself was livid.

"Heh-heh-heh... So not only do you try to keep up the act; you mock me to my face? Foolish girl! Let me ask you this, then! Not only do you dare to claim the name of a goddess, you even bragged to us that you can copy her powers?"

Well, if you can create a sacred treasure, let's see you do it right now. But beware! Fail, and you'll be exposed for what you *truly* are!"

"I don't really want to."

"Hmph! I won't listen to excuses. *You're* the one making impossible promises, and *you're* the one who needs to pay the price for them. Oh, but I won't kill you. You *do* seem decently powerful, and you certainly have the beauty to match. I'll make you into my personal plaything, so don't you worry!"

There was no end to Zangu's foolhardy ranting. Everyone except him and Velgrynd were holding their breath, waiting for what would happen next. Clearly Zangu was in the wrong, but the fact Velgrynd was being patient with him despite all expectations to the contrary gave them a glimmer of hope. They all looked at her, praying that this would somehow end peacefully.

"Well? You really can't do any of that, can—?"

"I would like to say a few things to you, but all right. I *did* make that promise, so I'll give you what you want."

Velgrynd, cutting Zangu off, produced an azure dragon sword, pooling her magicules together and building it with Create Material.

"Will this suffice? I doubt *you* can use it to its fullest, but it has God-class abilities, I will assure you."

"Wha...?!"

Zangu, instinctively accepting it, was instantly charmed by its glow. It was the mark of the real thing; there was no more doubting her words.

As a king, Zangu wasn't entirely inept. He was extremely arrogant at the best of times, but not a tyrant. He even had enough of a conscience to listen to the words of the people he ruled over. This was the first meeting of the five superpowers in ages, so he was being more high-handed than usual today, lest anyone think he was a pushover. That was Zangu's mistake, and at long last, he had come to realize it.

Then it's really true? No, it can't be. It's all just so ridiculous, isn't it? Someone from mythology, thousands of years ago, just showing up in this modern age?

That's impossible!

His mind succumbed to confusion. But as he did, Velgrynd—perhaps cutting him some slack because he was descended from a former Ludora—treated him as gently as possible. If this had been some unrelated person, the talking would have ended long ago, and there would likely be blood all over the walls. But Zangu, despite having all the luck in the world, simply couldn't accept it. In fact:

...No, wait a minute. If a goddess from mythology actually exists, who would be more appropriate to be at my side? Yes... Yes! If I can get my hands on her, all our problems will be solved!

It was an outlandish idea, but he sincerely felt he was snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

"Heh-heh-heh... Yes, now I see! Velgrynd, my goddess! You've traversed across time to meet me, haven't you? What a gallant thing to do for love! But very well. Allow me to reply to your feelings for me in kind. I swear that I will love and cherish you for the rest of my life!"

He was horribly mistaken, and he had a room full of witnesses watching it all. Velgrynd was bewildered.

"Huh? What kind of joke is that?"

"Heh-heh... No need to be shy, now. We will have to wait until the end of hostilities to hold the formal introduction, but once everything is taken care of, I will gladly accept you as my true empress. It is said that Shin never managed to father a son with his beloved goddess, but what will we bequeath to the world, I wonder? With the blood of divinity, I'm sure Arcia will reach greater heights than ever before!"

Zangu's impressively arbitrary delusions stunned Velgrynd into silence. Really, as her mind caught up with things, she wondered if she had ever been so insulted her whole life. Or maybe it wasn't that she couldn't keep up with this nonsense so much as she didn't want to believe it was really happening. It proved, either way, that even the omnipotent can feel totally lost sometimes.

And if that's how Velgrynd felt, the audience was expressing an even wider range of reactions. The Seven Sacred Treasures in the room, for example, were

beside themselves with shock. They wanted to shout “Stop him, stop His Majesty right now!!” to the ministers there, but had to make do with glancing suggestively at them instead. Their instincts told them that something horrible would happen at this rate. It was the right of no man to make a goddess do his bidding; they needed to quiet Zangu down before divine punishment came winging his way.

But the ministers didn’t move. They couldn’t, really. With Velgrynd’s face now expressionless, her beauty stood out all the more—and it made this even more terrifying, especially considering how guilty they all felt.

Clearly, the ministers wouldn’t be any help. The Seven Sacred Treasures, starting to sweat a little, turned toward their leader. Bright, feeling their stares, cursed his bad luck.

This was hardly welcome news for Japan, either. The intelligence department’s officials, nervous about this summit after working on it overnight, now wondered just how stupid the Arcian emperor was. He had a lot of guts, no doubt, but if Velgrynd flew into a rage, they’d all pay for it, and they sure didn’t want to.

“Well? A splendid offer, is it not? And you’d hardly receive as much attention from some ancient, senile emperor with barely any time left in his life. I, on the other hand, would spend every evening—”

“What?”

The air froze in the room. Everyone realized at once that what they had feared was happening.

Zangu, facing the full brunt of Velgrynd’s anger, was unable to move. He realized he had gone too far, but he just couldn’t swallow the words.

Wha...?! Wha...what is this divine energy I feel?! The goddess of mythology—it’s even more than I ever imagined. And I wanted to make her my wife? How could I even have dared...?

He struggled to keep his thoughts even barely coherent. Then, more than he’d ever wanted to, he understood just how foolish he had been. He’d thought that adding a goddess’s blood to his family line was a splendid idea, and maybe it

was on the surface, but some things just weren't ever going to be possible. It was told that Shin, the founder of Arcia, had earned the love of a goddess, but not even they had had children. Zangu, the distant descendant of Shin, never had the right to receive the affinity of anyone from the heavens.

Besides, as described in the ancient records, the personality of this goddess—even assuming that half of it was mere myth—was beyond intense. Whenever anyone insulted those she loved, she would breathlessly destroy entire countries over it. They had conducted excavations in the areas the ancient records said were affected, only to find the ruins of cities under the ground. The outer walls of the buildings they'd dug up were all melted by an intense flame, reportedly transformed into a glass-like substance.

Only now was the memory of these reports suddenly occurring to Zangu. His mind could picture a future where the countries composing Arcia were seared by flames, and it turned his face pale. *Perhaps*, he thought, *I have committed the ultimate taboo*—but it was too late now.

His utter destruction was all but assured by this point, but it was at this moment where someone finally took action. It was Yamamoto. If he allowed Velgrynd to fall out of control, he would be the one taking complete responsibility. The lives of everyone in the room were in severe danger at the moment, but compared to his reputation, that seemed like a second priority to him. He was habitually bossy and not too passionate about his work, but he wasn't rotten enough that he'd run away from his responsibilities. In fact, from the moment this war had broken out, he took it as a given that someone needed to step up and take action, and he saw that as his own role. That was what drove him to react before anyone else to Zangu's words.

"You insolent buffoon! What could possibly drive you to insult His Majesty, our emperor?! This could potentially be the basis for war itself, but what say you about that?!"

He shouted this before Velgrynd could say anything—or, really, to keep her from opening her mouth at all. It is a human tendency to grow calm if someone else nearby angrily spouts off before them, and that applied just as well to a True Dragon, quelling her rage before it had a chance to explode. It was the greatest play of the day, and it was all Kanji Yamamoto's work.

And now some of his setup was paying off, too.

“What’s all this noise?”

The emperor he’d called over (at the risk of his own neck) appeared with the most perfect timing possible.

“Oh, Your Majesty—”

“Ryu-oh, don’t let the words of the young bother you. I’m sure Zangu here was merely testing you, to see if you were truly worth trusting.”

Oharu rushed in, addressing Velgrynd as calmly as he could. He was in a panic internally, jogging down the hallway for the first time in several decades, but he showed none of it. As far as the world knew, he was every bit the stately ruler he claimed to be—and catching sight of him made Velgrynd forget all her ire. Regaining her reason, she thought over what she was told.

“So he deliberately tried to bait me in order to see how far he’d need to go to anger me—”

“Y-yes, indeed, um, probably something like that?”

Assuaging Velgrynd was Oharu’s primary task. He would gladly accept an insult or two if it meant calming this room back down. And it worked.

“Ah... Yes, I see. I didn’t want to think the descendant of Shin was that suicidal anyway. It makes sense.”

Velgrynd nodded deeply and flashed a smile—a gentle, beautiful smile, relieving Oharu greatly. “Now,” he said, swooping in to take the lead, “I’m sure our Arcian guests are very tired, so let’s take them to the waiting room.”

The emperor normally wouldn’t have been doing this himself, but he had little other choice. Everyone moved at once, like the spell had been shattered, and the world dodged one serious bullet.

The Arcia of future generations, by the way, was much friendlier toward the Conquering Empire of Japan than before—but particular respect and popularity was awarded to those with the last name Yamamoto. They were even listed in history textbooks, credited with saving Arcia from grave danger. It was the sort of fact that always showed up in final exams, so nearly everyone who went

through the Arcian school system was familiar with it.

So Kanji Yamamoto would come to be described as the Arcian ally who talked the emperor Zangu back to his senses. All his groveling had given him immortality, not that he could have known it at the time.

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With the Arcians gone, calm returned to the room. The emperor retired to his chambers to receive some medication for his upset stomach, so Velgrynd decided to go back to work.

"Still, it's been quite a while since anyone tried to test me like that. Zangu was his name, wasn't it? He's certainly growing in a fascinating way, isn't he? Just like I'd expect from the progeny of Shin."

"Y-yes, I'm sure. Ha-ha... I was quite surprised as well."

Yamamoto sorely wanted Velgrynd to shut up about this. But he knew his reputation was flying high in the department right now, so he hoped they would be patient with her.

"So that just leaves..."

"The Republic of Chinese Fiefdoms."

"Right, yes."

As allies with the Conquering Empire, the Chinese were the last to agree to talks, as long as the other nations were committed to them. Velgrynd hadn't directly spoken with them yet, so she wasn't aware of all those details. The head of state—officially titled the general secretary—was invited, as were several government figures and their bodyguards. They greeted Velgrynd in her room, hiding any shock they might have had.

"I am Wang Rongren. You are Ryu-oh?"

"That's right."

"Hmph! You look exactly like a human to me...but we won't be deceived so easily. Have you now infiltrated our closest ally, *yohma*? Or is this all a deception to make us think so?"

Wang Rongren wasted no time antagonizing Velgrynd. The Japanese in the

room were starting to sweat anew, as she herself muttered “Again?” under her breath. Judging by Wang’s performance, something was clearly up back in his homeland, and Velgrynd opted to refrain from off-the-cuff remarks before she could figure out what.

“I don’t know where this is, but we’ve volunteered to venture into the tiger’s den. Don’t assume your schemes will harm us *that* readily, cursed *yohma*!”

At Wang’s shout, the bodyguards with the Chinese made their move. They were dressed in white *changpao* robes, giving them flexibility as they worked in strict, refined synchronization. They were obviously martial arts masters to a man...not that any of it mattered to Velgrynd.

“*Yohma*, we concede your strength is fearsome. But know we will never forgive you for the name you stole!”

“Yes! The ‘dragon’ in your name was taken by Long, the progenitor of our Dragon Fist style! And no *yohma* should ever dream to bring that name to her lips!”

The bodyguards roared with white-hot rage. But the reaction from the Japanese was remarkably muted. Everything was thinking the same thing—*not again; she’s the real thing, you know*. But Velgrynd picked up on something else.

“Long, you said? Ah yes, someone by that name *did* call his skill set ‘Dragon Fist,’ didn’t he? And *this* is the world that Long lived in, too. You all must be his students and he passed his skills on to you, didn’t he? How delightful.”

Even with the time she’d spent at the royal library, not even Velgrynd had a grip on every single famous person in history. Japan wouldn’t have any books lying around about hidden martial arts schools in foreign countries anyway. It would have been understandable, therefore, if this Dragon Fist inventor Long hadn’t immediately rung a bell with her—but she acted like he was some long-lost friend. It befuddled the Chinese before her.

“Why are you acting like this is some grand discovery for you?”

“Trying to hide the truth? Well, good luck. We are the best of their elites, and we’ll crush you and your attempts to destroy us!”

"And we'll start with you, the one who took our master's noble name. We must restore the pride of our homeland!"

The bodyguards assumed fighting poses. Velgrynd, watching this, just beamed at them. "Oh my, you've certainly honed your drives for battle...at least, by the standards of this world. I can tell you've striven to improve yourselves—and to train constantly. I'm so glad you're still taking Long's teachings so seriously."

Velgrynd was now looking at these martial artists not as enemies, but as her beloved pupils. The difference in attitude only enraged her adversaries further.

"How dare you ridicule us...?"

"Let her. We should all just leap upon her at once—"

They were ready to rely on their fists, but someone stopped them—a smaller figure, the only one among them wearing a robe embroidered with the character for "dragon."

"Halt. This isn't anyone you could ever beat."

The clear, refined voice suggested the person with dark eyes and dark hair was a woman.

"L-Lady Xienhua?!"

"But..."

The bodyguards tried to refute her, but the sight of Xienhua, the Holy Fist, stopped them cold. She was the most powerful among them, ever coolheaded and always defiant against any enemy in her way, and they could tell she was anxious and sweating.

"I'll take her on."

And with that challenge, nobody else dared to speak up.

"You're the current master? Your will impresses me. You deserve praise."

"I am. I have taken on the *hun-po*—the spiritual and animal soul—of the Holy Fists of the past, the ones who have inherited the greatest power there is. And if you are truly the real Longhuang—or 'Ryu-oh,' as Japan calls you—may I ask you for a fight?"

"No problem. I'll be glad to educate you...and I hope you appreciate the honor."

The arrangements were made all too quickly.

Before anyone else could intervene, they were unsuspecting audience members, waiting to see how the fight would go.

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It ended, it went without saying, in a dominant victory for Velgrynd. It wasn't even close, although only Xienhua realized this. In the eyes of her audience, it looked like she was staging an all-out frontal attack; to her better-trained Dragon Fist students, it even seemed that Xienhua was cornering Velgrynd with her fists and kicks, both infused with a bluish-white lightning.

Dragon Fist was passed on to just one person at a time—all its skills were given to the most skillful of the master's pupils, regardless of bloodline. The most important skill passed along in the process was the *hun-po* Xienhua had mentioned, a forbidden ability that recorded all skills its invoker had earned and passed them on to their successor. Part of the master's internal strength was passed along as well, which meant that each generation held more fighting spirit within them, refined to a higher quality. It wasn't a given that the successor would inherit every single ability, but as long as *hun-po* was among the ones passed down, there would be hope for the next generation—and, with the hope that an all-powerful martial artist would be born following his teachings, Long had breathed his last.



This was the history Xienhua was born into, but as the Holy Fist, she was more than worthy of being called their strongest yet. Her inherited *hun-po* had fully integrated itself within her spiritual will, making all skills and strength her own. She had reached levels of power that were unusual, almost eerie, to see in this world. In terms of existence points, she was over a hundred thousand, and in the demi-material “key world” Velgrynd was born in, she’d be overwhelming enough to be classified as Enlightened.

Nobody in this world could even hope to compare with her—but, well, she’d chosen the wrong opponent today. Velgrynd toyed with her for a little while, and that was all it took to mark her defeat.

“...I give.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Such wonderful strength. Certainly stronger than Gensei. In *this* world, I think you could’ve beaten Kondo, too.”

Despite being so badly beaten, Xienhua seemed refreshed by the experience. All doubts about Velgrynd had vanished, and she admitted to herself that this was the real thing. Velgrynd, for her part, was overjoyed that the Long she loved had seen his martial art passed down to this present day. She couldn’t have praised Xienhua and her students more, and she was even ready to give them one or two God-class weapons. That never wound up happening, but the sheer joy she exuded at having had this experience was undeniable.

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So, after many twists and turns, the leaders of all the relevant states were here.

It turned out that the Chinese political leaders who had been brought here, apart from the general secretary Wang Rongren, were actually more martial artists in disguise. They had presumed this whole thing was a *yohma* trap, Japan realized, so no blame was assigned, and now they were replaced with the real government officials.

Listening to their story, it was actually an all-too-common tale of hostages being taken. Here, though, their sheer number was on a national level.

The mystics’ activities in the Chinese Fiefdoms had begun with the targeting

of the children of the nation's leaders. Over time they'd expanded on this, built up their numbers, gained new connections, hooked up with their targets, and brainwashed them before sending them off to their bases. Teachers, coworkers, bosses, families—they'd gradually possessed all of them, and they were around 70 percent of the way to their ultimate goals. That was why the invasion of the United States of Azeria had been approved by unanimous vote in the National People's Council.

"I'm not expecting an apology to be enough, but I hope you will understand that none of us were willing participants in this."

Wang lowered his head.

"Oh, it's fine," George replied. "I understand that every nation has their own issues to tackle. My own son was taken from me, besides, but if I put my family against my nation on the scales, my choice is gonna be the same every time. That's my responsibility as president...but even so, I'm not going to give up until the very end."

"Yes... I understand how you feel."

George and Wang nodded at each other.

"Along those lines, let me apologize as well."

Emperor Magellan of the Greater Rossiam Dynasty spoke up. His military was beyond his control now, staging a mad invasion of the Chinese Fiefdoms, and he admitted to everyone there that he had no way to stop them.

"I suppose I'm just as guilty, then. Our invasion of Greater Rossiam was a terrible misstep engineered by the *yohma*. I think it's time for me to admit that as well."

Emperor Zangu was acting unusually humble by his standards. After Yamamoto and Oharu's quick thinking had saved his life, he'd spent some time in the waiting room calming down. With his head cool, he'd realized just how dangerous his antics back there had truly been. He was far from a talentless ruler, and he could discern which way the wind was blowing. So he'd talked things over with his Seven Sacred Treasures.

Zangu's right-hand man was fourth-ranked out of the Seven. One of the Seven

had joined the invasion of Rossiam and had yet to return, so he'd been brought in to replace that person for this event. The missing member was a woman, one burning to fight so badly that she'd requested to join the operation, then put her military unit on the move without waiting for HQ's answer. It had been a clear violation of the chain of command, and a Sacred Treasure staging an invasion without waiting for imperial orders was a serious issue that couldn't be allowed to stand.

She had once been steadfastly against any opening of hostilities, but had recently demonstrated a clear change of heart. It greatly confused those around her, and she was soon placed under suspicion. Following her most recent crime, however, the government decided to stage a search, as much as they hated to make a hero and Sacred Treasure their enemy. They had failed to find conclusive evidence that a *yohma* had taken her over...but as they concluded, it had to be accepted as fact. It was a gut-wrenching, pride-destroying decision.

Velgrynd and Xienhua's battle had taken place in the courtyard that was visible from the waiting room. The Seven Sacred Treasures working together couldn't defeat the Holy Fist, but for Velgrynd, it was like taking candy from a baby. The Treasures understood there was no reason to keep on bluffing about their own strength, and Zangu agreed. Thus, without any further ado, the Holy Arcian Empire renounced its ambitions to conquer the world.

Heh-heh... I just remembered. As the myths say, anyone who earns the goddess's blessings will rule the world. If that is the inevitable truth, that would make Oharu our generation's mightiest ruler.

It was Zangu's clear understanding of this that made him pledge his full allegiance to Oharu.

So the summit began with a flurry of apologies.

"If I may also speak—"

"No, no, I understand the Conquering Empire of Japan's position well enough."

"Right. We of the United States regret forcing you into a decision as well."

Oharu attempted to join the fray, but Wang and George wasted no time

cutting him off.

The others in the room—including Yamamoto, standing motionless against the wall—could read their leaders' minds like a book.

Yes, I can see their motivations. If they try to pin blame on His Majesty Oharu for this, it's sure to raise his hackles, after all.

Yamamoto took a glance at Velgrynd, thinking about how he'd have made the same choice in their shoes.

After this spate of *mea culpas*, the summit moved on, its leaders working out a strategy against the *yohma*—but everyone's eyes quickly turned toward Velgrynd.

"So, Ryu-oh...umm, what sort of strategy do you think would be effective against the *yohma*?"

Japan's army minister hated to ask the question. It was terribly embarrassing for him. Here was the commander of one of the Conquering Empire's greatest forces, someone who certainly wasn't paid to shunt responsibility off on others. This time, though, nobody was going to criticize him.

All the world leaders awaited Velgrynd's reply. They had no other choice, for they lacked any sort of firepower that could resist these enemies which were beyond human knowledge.

As they turned toward Velgrynd, their only hope, the woman herself couldn't have been more casual. She turned toward the army minister, as if she thought the answer was obvious.

"You understand that any military deployment is meaningless, right?"

"Yes, regrettably. It might keep them from approaching our homeland, but we'd never fight a naval battle with them anyway. We could place everybody here into our ships, and we'd still never be able to resist the *yohma*."

The minister was right. If the fleet came close enough to Japan itself, the fleet's cannons could target Japanese cities. That made it worth building a naval defensive line, but either way, it'd be pointless if they had no chance of winning. They weren't sure the *yohma* would even try destroying urban areas. If

they had the power to possess people's minds, they'd likely prefer to co-opt the cities for their own use instead. If so, they had no reason at all to stage some grand naval fight.

"Precisely," Velgrynd said with a nod. "Guns don't work on *yohma*, and no foot soldier will provide any resistance. That narrows it down to two choices."

"What are those?"

"Either leave all of this to me, or try a little harder by yourselves. One of those."

To the proud military men and women in the room, the choice Velgrynd presented was simply humiliating. But the reality was that nobody had anything to counter her with. They were all gathered here, the supposedly most powerful wagers of war this world had ever known, and now they were flashing glances at each other, gauging each other's reactions. Their eyes told the whole story—they were in agreement.

Gensei Araki and Saburo Minamoto, proud swordsmen of the Conquering Empire, were the first to speak.

"This is our issue to solve, after all. I have no intention of trying to act proud here, but it would be pathetic of us to rely on Ryu-oh for everything. If there is anything I can accomplish here, I want to risk my life on it."

"I agree with my companion."

They were followed by the Seven Sacred Treasures of Arcia.

"Well, I don't want Japan seizing all the glory. I want us to play a role in this, too."

"We can't have His Majesty Zangu come out and fight himself. I hope he can leave this to us."

"Exactly. The emperor has duties he can carry out only if he is alive. This is a job for *us* to handle!"

The six members besides Zangu were ready to contribute. Xienhua the Holy Fist was just as resolute.

"Longhuang, my lord—if you are willing to offer the human race your

protection, we have nothing to fear. Even if we are defeated, with you on our side, we are all but guaranteed victory in the long run. So please, allow us comparatively smaller presences a chance to grow and prosper in battle.”

She meekly bowed her head. That made her the ninth warrior to have volunteered for this effort, but there was one more remaining.

“Umm, is it all right if I join you?”

This was codename “Billy,” head of the Secret Service of the United States. He was here to personally guard President Hayes, and by any account, he was a professional at warfare. Despite being just twenty-six years old, he cut an intense, masculine figure, complete with a scar on one cheek. He was proficient in casting magic as well, and he handcrafted the bullets he loaded his gun with, ensuring anyone he shot met their maker—even ghosts.

But while it was a courageous act from a courageous-looking agent, compared to the other nine, Billy was clearly a notch below them. His physical abilities were nothing to write home about, and even his weaponry wasn’t particularly noteworthy. He certainly beat everyone else in the room who stayed silent, too timid to think they could help at all, but could he really help in a combat situation? That was questionable.

Billy was fully aware of that as he nervously awaited Velgrynd’s answer. George saw fit to back him up.

“Yes, Billy has proven to be extremely talented in his guard duty. He’s saved my life multiple times, and Emile is just as fond of him. I’ll withdraw him from contention if he’d just get in the way, but if possible, I’d like you to take him along.”

Giving up such a trusted member of his personal staff likely meant exposing himself to more danger than before. George was fully aware of that, but with humanity facing extinction, he couldn’t find it in himself to simply do nothing. Billy, he figured, could hold his own against the lower-level *yohma*. He honestly believed this, and so he made the offer in hopes of expanding their warpower.

This group would form a team that’d raid the *yohma*’s headquarters. They’d destroy the portal Velgrynd called the “Underworld Gate,” eliminating the invaders’ threat right at its core. Everyone was resolved to do this...but

Velgrynd just gave their suggestions a measured smile.

"If you had opted to leave everything to me, I would have protected only those I *wanted* to protect. But I'm glad to see you have the enthusiasm to fight...and in appreciation of your resolve, I'll help you a little bit, all right?"

In fact, if they had agreed on the former option, Velgrynd was fully ready to leave the human race to its own fate. She could even see herself taking her favorites, like Oharu and George Hayes, and transporting them into some other world to live in. Goddesses can be finicky like that. But these representatives of the human race had made the right decision, so Velgrynd responded in kind.

"Codename 'Billy,' you said? All right. I'll let you on the team—I have no reason to turn you down. Your strength is on the same level as Minamoto over there, and if we can do something about your weapons, I think we can make you both a much deadlier presence."

Her mind made up, she asked Minamoto and Billy to surrender their weapons to her. Minamoto dutifully gave her his beloved blade, Billy his favorite Smith & Wesson Model 27 revolver. Velgrynd accepted them and immediately engineered their rebirth as God-class weapons.

"...?!"

"Th-this is just..."

Both men were awed by how plainly more lethal their weapons had become. Gensei wasn't so surprised, having experienced this before—he just nodded, his expression serene. The others in the room weren't so calm, the Seven Sacred Treasures shocked at how she was letting these God-class pieces flow freely over to other nations. In a fight, though, they'd undoubtedly help a lot, and since now was no time for Velgrynd to hold back, Oharu voiced no objections.

"That should make you two a bit more capable. But I want one thing to remain clear here: The only *real* power out of you all is Xienhua, and Xienhua alone. What was your name again? Bright?"

"Yes, my lady!"

"Right. You're the most decent among the rest, but you're still not even tapping into three percent of your God-class weapon. And the others don't

come even close—maybe one or two percent. I'd like to see some more effort from you all, please."

If they *could* unleash all of a God-class weapon's force, it'd cause them to reawaken as spiritual life-forms capable of beating most of the *yohma* single-handed. At this point, this transformation wasn't even remotely possible for any of them. Velgrynd, after all, had designed the Sacred Treasures' weapons so the blood descendants of Shin had access to their powers. They could all use this equipment well enough, but they weren't able to unleash its true firepower.

Still, there was no need to be ashamed of that. As sparse as magicules were in this world, everything was that much frailer and more vulnerable. If these people had crossed worlds and had their physical bodies remade in the process, they'd likely awaken to Enlightened status, and Xienhua had every chance of reaching the Saint level.

So the warriors were ready. It was time for the grand counterattack.



The *yohma* Delia was taking a walk around Greater Rossiam's grand palace.

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During her human years, Delia had been the fourth member of the Seven Sacred Treasures. On that fateful day, she'd received a vital assignment—stop a *yohma* calling himself Emile from carrying out his mission. But it had all been a trap laid by Emile himself. Even their intelligence department had been caught in Emile's web, and he'd used this to lure Delia out. She had been defeated—trounced, in fact, by the roughly dressed Emile, despite the full set of battle gear she'd brought with her.

It was humiliating. But more than that, it was the first time Delia—an overwhelming force among mankind—had ever felt fear in her life. She'd abandoned all sense of shame as she begged for mercy. "Of course," Emile had said with a light smile. But by the time she knew what that spelled for her, it was too late. Delia's knowledge, position, and even her name was taken from

her, and she was fully reborn as a *yohma*.

On the mystic scale, Delia was “general”-class, just like Li Jinlong and David Reagan. She had come onto the scene in time for Arcia’s invasion of Greater Rossiam, participating in the operation to destroy Greater Rossiam.

As far as the *yohma* were concerned, their first mission was to procure territory to rule over. The second job was to make mankind servile to them, so they’d have a steady supply of bodies for their race to take over. Not just anyone would do, however; they preferred tough, strong, muscled bodies, capable of withstanding the magicule-driven transformation. This made sorting the bodies important.

As a half-spiritual life-form, when a *yohma* possessed someone, they basically did not need to eat after that point. Not that they couldn’t—and, in that, they could absorb nutrients from food just fine—but a lack of food was no problem, either. Regardless of that, powerful, durable bodies were still preferred as targets for possession, and so the *yohma* sought ways to thoroughly manage and control the human race for their own purposes.

The idea that they’d wound up adopting was to simply do away with the one nation out of the five with the worst climate conditions. That was Greater Rossiam. Its fields produced relatively little, and over half of its territory was unsuitable for development. Its soldiers were well-honed and spiritually strong thanks to this harsh environment, but the *yohma* ultimately decided that no nation needed to be located here at all.

Installing a king to rule over conquered lands was a must in order to control and manage the land and its people, but with Rossiam no longer seen as necessary, there was no urgent need to keep the royal dynasty going. The *yohma* had no intention of simply killing everyone in the region; they figured that if the Rossiam royalty were eradicated, the nation’s current political system would collapse by itself.

Along those lines, Pulcinella the Mad Priest was agitating the populace with an eye toward staging a coup, and Delia was following his lead.

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Delia performed a patrol of the palace grounds, then let out an annoyed sigh. No matter where she looked, there was no trace of Rossiam's royalty—the emperor and his entire family. The same was true for all his high-ranked political officials and their families—and, in fact, all the knights working in the palace, as well as the chamberlains and female attendants, had vanished as well. They had combed the palace, searching for hidden corridors and the like, but they had yet to discover any trace of those who had gone missing. They'd even possessed a couple of palace staffers, picking through their detailed memories of the palace, but still found no clues. The only conclusion they could reach at this point is that these people had all disappeared into thin air.

"How's it going with you?"

She was being addressed by Emile, a coworker of hers. They were both of the same rank, so they had a friendly relationship with each other.

"I give up. I have absolutely no idea where the Greater Rossiam emperor could have gone."

"Yeah? That's a problem. It's not like they have access to Control Dimensions like we do..."

"Oh, no way. People on *this* world would see that as an act of God. The Seven Sacred Treasures can't even teleport themselves around."

Delia was sure of it—the memories of the powerful human body she had taken over left her fully convinced. There were too few magicules around for people to cast spells with, and elemental magic like Warp Portals didn't exist at all. There were extra skills like Spatial Motion that Delia did have access to right now, but the transport gates that skill summoned could be used by maybe a handful of people at best before losing integrity. Thus, no matter how you sliced it, it was absolutely impossible for anyone to have escaped this palace while they had it under siege—or it should have been.

Emile was the most physically gifted among the more recent recruits, so he'd been set up with a *yohma* from the "general" class, the lower end of the upper echelons. He wasn't the world's strongest man or anything, so Delia assumed he wouldn't be aware of things like transport magic. The body Delia now

inhabited was stronger and contained much more knowledge of this world. It gave her a feeling of superiority over Emile.

"Well," Emile said, "that would mean there's a hole in our siege, but my instincts tell me that's not the case. I feel like we're overlooking something very important."

He was looking at Delia's spear as he spoke—this divine instrument from the Seven Sacred Treasures, fabled as the work of a goddess. Somehow, it seemed familiar to him. He wasn't sure why, but thought the answer was locked in his memories somewhere. *Yohma* can read the memories of the humans they take over, but while important knowledge was one thing, the repeating cycles of human life—the day-to-day conversations and experiences—took up so much of the mind that examining them in detail took too long. They couldn't waste time and effort on things that didn't really matter anyway, so these more humdrum memories were generally ignored.

Emile was no exception to this. He had a grasp of his body's identity, skills, the nature of his work, the people he associated with—the basic stuff. But he wholly ignored memories like this body's childhood experiences. That was why, when he recalled the beautiful woman who had associated with his grandfather, all he could remember was the name "Grynn." If it had dawned on him that this was Velgrynd, he no doubt would've been concerned enough to redraw all his plans.

I wonder about that spear, though. Maybe it's related to Emile, the previous owner of this body, somehow. Let's look through my memories a little...

Emile's apprehension refused to leave him alone. It bothered him. He didn't think it had anything to do with the Rossiam royal family's escape, but nonetheless, he began poring over his memories to assuage his fears.

Delia, on the other hand, was supremely confident.

"Ah, whatever. No point dwelling on a couple of fugitives. There's no way they can beat us anyway. Let's just ignore them and stick to the plan."

"...Good point."

"We wanted to take the royal family hostage and bait the nation's elites to

join our side...but let's abandon that plan for now. Instead we'll set this place on fire and make it known to the world that Greater Rossiam is finished."

The original blueprint had called for them to announce that the royal family would be publicly executed, sending the people into a frenzy. The powerful, civic-minded heroes of the world would be lured into trying to stop this, and then their bodies would belong to the *yohma*.

Ideally, this tactic would have helped to snare Xienhua, the strongest in the Chinese Fiefdoms and likely this whole world. She wasn't from Rossiam, of course, so whether she'd take action or not was a gamble—but the stakes were low either way, so the *yohma* didn't care if things didn't pan out. Once Rossiam was plunged into chaos, their attention would turn toward the Chinese Fiefdoms next, and Xienhua was bound to come out then, so it didn't make much difference. Either way, once they had Xienhua in their grasp, this world was good as seized. Delia gloated to herself about it. It'd all be so simple.

But then Pulcinella the Mad Priest sent an emergency telepathic message.

"*You can hear me, right?*"

"F-Father Pulcinella? Did something happen? Why are you personally reaching out to me?"

"Well, a priest of mine I dispatched to Chinese lands ahead of me has sent back a strange report. I was having him work out where the Chinese commanders were located, but he said he couldn't find a single one of them."

"What? So the humans are tricking us?"

"...No, I don't think so. I considered the possibility that it's some kind of camouflage spell unique to this world, but nothing like that would ever work against any of us officer ranks."

"I agree. No one on this low-level world could ever threaten us, no matter how much they struggle."

Delia couldn't imagine they were being deceived at all, and she assumed the same for the underlings who worked for her. Judging by her memories from back in her human days, even the Seven Sacred Treasures would be on the lower end of average in the *yohma* hierarchy. Xienhua was another matter, but

there was no way anyone else would get the best of them.

But Pulcinella wasn't so sure.

"Don't get so full of yourself, Delia! This world exists in physical space, full of possibility. With the right number of magicules, things can change in every which way. We yohma only become complete once we obtain physical bodies. I want you to make sure you don't forget that!"

Delia, after that tirade, realized he was right. This world was inferior in terms of pure strength, but that was only because its physical laws differed from the ones they were familiar with. She admonished herself not to forget where she stood until this invasion was over.

"My pardons, Father. I will take your advice to heart."

"Good. See that you do."

"Yes, sir! Now, I actually have some problems to report from our side..."

Delia thought it a good opportunity to update Pulcinella. They were here to catch the royal family, only to find nobody home. It was just like what Pulcinella had heard of over in China, making her sense of dread even more palpable.

"What? The situation is similar in Rossiam? I can see the palace from here, but I didn't detect anything unusual. Did we let our guards down? I don't know, but I feel like something terrible is happening..."

"What should we do?"

Delia was in full agreement with him. Next to her, Emile, listening in on the telepathic conversation, looked just as nervous.

"Wait for a little bit. I will discuss things with Masahiko Amari."

Pulcinella wanted to avoid reaching a conclusion by himself. The commander class, the sharpest leaders of Cornu's squad, had miraculously installed themselves within the brightest human minds of this world as well. Masahiko Amari was one of them, and asking for his advice made perfect sense to a fellow "commander" like Pulcinella.

The decision they made was:

"We're going to retreat. We've got an unknown situation taking place, so we need to free ourselves from all other operations. We're going to regroup over in Atlantis to carefully rework our plans. Any questions?"

"*No, sir,*" Delia instantly replied. Emile had no objections, either—and with that, the *yohma* paused all their plans and decided to regroup back on their home turf.

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Masahiko Amari, after hearing the news from Pulcinella, could tell things weren't going the way they wanted.

All of them were invincible. Looking at the situation, both as *yohma* and from the perspective of the humans they possessed, they were one step away from conquering the world. Once they built their rule over the human race, they'd top it all off by summoning Cornu—and from there, they'd start reworking the planet itself, making it into a stellar base for their future conquests. Space was a big place, but not as large as the universe they'd come from. Now that they had physical bodies, they could feasibly conquer this entire dimension in the span of thousands to tens of thousands of years. As they did, they'd develop a new Underworld Gate to the next dimension, with an eye toward yet more pillaging.

Now, however, they were running into snags. Something they weren't aware of was playing a role in this—Amari was sure of it.

"Well, what now, then...?"

Li Jinlong and David Reagan both reacted to the blurred-out phrase.

"Something wrong?"

"You look pensive. I thought everything was going as planned. Is there a problem?"

Amari looked back at them and explained the situation. The royal family of Rossiam and the leaders of the Chinese Fiefdoms had both disappeared for unknown reasons, and he believed some external force was behind it.

"Wah-ha-ha! Aren't you overthinking it a little?"

"It's a cause for concern, to be sure, but is it really enough that we should

pause our entire operation?"

Li openly laughed off the threat. David audibly wondered whether Amari was being too weak-willed. But Amari wasn't moved.

"We're strong, that much is true, but we're not omnipotent. Let your guard down for even a moment, you realize, and this entire invasion could fall apart. We need to take this opportunity to gather as much information as we can. Contact our people in the remaining three nations and have them brief you on matters. We have to look into what's going on with the other world leaders."

With that order, the trio went their separate ways.

After his two compatriots left, Amari leaned back in his office chair, thinking to himself.

"It's the same thing in Arcia. The imperial family, along with the rest of the Seven Sacred Treasures, are all gone."

"This is Azeria. The President and his close associates have fallen out of contact. There's no record of them leaving the White House, but they're nowhere to be seen in there."

"Security's been stepped up inside the Conquering Empire of Japan. I attempted to enter the administrative zone, which includes the palace, but it wasn't possible for me."

Before he gave his orders to Li and David, Amari had already been moving his own teams on the ground. Whenever something bothered him, he liked to take immediate action to address it—and his suspicions were quickly confirmed.

Azeria and Arcia are fine, but I'm wondering about Japan. I think I had one of our company-officer-class yohma performing spy work over there, but perhaps Gensei would be a challenge for him...? No, no, that's impossible. Fighting is one thing, but Gensei's no counterespionage agent.

As Masahiko Amari's teacher, Gensei was a world-class swordfighting talent. He wasn't a spellcaster, however, and without Amari around, the Imperial Palace Spellcaster Guard would have trouble dealing with the *yohma*'s undercover maneuvers. It'd have been one thing if the *yohma* stormed the palace, were discovered, and it resulted in a battle. But if they couldn't even get

anywhere near the palace, that was highly unusual.

"Well, well, what now?"

Pulcinella and the others had been ordered to return at once; they would be teleporting in once they'd finished wrapping things up. David and Li would have caught up with the news by then, so they'd likely all be discussing their future plans shortly. But that wasn't what Amari was concerned about.

What am I anyway?

The human Masahiko Amari had been possessed by a commander-class *yohma*. The assimilation process wasn't complete yet, but he had gained enough access to all of this body's capabilities.

...Or not.

Masahiko Amari, after all, was closely matched with Kondo. They had been dear friends and rivals, and thus it wouldn't have been strange if his spiritual force was honed to near-ultimate levels. That was exactly why Amari was now wondering about himself.

Am I really a yohma? Or maybe...

The humans of this world received no support from magicules, that miracle state of matter. That made them weaker, but they were still free to think and act as they wanted, as their spirits could be as steadfast as anyone's. On the other hand, many of the *yohma* were former angels that served the seraphim—and angels in the Dominion class or lower were little more than robots carrying out orders. Their senses of self were stretched thin at best, and even now, there was a chance that the humans would possess them, not the other way around. If a human's will could break through a *yohma*'s sense of ego, all order among the mystics would be blown away.

Amari could conceive of all of that, and it unnerved him. It applied just as much to him, too. As a *yohma*, he believed the resurrection of Cornu was the best thing for them all. He needed to expend every effort to make it happen; no obstacle to it should be left unaddressed.

Now, however, Amari's thoughts were different. The Underworld Gate expansion work could wait. In fact...

What if we destroy that Gate? Then I'd be king, wouldn't I? Ah, but a king can be such an irritating thing to be; I could let Pulcinella take the job, instead of having invaders like the yohma do as they please. Wouldn't it be more desirable for us humans to rule over this land?

These were outrageous thoughts, these ideas he kept hidden in his mind. But was this phenomenon happening to him alone?

Amari's commander-class *yohma* memories told him that he had once been a member of the cherubim, given life by a god called Veldanava the Star-King Dragon, and assigned to serve Cornu. Despite that, and despite having gained powers that'd put him on the level of an awakened demon lord on certain other worlds, here he was struggling with questions about his very existence.

He knew that he himself was a very convincing example. He didn't want to stop there. It was clear, he now concluded, that the others like him must be much the same way—and if so, who was really his friend, and who was his foe? Was installing Pulcinella as king really the right move? Now the question seemed impossible to answer. There wasn't enough information for him to make a decision.

So Amari put off the topic until later—and that was when an aide reported that everyone had arrived.

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"The conclusion seems clear, then. All the world's leaders and top officials have disappeared?"

"Some still remain, just to be accurate."

"No need to consider them. We must assume that everyone with the power to enact policy in their home nations is gathered in the Conquering Empire. The human race is clearly showing signs of a counteroffensive."

"I will not deny that, no."

If the two leaders in the room were in agreement, there was no debate left.

"Should we send our fleet to Japan, then?"

The fact that the *yohma* had a base here on Atlantis was an open secret. The

humans knew about it, and the *yohma* hoped they'd be lured over someday. People in military service, after all, were typically more suitable vessels than the general public. Best to have them beat a path to their doorstep rather than try kidnapping them all—such was the *yohma's* strategy.

But if something disturbing was going on in Japan, that changed matters quickly.

They could, perhaps, have sent out a large offensive force and wait to see what would happen...but Masahiko Amari was fighting off the anxiety that he was missing something important. The world was all but theirs now, because there was nobody strong on this planet. But was that really the case? If that assumption proved incorrect, that presented the need to reconsider this whole operation at its core.

"If I could just confirm this one more time," Amari said, "I want all of you to exercise all your knowledge for me—are there *truly* no strong people left in this world?"

"That much is a given," Li Jinlong replied, a grin on his face. "The only threat to any of us is Xienhua!"

The confidence he effused only added to Amari's concern.

"Hold on. Let me ask you, then; who trained Xienhua?"

"That..."

"Because in my research, I saw that she is trained in the 'Dragon Fist' style, which is strictly passed down from the master to one of their students. It's said this style includes skills that remain unknown to the public."

"R-right, yeah! That's why she's so much stronger than average."

"But how were these skills created in the first place? The style was originally founded by a man named Long; do we have any information on him?"

The question made Li reflect on his body's memories. He was an advanced student of the Dragon Fist, even though he hadn't been selected to become its next master, so he had learned quite a bit about its progenitor.

"I think it was written in one of our sacred tomes that he was guided to found

this style by a great woman named Longhuang, but what I read was just a collection of oral histories. I don't know how useful it'd be for us."

"...Hmm."

The dread was growing in Amari's mind. An ancient, unsourced biography like this normally wouldn't have fazed him at all, but something about it kept nagging at him.

"Actually," Delia said, remembering something, "I recall a myth about a goddess who guided the original founder of Arcia as well..."

This was doing nothing to assuage Amari's mind. Delia grew pale as well, a cold sweat running down her back. Since becoming a *yohma* she had never let herself be swayed by emotion like humans were, but the importance of this memory spooked her.

"And this goddess's name was?"

"Cardina..."

"..."

"...It's said she called herself Cardinal, in reference to the deep-red color used to represent her, but came to be better known by the nickname Cardina."

The word "cardinal" rang some bells. Amari, plunging into his *yohma* memories, knew that Velgrynd the Flame Dragon had called herself that for a time, after the color of her aura.

Quite a coincidence. Velgrynd the Flame Dragon should be in the same demimaterial "key world" as Lord Feldway. I heard she was too infatuated with Emperor Ludora to have even known what our true objectives are. There's no way she can be in this world...

Even as one of the commanders serving Cornu, he had never been given the chance to speak with Feldway the Mystic King, a godlike existence to him. Therefore, he had to rely on secondhand sources, but they'd told him that their plans in the key world were going well. Velgrynd was completely submissive to Ludora; she'd never leave his side, and that wasn't up for debate. It was impossible to picture her on this planet...but now Amari couldn't shake the idea

that she was, somehow. The pained expression on Delia's face indicated that this topic was far from over.

"Hmm... Is that all?" he dared to ask. Delia replied by presenting her spear.

"This weapon is a 'Sacred Treasure,' supposedly crafted by that goddess. It contains a fearsome amount of power, but not even I can take full advantage of it..."

"...!!"

The statement unnerved both Amari and everyone else in the room. It was a given that a general-class *yohma* could wield a Legend-class weapon like it was one of their own arms or legs. If she couldn't handle this spear in that way, it proved that it was a God-class item.

"Could—could a magicule-starved world like this really create a God-class weapon? And not just one, either—the stories say there were twelve at first. I know the Sacred Treasures my former comrades wielded well, and I feel they are in the same class as this one."

"So there are twelve God-class weapons in this world?"

"Yes...but I don't think any of the others were extracting more than a few percent of their weapon's capabilities!"

"That's not the issue," Amari wanted to shout. But since that wouldn't solve anything, he opted for a change of subject.

"The issue here is the fact that, at one time, there was *someone* on this planet who could produce God-class gear."

"Oh, come on! These are all just legends!"

"Can you think before speaking, please? You're smarter than that. You have the physical evidence right in your hand and you still won't consider it?"

"I'm sorry, sir!"

Amari cast a sidelong glance at Delia, who was hurriedly apologizing. Now he was sure of it. The goddess Cardina had to be Velgrynd the Flame Dragon. It was all a bunch of coincidences, but stacked up high enough, they formed an irrefutable truth—a truth that made Amari mutter out loud:

"To think Velgrynd was on this world..."

The statement was a titanic blow to one member of the meeting.

"...Velgrynd? Did you say Velgrynd?!"

"What is it, Emile?"

The usually aloof Emile was suddenly acting very suspicious. Ignoring all the stares, he began to mumble to himself, a trait stemming from the instincts of Emile the human being, not the *yohma*. The rest of the group, not knowing this, nervously waited to hear about whatever discovery he had just made.

"Yes... Yes, that's it. She *is* here, in this very world! In which case, we're..."

Pure fear ruled over Emile's heart—emotion from his *yohma* side. But there was also a drive for self-preservation—and that was the specialty of Emile Hayes, son of Laurent, for he was still kicking inside that body, fooling the *yohma* into believing he had been fully taken over.

The fear that Velgrynd was acting against them had crushed the thrall the *yohma* had over his body, and Emile took advantage of that, struggling as hard as he could. In his mind was a recurrent image, the memory of a beautiful, smiling woman that he'd loved like a grandmother, like a mother, and like a big sister. A memory of an embrace, one that provided absolute comfort at all times.

The name of the woman who'd held him at a young age was Velgrynd. So Emile called her name, seeking whatever assistance he could find.

"*Help me, Gryn!!*"

This screamed request wound up becoming the key that changed everything.



"You called for me, Emile? I'm here to save you."

She suddenly appeared, saying those words. As tightly guarded as the *yohma* base was, it almost seemed unfair how little that affected her. This, of course, was Velgrynd, and considering how she'd even managed to half-destroy Ramiris's labyrinth in the past, the *yohma*'s Barriers may as well have not existed.

The *yohma* couldn't be blamed for their stunned silence. Even the normally calm and collected Masahiko Amari hadn't expected something like this. He was sure Velgrynd had a hand in this world's history, but he hadn't expected to encounter her like this, before he could even do anything about it.

"Velgrynd... Why are you here?"

"You know my name, I see."

"Of course. Didn't you work together with our lord Feldway to help Emperor Ludora with his conquests?!"

"Ahhh, I guess if we're connected by key worlds, we can sync up our timelines like that, huh?"

"What?"

"Forget it. If you don't mind, I've got some errands I'd like to take care of right away..."

Masahiko Amari was thrown into disorder...but the coolheaded part of him kept thinking. If they had picked up on Velgrynd's presence sooner, they could have at least taken some measures against her. But the threat had never even occurred to them.

This is a huge failure. But why? Someone on her level shouldn't be able to cross dimensions at all. We're expending every effort to enlarge the Underworld Gate we have, but we still haven't managed to call in Sir Cornu...

Velgrynd was an existence on the same level as Cornu, perhaps even higher. Her magicule count was too colossal for Amari to even fathom. But how had she come over to this world? He had no idea. Nor did he know what her objectives were. If at all possible, he wanted to avoid hostilities right now. But:

"Errands?"

"Oh, just a simple request. Give up on invading this world and retreat to your own, all right? Do it, and I'll let this whole thing pass."

Velgrynd delivered her ultimatum with a smile, but there was anger sandwiched between the words. These beings were trying to hurt the people she loved, and she hated them. Amari could tell.

This is awful. She's already pegged us as the enemy. But I don't understand. Wasn't she allied with Lord Feldway? ...Wait. Synchronizing timelines?!

His astonishing brain worked at astonishing speeds, figuring out the truth lurking within what Velgrynd had told him.

Oh... She came here from another timeline. I don't think she knows our situation, but she didn't seem surprised by my talk of Lord Feldway and Emperor Ludora. It seems fair to assume she is aware of all events up to the present moment. And judging by how Sir Cornu hasn't changed his orders, something or other must have happened at a future point in time. It's likely that...

It was likely, Amari concluded, that she had jumped into this world's past from her "key world." It was laudable how sharp his brain was—but sadly, he wouldn't have time to reap the benefits.

"I'm not here to negotiate, all right? You annoy me."

She wasn't even trying to be approachable. Amari needed to make a choice fast.

Velgrynd, meanwhile, was perfectly calm as she brought a hand up to Emile, whom she had pulled over toward her at some point. Her aim was clear at a glance—she was trying to separate Emil from the *yohma* that was a step away from full assimilation. The *yohma* resisted with everything it had, but it was likely just a matter of time. And if that was how it was, Amari thought, best to use that time as effectively as possible.

"We're aiming for a world where *yohma* and humanity live hand in hand, you know. It's a pity you don't understand that."

"No, because intelligent creatures aren't about to understand each other's one-sided desires anytime soon."

"Heh. No doubt. But I'm afraid we can't give up."

"That's your answer?"

"It certainly is!"

Velgrynd smiled. "Silly boys. All right... Have at it, people!"

The final battle was about to begin.

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The *yohma*'s eyes opened wide at the people who'd suddenly appeared. The same was true for the other side as well. The most powerful human warriors in this world were even more puzzled by this than the *yohma*.

"You were called here."

"Huh?"

"You have to go, all right? Go and save that guy."

And after that short conversation, Velgrynd suddenly disappeared. They had been in a daze to start with, and now they had been summoned to this unfamiliar place—in the middle of all *this*, no less. None of them even realized they had been carried across physical space. They hadn't gone through any transport gate; they had simply blipped into this new location without warning.

It was, in essence, teleportation, carried out on ten or so people at once—a truly astounding, supernatural feat. The work of divinity, something Gensei and the other warriors representing the human race here could never have comprehended. Being told "Have at it, people!" wasn't much in the way of guidance.

In difficult times like these, it was important to figure out what you were capable of doing before anything else. When taking an exam, the rule of thumb is to save problems you don't understand for later and focus on the questions you have an easy answer to first. This strategy can be applied to jobs as well; if you begin a task by tackling the things you know how to handle first, the rest often falls into place by itself.

Here, the group was lucky that some of them knew each other. Having discovered the familiar faces among themselves, they began to negotiate.

Gensei's eyes immediately went toward Masahiko Amari, his student and trustworthy friend.

"Masahiko, you're not the sort of weak man who'd lose to the *yohma*. His Majesty is sorely grieving your absence. Pull yourself together and come back."

Wanting to gauge the response, he began with these words, his hand on the hilt of his sword so he could pull it out at any time.

Minamoto, lined up beside Gensei as usual, followed his cue.

"You can't lose to this, Amari! Please don't lose your own mind!"

Like Gensei, he was appealing to Amari's reason. They were betting that his true self would return, that he could overcome the *yohma*...but the result was surprisingly instantaneous on Amari's end. After all, he still hadn't fully decided whether he was human or *yohma* yet.

"I..."

Before he could continue, Amari found himself at a crossroads. Even for him, this was far too unexpected a development.

The main issue here was the presence of Velgrynd. He hadn't dismissed her ultimatum because he thought he could beat her. Quite the opposite—defeat was inevitable now, so he had called off negotiations in order to rile up his allies. Frankly, Velgrynd was on another dimension. There was no debate as to whether they could win or not; the moment they antagonized her, they were sunk.

So what to do, then? Evacuating from this site seemed to be the best plan. They could have accepted her offer, but that had been shot down. If they said yes to her, the operation would end with nothing in their strategy having been achieved. The blame would all go to Amari and Pulcinella, and Amari wasn't meek enough to accept those consequences. In fact, the *yohma*'s defeat felt oddly refreshing to him.

All in all, the human side of Amari was winning out—which is why Gensei's pleading hit home. His human heart was telling him to travel over to them. His intelligence as a *yohma* was shouting about how it refused to accept defeat. His sensibility as a human told him there was no point trying to escape. His instincts as a *yohma* were scared witless at the threat of Velgrynd. And as all this information fought each other in his mind, Amari felt sorely pained.

Yes... The yohma's greatest weakness is the thinness of their sense of self. If they were at least granted names, that would establish a firm sentience in all of them. But then again, that's exactly why I overcame this yohma. Yes... I am Masahiko Amari. I could never be a yohma—

But he was suffering—suffering in a way only a human being would. Seeing that, Gensei and Minamoto thought they were on the right track.

“You have to remember, Masahiko! Remember who you swore your loyalty to! Who do you polish your sword skills for? There needs to be a concrete meaning behind your strength, or else it turns into simple violence. You didn’t forget that teaching, did you?!”

Amari remembered. His loyalty was to His Majesty the Emperor, and his sword must only be swung to protect the weak.

“Kondo fought gallantly to the end, Amari, before breathing his last. We looked up to both of you so much—you shone like the sun to us. But now...I guess Kondo died because of the *yohma*! Don’t tell me you actually want to join hands with them?!”

He couldn’t be fully sure it had been the *yohma*’s fault, but it wasn’t a blatant lie, clearly, so he went with it. Amari believed it too—and in his heart, he blazed with the thought that it could never be forgiven. There was the sound of something snapping in his mind, and then Amari stopped thinking and turned his ear toward the pleas of his own heart.

Xienhua, meanwhile, was being addressed by the *yohma*.

“It’s been a long time. I suppose it’s fate that brought us together here. No need for any words between us. Let’s do it.”

With a dauntless smile, Li Jinlong raised his fists. He was a muscular man, making it hard to believe he was in his fifties. If anything, being merged with a *yohma* had let him regain some of his youthful vigor. He was more ferociously obsessed with Xienhua than ever.

“You never give up, do you? How many times do I have to beat you down before you admit defeat?”

“I’ll never admit it. Not unless you kill me. I know you were stronger than me, but that’s in the past now. I’m going to keep up the challenge until I win.”

Li was intent on taking her position as inheritor of the Dragon Fist. He had never fully abandoned that ambition, even as a *yohma*.

"Your tenacity, at least, is second to none."

"Ha. The winners write the history books...no matter how they win."

Then Li went on a charge, closing the distance between them with his body bent over as if sliding across the floor. His right fist, held in front of him, was like a missile. The energy from every part of his lower body, down to his toes, joined the force propelling his hips, focusing everything into his well-honed fist. Combined with his *yohma* power, the resulting force could have blown a normal person to pieces.

If Xienhua had taken this blow cleanly, even she would have been down for the count. But instead, like a flitting leaf, she danced her way around the strike, parrying it. And that wasn't all. Her delicate hands became balls of electricity, her left one stopping Li's advancing fist cold. Grabbing it to take advantage of its force, she spun away while holding her front leg out, ending up behind Li's back. With a forceful push, she threw him to the floor, then used her free right fist for a smashing blow right at the root of his neck, near the back of his head.

It was a captivating, vibrant move. Li had his fist out, in the middle of a light-speed strike, and he could do nothing but let this happen to him. The pain shot across his body—and with this unguarded blow on a pressure point, not even Li could escape unscathed. But he was still a *yohma* general. The blow had Xienhua's accumulated battle force inside it; any normal *yohma* would have instantly been annihilated—but he still managed to stand up.

"Phew... That hurt," said Li. "It would've killed any of my men."

"You always were tough like that, weren't you?" asked Xienhua.

"Of course. It'd be no fun for you, either, if it ended in one shot. Now we can do it. For real."

With a vicious laugh, Li sneered at Xienhua.

Xienhua clicked her tongue. "We can 'do it'? You freak."

"Huh? No! I didn't mean it like that—"

Li could be oddly pure of heart like that, but Xienhua went back on the attack, not caring at all.

On the undercard of this day of fighting was Billy of the US Secret Service against David Reagan, the Azerian supreme southern fleet commander.

"Sir, you are under suspicion of treason against the United States of Azeria. I suggest you consider how you're going to defend yourself in a court of law."

"Not too likely, son. I'm no longer even human. Your courts can't touch me."

"In that case, I am going to bring you into custody. If you resist, I inform you that I have permission to shoot to kill."

"Don't make me laugh. I've gone beyond all of mankind's limits. That toy would never work on me!"

David smiled from ear to ear as he boasted. Billy responded by pulling the trigger without a moment's hesitation. It's basic battle tactics, after all, to strike at your enemy while their guard is down.

The bullet Billy fired was a special one that contained all his fighting force. He could make one in a day, and it took a week to build up the necessary spiritual force to craft another, so he had only seven of these bullets total. The Smith & Wesson Model 27 could hold six bullets, and every chamber was loaded with these sure-kill specials. Most of all, though, Velgrynd had just finished reworking this revolver into a God-class weapon, greatly enhancing the lethality of each shot. It was more than enough force to penetrate David's protective barriers.

"Gahhh!"

Much to the commander's shock, the first shot went straight through his heart. Velgrynd was one matter, but he'd assumed that nobody else here was a threat—a major blunder.

No... What's going on?!

He could no longer hide his apprehension. Becoming a *yohma* had freed him, he thought, from the fear of death. No one can escape illness or pain in their lives, but now that he had "evolved," David was exempt from all of that. But Billy's gun clearly had the power to hurt him—and realizing that filled David with terror. The weakness inside the human heart had been masked by his new *yohma* will—but what the *yohma* who possessed him didn't realize was that

David had been a weakhearted man all along. That had made possessing him trivial, but now it was becoming a severe liability.

David shot a look to his side. There he saw Li Jinlong struggling against Xienhua. It nearly made him lose his mind. How could something so ridiculous be happening?

“Are you seeing things differently yet, sir?”

Billy couldn’t help but rile him a little. This was no fight he could normally have won. In situations like this, he knew that if you catch the opponent by surprise, unnerve him, and make him think you have the upper hand, that opens up chances to score the win. He had six bullets left, although one needed loading into the empty chamber first and he knew David wasn’t likely to let that happen. He had to take the commander down with the remaining five bullets, or else his defeat was set in stone.

The thought made him hesitate to unload his entire bullet stock on David at once. Now both sides had the same thought—*I need to make the right moves here, or else I’ll be the loser.* Thus an unexpected stalemate began to unfold.

At least one other matchup, however, was much more uneven. Take, for example, the *yohma* Delia against a team of six warriors. She didn’t like it much.

“Hey! Why am I the only one facing six guys at once?!”

She was so frustrated, she said that out loud rather than keep it to herself.

“Well, it still won’t be enough! Get out of here! Go help someone who actually needs it!”

“No! We came here to save you!”

Bright, leader of the Seven Sacred Treasures, ignored Delia’s pleas.

“Then put that sword away!” Delia shouted—just as she deflected a slash from Bright.

An arrow flew through the air, aiming for this opening.

“Look out! You’re as tricky as always, huh? What would you have done if that had hit me?!”

Delia dodged it only because her danger-detection skills had seen dramatic improvements. She was complaining to the archer who'd fired at her, but the young man responsible acted like he couldn't care less.

"Sorry, Delia, but could you just let us catch you? Because you're lookin' pretty scary to us right now. We're staking our lives on this, too, you know."

A woman with a whip was keeping Delia precisely pinned down, as gloomy as she sounded about it. The archer, responding in kind, stepped up his attack.

"If you're trying to help me," groaned Delia, "you could at least act like you want to talk this out!" But she was forced to dodge their unrelenting barrage as she spoke. It was six against one, and normally the attackers would have enjoyed the upper hand, but Delia actually had the edge here. If she'd wanted to, in fact, she could have laid waste to these six warriors—which would have been a grisly scene.

It didn't happen, though, because she didn't want that. Delia, too, was starting to reawaken to her human self. The *yohma*'s plan had been airtight, but once they started stealing the names of humans, things quickly went haywire. Even if the extraordinary outlier called Velgrynd hadn't stepped onto the scene, it probably would've fallen apart elsewhere soon. Anyone with the right perspective would've seen it clearly enough.

*

The strategic conference room in the *yohma* base was in a state of chaos, its occupants doing their best to fight off the intruders. The only ones retaining any sort of composure were Velgrynd, who was attending to Emile's treatment, and Pulcinella the Mad Priest, who opted to just watch the proceedings with arms crossed.

Pulcinella had been lauded as a great, holy man, but at his core, he exemplified evil and was cunning enough to hide it from everyone. Even now, he was accurately gauging events as they unfolded, working out what his best next move was—pure human greed in action.

His *yohma* conscience had been consumed by his human side long ago, but that didn't mean his assimilation was complete. He'd made absorbing and acquiring power his first priority; the knowledge his possessing *yohma* had was

put off for later. As long as he got his power, he thought, nothing else really mattered. The knowledge was seeping into his brain anyway, but he couldn't be bothered to try studying it in depth. There were millions and millions of years of memories involved, and even with Hasten Thought, it took a vast amount of time. Besides, if he absorbed a bunch of unnecessary data, it might end up interfering with his own consciousness.

Those were the concerns behind Pulcinella's approach to possession, but it would prove to backfire on him. Why? Because thanks to his lack of study, he had no idea who Velgrynd was at all. And that hole in his knowledge drove him to make a lethal mistake. Instead of working out how to deal with Velgrynd, he put his own greed first.

I imagine Masahiko Amari is cunning enough of a man. He must have realized by now that if someone destroys the Underworld Gate, they can become king of this planet. I pretended not to notice, but it's the only right answer. I know he trusts me. Let's use these invaders to gain the upper hand for myself!

Pulcinella's plan was to take advantage of this chaos to break down the Underworld Gate and kill Amari. That, he thought, would qualify him as king of the world, and he thought this fighting was an excellent chance for him. The *yohma* that possessed him had constantly fought on the front lines as one of Cornu's commanders, so it possessed the extra skill Life Drain. Unlike Luminus's Energy Drain and Yuuki's Lifestealer, this skill let him capture and use the energy from dead enemies. The amount he could capture was limited to under 10 percent of his own magicule count, and the skill couldn't be invoked in battle, so it wasn't all that convenient. Still, it guaranteed that the more he fought, the stronger he got—a nice side effect.

Pulcinella's greed, however, had enhanced this skill by biblical proportions. The result was the brand-new unique skill Fulfiller. If an enemy had been weakened to the point of unconsciousness, he could continually drain it of power until his own body was sufficiently fed. This, again, was hard to invoke during battle, but in a large, confused combat situation like this, it could come in very handy. This conference room, after all, was packed with powerful fighters.

Heh-heh-heh... Play my cards right, and I could gain double the force. Amari

wouldn't even be a challenge to me then. He'll be my assistant from now on, not Cornu's!

Nothing but his own desires weighed in Pulcinella's mind. Even Cornu meant little to him. So he kept waiting and watching, working out who to strike at. Xienhua still held a clear advantage over Li, but their battle was closer than he'd assumed at first. They were exhausting each other, but there was still no clear victor.

I could take power from the weak, but then the stronger ones would get suspicious of me. Going for Xienhua instead would be perfect!

She had been in his sights from the very start. He had been gunning for her since before he'd gone to the Chinese Fiefdoms, and now it was all going how he'd planned. He smiled—then, waiting for the moment when Xienhua and Li were locked together, he struck.

*

There were smiles on the faces of Xienhua and Li Jinlong as they exchanged blows.

"I'm so happy, Xienhua. I'm getting to fight someone I could never hold a candle to before!"

Their matches would end with a single blow before, but now Li could hold his own against her. It elated him. He'd always looked up to Xienhua; the fighting ring always loved her, elevating her in ways that couldn't merely be attributable to genius. Still, the experience gave Li mixed feelings. He felt he would have inherited the Dragon Fist style if Xienhua wasn't around—but when he first saw the young Xienhua's talents, he was filled with a desire to see just how far this little girl would go. Perhaps that was the moment when he'd first accepted defeat.

"Ha! It doesn't mean anything if you borrow someone else's force instead of building your own."

"Like you know how it works. As long as I can surpass you, that's all that matters."

"Oh, I do know. I'm not fighting with just *my* own power, either."

"What?"

"Only the inheritor of the style knows this, but it's no secret or anything, so I'll tell you. The *hun-po* I have inherited contains all the knowledge and experience of past generations of my style's masters. I have taken all of it on, so I'm naturally going to be more powerful than the one I succeeded. The dream of our founder, after all, was to be strongest in the world. An impossible dream, but he kept chasing after it—and that's why he created this unbroken 'chain' for his successors."

The story sounded familiar to Li. He recalled rumors about how the successor was always stronger than their teacher. Now he knew why. But even more surprisingly, Xienhua's power really wasn't just her own, but something supported by untold generations of martial arts giants before her.

"So you're using the power of others too...?"

"That's right. That's why I can't lose to you."

Human beings are capable of forging new paths with the accumulated knowledge of those who came before them. The ideals of Dragon Fist worked the same way. Much like how a building will tilt without a solid foundation, one must constantly strive to improve their own core so they can make the most of other people's power.

"Are you saying I didn't train enough?"

"Yes. If you can't use the power you were gifted with, it'll all go to waste."

"*Nngh!*"

It was humiliating, but Li realized it was the truth. In power alone, he outclassed her, and yet here he was on the ropes. There was no making excuses for that.

He could feel his high spirits deflating, but even so, this was fun for him. He had no advantage at all in this battle, but he had a vague idea that victory was within his grasp. This exchange of lethal blows, something neither side would emerge from quite the same as before, made Li's blood soar. His *yohma* side was trying to hold him back, but he had no interest in listening.

More... More! I'll be stronger...and stronger...and I will win!!

Any remaining inferiority complex toward Xienhua was gone now, as his lust for victory rose within him. His *yohma* side lent him more power in response—a sign that the full assimilation was almost complete. The desires of both human and *yohma* merged, and Li would make them his own, eliminating the borders in his mind. That, he was sure, would make it possible to beat Xienhua.

Then, at that moment, Pulcinella was suddenly standing in front of Xienhua, who was still grappling with Li.

“Nnngh!!”

His hand, straight as an arrow, plunged into her back. It all happened in a single instant.

“Kah!”

Bright-red blood sprayed from her mouth as she fell to the floor. She had trained her body to its limits, dipping her toes into the realm of Enlightened half-spiritual life-forms, and that kept her from being killed instantly. But now Pulcinella literally had her by the heart, scooping it out of her chest. Death would come shortly, and Pulcinella couldn't have been more excited about it.

Greedily devouring Xienhua's heart, he invoked his unique skill.

“So delicious... Now my powers will reach greater heights than ever!”

He was right. Power surged through his body. And nobody was angrier about it than Li Jinlong, his servant. The human part of Li was screaming, wholly ignoring the power hierarchy between him and the *yohma* inside.

“You! Not only do you interrupt our duel... What have you done to the woman I looked up to?! The strongest are only that way because they beat people fair and square!!”

He launched a kick Pulcinella's way. It didn't work. It was a killer right roundhouse, but Pulcinella simply lifted his right arm to stop it.

“Puny wimp! I have no need for people who defy me. I will feed upon you as well!”

He hadn't fully drained Xienhua of her power yet, so consuming Li as well

wouldn't earn him more than a few extra drops. But, with a sadistic smile, he destroyed Li's leg.

"Gaaahhh!!"

Yohma had no pain receptors, but the human element of Li's conscious was strong enough that he felt phantom pain from the now-severed limb. Pulcinella simply laughed.

"How ridiculous! You failed to master your *yohma* powers. You don't even understand what it means to surpass mankind, you fool!"

If he had better understood the characteristics of a *yohma*, he would have made more thorough use of that power. Then he might've had a chance of beating Xienhua. It made Pulcinella laugh, but he was also considering how to educate his own clergy members on this subject. If they stayed firmly *yohma* for him, all was well, but if the human side started taking root again, that was trouble. Such a trend had its good and bad sides—it'd make his staff more accommodating to his needs, but it also opened up the chance of a betrayal down the line. *Yohma* had strict castes in place, but with enough greed and desire, they could put their own selves first at this rate. Pulcinella himself was a great example of that, so he knew it to be firmly true.

So would it be a good idea to use Li Jinlong as an example of how not to strengthen themselves...?

If so, though, it'd make any betrayal even worse. Best to keep things as they are until I have a system in place which tolerates none of that business at all.

By this point, Pulcinella was already acting like he was king. But he didn't have too many of his top officials left. He planned to do away with Li himself, and Velgrynd had taken command over Emile. That just left Delia, David Reagan, and the now-questionable Masahiko Amari. He had to watch out for Amari, but a little demonstration of how much more powerful he was, and Amari was bound to fall in line and become his right-hand man.

He's no fool, after all. Once he realizes he can't win, I'm sure he'll lend us a hand. The question then becomes this Velgrynd woman. Maybe I can test my skills a little and make her a sacrifice—

Pulcinella was painting a fairly rosy picture for his own future—as unlikely as it was to come true. But he banished the happy fantasy in an instant and raised his fist to land the final blow on Li. An evil aura surrounded it as it came whirling down toward Li's head—

"Move."

The moment he heard that word, an unimaginably intense pain racked Pulcinella's body. It made him roll around on the floor, but Li wasn't laughing.

"I can't have you die here, Xienhua. That would spell the end of Long's dream."

Velgrynd, as always, was putting her own priorities ahead of everyone else's. It was the most incredibly absurd thing to tell someone who was on death's door. Xienhua saw fit to protest a little.

"B-but...I..."

"Regeneration! And also some Healing, too. How's that?"

The magic, capable as it was of fixing entire parts of the body, regenerated her heart and even replenished her stamina. It was drastic, but that's what Velgrynd gave her. Velgrynd had gained a mastery of holy magic during her travels, and while she didn't need it for herself, it had proven handy for all the assorted reincarnations of Ludora she had come to know. It'd occasionally made her the object of unironic worship, not that she cared. She might have been performing divine work with this magic, but it was of no concern to her.

"Um... I'm healed. I don't hurt at all. I feel fine."

Some people, like Hinata, have a natural resistance to magic. Her kind existed in this world as well, but a "divine miracle" that worked with a person's spiritual particles had no problem taking effect.

"I'm sure you do. I thought that the divine miracle Resurrection would be going too far, yes. But good."

"Yes..."

There's an even greater magic than this? Xienhua thought.

Her body was back to normal now, but that didn't solve the problem at hand.

Pulcinella had been hit with a jolt from Xienhua's *hun-po*, the combination of her spiritual and animal souls. It still contained the knowledge and experience passed down across generations of Dragon Fist masters, but it had lost the majority of its force. Unless that was addressed, Xienhua would be in a permanently weakened state. That'd normally have been a huge issue—but Velgrynd was there.

"I'll lend you some of my power. It's dragon force, so it should be a good substitute."

More than a substitute. It made Xienhua stronger than ever before—by human standards. It was little more than a rounding error in Velgrynd's mind, though, so without any more hesitation, she placed her dragon aura around Xienhua. The force stabilized Xienhua's power, strengthening her entire body. It didn't bring her to Saint level all by itself, but now Xienhua was fully awakened into an Enlightened state.

"This—this must be the divine power that Longhuang gave only to our founder...!"

Li, left reeling at all of this, sounded oddly happy about the turn of events. His expression was exactly as it had been back in his human days.

"Heh-heh-heh... *That's* how I like to see that kid. It's hard to aspire to be someone unless they're high up in the sky."

Once again, he considered himself Xienhua's greatest rival. Even from his perspective as a *yohma* general, she looked so much more powerful to him. And while Xienhua was too elated to notice, becoming Enlightened had just greatly extended her natural life span. She would eventually become the "Dragon Fist Master," one of the world's guardians, after reaching a height that not even Long himself could dream of—but that's another story.



Pulcinella, whom Velgrynd had so rudely thrown out of her way, couldn't understand what had happened to him. It might not have been up to the standard of Cornu of the Three Mystic Leaders, but he was sure the power he'd just gained was absolute. Instead, here he was experiencing the most unbearable of pain.

What...? What's going on?! Why am I feeling pain like some human being?!

The reason was simple—Velgrynd's dark-red “cardinal aura” could burn anyone who touched it to ashes. She had been going as easy as possible with him, since she had no intention of killing back there...plus, she assumed, having a brush like that would hopefully teach him to avoid any more foolishness. But he was more drunk on the idea of himself as king than she'd thought. He'd failed to see reality, and now he was stepping into territory he never should've found himself in.

“A surprise attack? How clever of you.”

Those were the words of a tried-and-true minion, one who failed to realize just how yawning the gap in ability between them was. Not even Velgrynd could have imagined anyone addressing her like that. So, not giving him any more thought, she turned toward her next concern.

Billy and David were still facing each other. Velgrynd, sneaking up behind the latter, slapped her hand down on his head—a cardinal-aura-infused blow that instantly vaporized the *yohma* inside. It was an astonishing show of force, but that was par for the course for her.

As she did this, Pulcinella stepped up. Realizing he was in trouble, he barked out an order to Delia.

“Give me your spear!”

“Huh?”

“You can't access its full power anyway! It'd be far happier with me than in the hands of some worthless coward like you!”

As faulty as that logic was, it didn't stop Pulcinella from snatching the spear away. He could promptly feel its power. It made him laugh. Now, for certain, he could end the day victorious.

Delia was thrown to the ground. Her former teammates ran up to her.

“You all right?” Bright asked, speaking for the entire team. Delia, hearing this, let a tear fall down her cheek.

“Don't be stupid. I'm not human. I'm a *yohma* who invaded this world—”

"But you're crying. Those tears are all the evidence we need to know you're still human."

"Bright..."

"Besides, you still have all your memories, yes?"

"Just chase that *yohma* out of there!"

"Come on. You're too brazen a woman to let a *yohma* beat you."

There, at that moment, Delia could clearly hear something shattering in her heart.

"Hold on, Katarina, you better apologize before you keep that cheerleader act up! What do you mean, I'm brazen?"

"Oh, I'll stand by that," a tearful Katarina replied as she held Delia. "You're too brazen to go down *this* easy. That much I believe."

The rest of the Seven Sacred Treasures joined her. There was no need for any more words. Seeing her friends shout for joy, one after the other, Delia smiled from the bottom of her heart.

Pulcinella, watching this, just sniffed at them.

"Lord. *This* is why humans are so worthless..."

David, too, had regained his sanity thanks to Velgrynd. Delia was the last person still faithful to Pulcinella, but apparently her human consciousness had won out in the end. Even worse, by the looks of things, Amari couldn't be trusted to do much better, either. *His* human side seemed to have the upper hand now, and Pulcinella doubted Amari'd be fighting alongside him.

Nonetheless, he didn't see any problems. He was still powerful, and he had just gained one of the world's most powerful weapons.

This spear... It truly is a God-class menace! It's not even trying to recognize me as its master, but it's still strong enough for me. I can easily use this to take care of this annoying Velgrynd woman.

He was endlessly optimistic, if nothing else. But it was simply hopeless, how little he knew his place. Even in his mind, however, there were alarm bells

ringing. Now he was poring over the knowledge that the vanished *yohma* had given him, searching for something related to Velgrynd. If he could examine it closely enough...

"I suppose I can only rely on myself now. Very well. I will simply take care of you personally!"

"I'm sorry, are you referring to me?"

"You truly *are* a foolish woman! Who else would I be ref—? *Hrrgnngh...?!*"

He'd openly demonstrated his intent to kill. That was ill-advised. Velgrynd had let him go this long because she just wasn't interested in him, but now she recognized him as an enemy.

Despite it all, Velgrynd had still tried not to kill him with the shot she'd just landed, knowing there was a chance he could come back from his *yohma* self. The problem with Pulcinella was that he had done little more than take over the will of his *yohma*; the core of it was still there. The blow she'd just given Pulcinella had shattered that core for good.

"Well," she said, beaming, "that's the end of my job. It looks like that man over there won against the *yohma* himself, so that means nobody's possessed any longer."

Before all of this began, there had been six mystic leaders in this conference hall. David and Emile had had their *yohma* powers plucked out by Velgrynd, making them regular human beings again. Amari, Li, and Delia had overcome their *yohma* without external aid; their mystic powers were still there, but that wasn't any problem in Velgrynd's eyes. Finally, Pulcinella had just had his *yohma* core destroyed, which likely meant those powers were gone—but something wasn't quite right with him.

"Heh-heh-heh... Well, thank you. Thank you very much. Now the hateful seal that was blocking my powers has been removed!"

He had fully taken in his *yohma* powers now. They were starting to externally transform him. His skin turned a shade of light blue, his eyes glowing red, and unlike the other low-level mystics, he was even growing wings like an angel. The gear his *yohma* possessed had transformed into the holy robes he wore; this

garment was untold numbers of years old, making it among the best the Legend class could offer.

The spear he took from Delia had transformed as well—into a *khakkara*, a staff crowned by a set of metal rings. The weapon had accepted Pulcinella as its owner, and while he lacked the magicules to fully unleash its powers, he felt like his magical energy had been doubled.

Now Pulcinella felt like he was at the very peak of his life. But his foolish arrogance had grown with his strength. Now he truly felt like nobody could stop him.

It almost offended Velgrynd. *Is he really that much of an idiot?* she thought—but she decided to let him be. Being an absolute font of strength, she saw no need to panic.

Pulcinella, not realizing this, began to laugh loudly. “This feels so comfortable. With this power, perhaps I could best Lord Cornu himself...”

That was how omnipotent he felt at the moment. His powers had, in fact, risen to the level of an awakened demon lord, and he felt like he had surpassed all limits placed on him before now. But he was measuring these achievements using a very tiny yardstick indeed.

“Forget it. He’s at least ten times more powerful. It wouldn’t even be close.”

He was making such a stupid mistake, Velgrynd couldn’t help but interject.

Pulcinella, the target of this derision, was enraged. “Well,” he said. “A sad thing *some* fools here don’t understand how the world works.”

Speak for yourself, thought everyone else in the room.

It was at this point that Velgrynd realized Pulcinella was talking about her. She didn’t understand why, though. His attitude seemed to indicate he thought he could beat her, but she couldn’t guess what basis he had for that. She had known the *yohma* for a long while, so she couldn’t believe that someone among them wouldn’t be aware of who she was. Maybe it’d have been understandable among the lowest-level mystics, but a high-end one—a former angel connected to the Three Mystic Leaders, no less—should have been quivering with fear at the mere mention of her name. Against the strongest of True Dragons, that was

simply a natural response.

But Pulcinella's reaction was just too unnatural. It gave Velgrynd pause. She wondered if she was making some sort of mistake.

"You know, I've been curious—you're being awfully rude. When you said 'fool' just now, you weren't referring to me, were you?"

After her long journey, Velgrynd had grown surprisingly patient. She would describe herself as a graceful, piteous woman...and even if that wasn't *quite* true, she had certainly cultivated a gentler side of herself compared to before. That was why she asked that question instead of flying into a rage—but Pulcinella took this as a cue to get carried away.

"You don't realize? You may have *some* strength, but you really need to stop being so full of yourself. Because outside of this world, there is an even greater world—"

Wow. He really doesn't know.

Now it dawned on Velgrynd. Pulcinella had overcome his *yohma* self and was moving of his own free will. At the same time, she pitied him. Masahiko Amari had been taken over, but had used the experience to gain as much *yohma* knowledge as possible. This man, on the other hand, sought nothing but power.

And that's why he's grown this arrogant. He doesn't even know the most essential of facts.

Realizing that made her more exasperated than angry. She turned toward Gensei and the others, ignoring Pulcinella as he pressed on with his little speech.

"What do you think is best to do with this man? I broke his *yohma* core, but his power's still intact. At this rate, not even I can fully handle this."

By "handle this," she meant taking his powers away from him. But Pulcinella took it the wrong way.

"Heh-heh-heh! Of course you can't! It's a little bit too late to get cold feet, isn't it?!"

He took those words to mean that Velgrynd couldn't defeat him. No matter

what he faced, he always saw things breaking his way.

"If you admit your defeat, I will make you my underling out of respect for your goodwill. You will soon appreciate my mercy when I appoint you to—*Brrnnhh?!*"

"Silence."

Another slap from Velgrynd. Pulcinella was helpless to react...and only then did he realize something wasn't going to plan. *Am I making a great mistake?!* he thought, hurriedly attempting to search through his memories. But he wouldn't find anything at all. When Velgrynd had destroyed his *yohma* core a moment ago, all the memory data that came with it had disappeared.

No... No, no!

Pulcinella felt overcome by a sense of dread for reasons he couldn't define. Leaving him be, Velgrynd turned toward Gensei again.

"If I let this man live, I'm sure it'd present problems for all of you. I think it's better to kill him, but what do you think?"

Whether Pulcinella lived or not was of little importance to her. But no matter what she chose, she couldn't just leave him like this. Things would be fine as long as Oharu was alive and Velgrynd was around to protect him—but after that, there was no telling. Upon Oharu's death, Velgrynd would zoom right off to the next soul fragment of Ludora's, no longer caring what happened on this world...and after that, no one would be able to stop Pulcinella. But Velgrynd also knew that reincarnations of Ludora came back to this world on a cyclical basis, passed down through a family bloodline. Letting Pulcinella do whatever he wanted with this planet wasn't in her best interests, either.

Neither Gensei nor anyone else could stop him. That much was clear. And that's why dispatching him right here and right now was the quickest path for everyone.

"You're right, yes, but..."

There was nobody here from Greater Rossiam. Killing one of that empire's greatest heroes was bound to leave a bad taste in the mouth. Everyone here knew it was the right call, but nobody was too enthusiastic about it. Velgrynd

knew that, and that's why she wanted more opinions. In other words, she wasn't keeping Pulcinella alive out of kindness—it was because she concluded that killing him right now could cause Oharu untold trouble later.

So she left the decision to the others. It wouldn't be an easy one; they were all from other nations. If they talked it over and decided to let Pulcinella off the hook, Velgrynd was prepared to accept that. Amari certainly knew what she was doing here, as did everyone else. That knowledge emboldened them to speak freely.

"We have no other choice but to execute him," Amari said. "We can just tell everyone that I did it while possessed by my *yohma*. If Greater Rossiam demands I be put in their custody, you can go ahead and offer me."

"No... I agree that we need to finish him off," a cautious Gensei replied, "but there's no need for you to sacrifice yourself. We can give them the whole story and try to win them over."

"He's right," David said. "I mean, if reasoning with them won't make them understand, we can just apply the right kind of pressure instead. We in Azeria would be glad to help."

"I think your words could be misconstrued, Commander, but I do agree that execution is the right choice."

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and stuff. That's what my grandfather always said. I think Pulcinella has nobody but himself to blame for this."

Between Billy's and Emile's responses, the decision was unanimous among the Azerians. Laurent Hayes, Emile's grandfather, had only relied on Velgrynd's assistance for the most insipid of things. The recollection made her smile a bit.

The reaction from the Chinese Fiefdoms, meanwhile, was along the lines of tacit approval. They had been invaded by Greater Rossiam; there was little love lost between them, and so they politely refrained from commenting in depth.

The Arcians, on the other hand, were thirsty for blood.

"We can make up any kind of story we want afterward. Let's kill him."

"Yeah. That bastard pushed Delia down, stole her weapon... I wish I could tear

him apart with my own hands."

"I can't say I blame you. I have no reason to be against it, no."

"Same."

"..."

Given how one of their own had been hurt, they certainly weren't holding back their emotions.

Hearing all this, Pulcinella realized just how dire the situation was.

At this rate, this woman Velgrynd may just kill me. Before she can—

He tried to find a way out, secretly concentrating his full mind and body on this one goal. Then, noticing Velgrynd had her back turned, he attempted a surprise attack. Any pride he had as a man of the cloth was gone; the laws of chivalry didn't matter on the brink of death.

"You're going to die! Behold the might of my full-bore strike!"

This was the Divine Dispelling Light of Destruction, a secret, forbidden Spiritualist skill that used divine blessings to destroy evil and its servants. His *yohma* power was added to this, creating a flow of energy more massive than anything this world had ever measured.

The shock waves alone caused tremendous damage. The earth shook; the very air seemed to grate against itself. The base that had been remade into the *yohma* headquarters began to collapse, unable to take the strain. It was impervious to airstrikes and could even serve as a nuclear fallout shelter, but not even that was enough. The empty space between Pulcinella and Velgrynd was buried in less than a second—such was the instantaneous effect of the damage, something clear to anyone that could see it.

I won! No life-form exists that could withstand this force. And now I am the ruler of this world— Huh?

As Pulcinella attempted to gloat over his victory, he saw it—the energy force, now shaped like a spear, cleanly inserted into Velgrynd's unguarded back. But she wasn't hurt. It hadn't worked. It couldn't have. He was fighting Velgrynd, after all. A quantity of energy large enough to destroy this entire continent had

been neutralized and dissipated in a single instant.

"Can you wait quietly until we reach a conclusion, please?" she said, as if nothing had happened. And then Pulcinella knew. He could never defeat Velgrynd. If he had given up at that juncture, perhaps things would have wound up differently. But there was no point theorizing about that. Because Pulcinella, never knowing when to quit, was about to tap into something he never should have.



"Well, what can I say? I never realized there was someone I couldn't defeat on this world. A grave miscalculation...but you still can't touch me."

"Why is that?"

"Because I am a very careful man. I always pretended to be a good man so no one would bear a grudge against me. I only stopped because I thought victory was assured. I never imagined there was anyone like you...but victory is still mine. I've already taken the necessary measures."

"Can you quit stalling, please? Just give me the summary."

"Heh-heh-heh... Why the hurry? But all right—I'll tell you. The nations of Azeria, Greater Rossiam, and Arcia have all been hard at work developing a new kind of bomb. They all work on the same principle, although each nation's working on a different design—but what matters is the force of this weapon."

"And you're going to use this bomb to kill me?"

"No, nothing like that. I believe I can withstand the blast, and if I could, I'm sure that you can."

"Oh? So why are you bringing this up?"

"Don't rush me. I can certainly understand your anxieties, but..."

Pulcinella was now teasing Velgrynd, greatly irritating her. She knew that was on purpose, but she played along. Pulcinella was the kind of coward who'd attempt a sneak attack while they debated whether to kill him or not. Taking him out right now was clearly the correct option, but she decided to hear him out anyway.

The reason for that was simple—it was to keep any future trouble out of her life. If he was going to lay his scheme bare for her right now, it was only polite that she listen to the whole thing. That, and she was sure things would be fine no matter what kind of trick he had up his sleeve.

It was thus with a placid mind that Velgrynd kept listening...but the next thing he had to say took the smile off her face.

“But here is my plan! I am going to steal these bombs and set them off above the capitals of each nation. I already have my people in place for it. It’s too late to do anything now!”

It was a literal bombshell announcement.

“Are you crazy?! If you do that, it’d claim so many innocent lives!”

“You have to be kidding me! If you take out the leadership of all the nations, it’d destroy all sense of order!”

“The *yohma*’s basic plan was to raise the human race to serve as their bodies, not destroy them! What are you even thinking?!”

Pulcinella’s lips twisted into a smile at all the shouting.

“Ahhh, how lovely to hear. Yes, I suppose I can’t blame you for panicking. It deeply pains me as well. Much as you said, Mr. Amari, it is best to help humanity grow and thrive—but the fact is, there are far more people than there are *yohma*. Being possessed by one should be all it takes to help you survive this era of war. None of it will affect us at all—and we’ll just collect the survivors and raise them instead!”

The plan had been delayed quite a bit, Pulcinella admitted. But, as he boasted, there was still nothing to stop it. The logic was highly questionable, but he wasn’t terribly off the mark, either.

It made Amari grow quiet. Gensei looked just as pale as he turned toward Velgrynd. Pulcinella had done all that talking in an attempt to stall for time, no doubt. The plan was ticking right along, even as they spoke.

Now, there was nothing Gensei or anyone else could do. The only possibility left to them involved relying on Velgrynd’s teleportation. There would be a lot

of casualties, no doubt, but they needed to be sure each nation's top government officials were brought to safety. They were all evacuated to the Conquering Empire of Japan at the moment, fortunately, so Gensei assumed Velgrynd could guarantee their escape.

That's why he gave her a look—but he instantly regretted it. What he saw there was an angry goddess. Pulcinella's scheme had brought her wrath to the forefront.

"It pains me as much as it does you to see innocent people die," Pulcinella continued, failing to read the room. "If I could, I'd try to avoid that as much as possible. But what do you think? Why don't you let me go for now? If we agree not to interfere with each other, I'll gladly give you Japan—no, half the globe, even!"

Given the threat of those bombs, he thought he had ample material to negotiate with. But that was just wishful thinking.

"Lowlife. I didn't mind how you targeted me, no matter how low you stooped, but I will *not* let you do anything that gets my man involved. You will never return to the cycle of life again. I will crush your soul and grant you eternal suffering."

Velgrynd was, at the core, a vengeful woman. She was strong, and that gave her an "above it all" attitude in most situations—but flip the switch, and she'd fly into a rage.

"W-wait! I told you, I have no interest in— Wait! Listen to me! My people are going to set off the bombs unless I order them to stop! I have them on standby right now above the capitals of all five nations. Please, let's all just take a deep breath and—"

"Will you shut up already? I took care of that long ago."

"Eh?"

Pulcinella couldn't parse this. Neither could anyone else in the room. What she meant was a total mystery. It didn't exactly seem like a bluff. It had the ring of truth to it, but how could she have protected five different countries while remaining in this conference hall?

That, of course, was because Velgrynd had Parallel Existence, a skill that made such a feat completely possible.

She would never leave Oharu's side for any reason, which kept the Conquering Empire safe. She could also travel instantly to any point she had visited before, and she had been to Azeria, Arcia, Rossiam, and the Chinese Fiefdoms. That eliminated any potential problems. All she'd had to do was send out some Parallel Existences, bring them to each nation, find the *yohma* hiding in them, and blow them away with their bombs.

And the task was already done.

"No... That's impossible. That's completely impossible—!"

Pulcinella frantically tried reaching out to his agents. The result was silence—and indeed, they had been silenced well before now. Faced with this reality, his face twisted in terror. Now, in a very literal way, he understood just how boundlessly dangerous the beautiful woman before him was.

"Please—please forgive me..."

"Nuh-uh."

It's said there is nothing scarier than the smile of an angry woman—and everyone there now knew this to be the truth.

"No, noooooooooo—!"

"Cardinal Acceleration!"

Behind the fleeing Pulcinella, there was a flash like a supernova. Enveloped by searing rays of heat, Pulcinella's soul was crushed to nothing.

And that wasn't the only damage. Velgrynd had intended to keep it as small-scale as possible, but it'd had enough force to wipe out a good third of this continent. The survivors could only stare blankly. The goddess before them seemed so beautiful, and so fearsome.

By the way, Velgrynd's Cardinal Acceleration wound up causing damage in areas quite removed from this world as well. The shock waves from it, riding in via Dimensional Combo, went across time-space boundaries to even reach Cornu of the Three Mystic Leaders, the *yohma* boss that had possessed

Pulcinella.



Trying to open, then enlarge the Underworld Gate on this world had come back to haunt him...and thanks to that, Cornu lost his entire army and sustained injuries so grievous that they would take several decades to recover from. The fallout was nothing short of shocking, but that was none of Velgrynd's concern.

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"Well, I suppose goddesses have always been like that. Clearly, much of the fault belongs to the humans that angered her."

These were the first impressions offered by Oharu after being briefed on everything that had taken place.

"I'm sorry. I thought I was turning it down pretty low, but, um, I guess I pack a lot more of a punch than I thought?"

Trying to say that in a cutesy voice wasn't going to help matters. But Oharu didn't call her out on it, and if he wouldn't, no one else was about to. Velgrynd had done it, and there was nothing left but to forgive her.

Fortunately, although "devastating" didn't even begin to describe the damage, Pulcinella was the only one who had died. However, the area between the Azerian naval base the *yohma* had used as their headquarters and the hidden cove they'd used as a military port was completely obliterated.

The shock waves shook the ocean, leading to large-scale natural disasters, but Velgrynd quelled them before anything serious occurred. The steam from the evaporated seawater created storms, but she used climate control to make them go away. The wrecked cove turned into a small mountain of pure magma, but that was already taken care of. Some forested land and the like was lost, but aiming some High Healing at the land—a move that made no sense to observers—let Velgrynd create entirely new environments before the day was through.

So while the geography of the world had been irrevocably changed, the actual impact was pretty low. That was the ultimate conclusion people reached, and that marked the end of the *yohma*'s invasion—all solved with the help of one moody goddess.

A few years passed.

Velgrynd never intervened in human history again. Oharu didn't want her to. Her power was transcendent, and in a world without serious magic like this, things would just turn into a farce whenever she showed up. Therefore, she left matters to him. He might make mistakes sometimes, but as he warned her, those experiences would help humanity in time.

So the goddess stayed by Oharu's side, calmly watching over the workings of man. In time, the end came. Oharu's life had run out.

Velgrynd was there, along with Oharu's family and close advisers, as well as anyone else who had been involved with the emperor and his consort. The sleeping Oharu awoke to find himself surrounded by them.

"I am happy. I have been blessed with the honor of being loved by a goddess, and I have...enjoyed the peace that brought me. I worry for those I leave behind...but I refuse to allow you to fight for my sake. You must always strive... for a peaceful resolution. There is nothing good about conflict..."

Those were Oharu's last words.

Conflict was something he was willing to stomach if it were for his own sake. But if it was for the sake of his loved ones, it quickly became unavoidable. It would cost not just him, but his loved ones their honor. He could perhaps rile them into action to dispel their fears—but doing that on a national or religious level could never be tolerated. Saying you were fighting for the sake of someone besides yourself sounded nice, but all that did was shunt responsibility onto the other party. Oharu was trying to say that each one of them, individually, had to bear responsibility for what they did.

After experiencing an era wracked by vast sea changes, Oharu held a dream that he could pursue a world without conflict. He didn't know how to make it come true, but he constantly thought over potential solutions. He had a responsibility, and he was sticking to it. He never stopped trying to understand the other side's perspective, and he used that understanding to reach common ground through talking.

With those two pieces of advice, Oharu breathed his last. His expression was a picture of serenity; his death was no doubt a painless one.

"You worked so hard. I'm very proud of you."

Velgrynd reached out to caress the late Oharu's face. Then his body began to glow. The light compressed itself into a small, crystalline form, the shining soul fragment. Velgrynd held it tightly against her chest, then shed a tear filled with equal parts love and heartrending pain.

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Now that Oharu, the reincarnation of Ludora, had passed on, Velgrynd had no further reason to stay.

"I'm off. Good luck to you all."

She thought about adding "I doubt I'll see any of you again," but decided against it. The thought, she was sure, would come across.

"I only wish I could continue to chase after you, Lady Longhuang."

"Well, you can't."

"Maybe not. But I'd prefer to hold on to hope instead of giving up here."

"Yeah... I suppose I've visited this planet several times over the years, after all. There's no such thing as an absolute. Keep up the good work, okay?"

"Yes!"

Xienhua looked energized. Several onlookers had the same dream. They were charmed—they couldn't *not* be charmed by the divinity of the living goddess before them—and they held hope in their hearts that someday, they would run into Velgrynd the way Xienhua had.

"May we meet again, someday."

Masahiko Amari's parting words represented the thoughts of everybody on hand.

Velgrynd flashed a soft smile. There was no telling what was on her mind, but the smile immediately captivated everyone who saw it.

"Yes," she said, enjoying the moment. "Someday." And then she flew off.

Several decades passed after Velgrynd's departure. Humanity was at peace once again. Some nations had nursed aspirations of domination, but the whole *yohma* affair had nipped all that in the bud. The lesson would doubtlessly be

retained for at least a few generations to come, and no major wars were likely to erupt before then.

George Hayes returned to his role as president of Azeria, serving out his term and then retiring to support his son. Emile wound up establishing an entertainment agency, hoping to make this world struggling under war and famine just a little bit brighter. For Emile, whose genes had come from one of the world's genius-level swindlers, it was work he was born for—and he really did make the world brighter, bit by bit.

And Masahiko Amari supported him the whole way.

Amari left the army soon after the peace treaties were signed. He'd asked for permission to resign in order to take on responsibility for the whole war, and Oharu (who had still been alive back then) had granted it. He had been freed from his responsibilities in the Conquering Empire, except for a certain secret mission Oharu gave him. Soon, he was working with Emile, helping him out with financial support and using his bottomless personal connections to help the agency grow into one of the big names of the industry in just a few years.

Rumors went around that the agency used all manner of underhanded tactics to achieve its success. Amari had several mafia outfits working under him, forcing him to stay out of the public eye for much of his life. But he and Emile remained close, with Emile calling on him for help whenever a problem occurred.

In time, the agency Emile founded grew to the point where it was one of the largest, most well-known companies in Azeria and across the world. And there was actually a very fascinating rumor about the company.

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One of the biggest stars in Emile's stable was a beauty by the name of Longhua. She was active in show business for several years before retiring, only to stage a comeback after a few more years had passed. This was, of course, another person taking on Longhua's stage name, but nobody knew exactly who

she was in real life—and this became a pretty famous story in the entertainment industry.

However, one rumor had it that Longhua's real name was Xienhua—and, weirdly enough, that every other performer who performed as Longhua *also* had that same real name. It was like something out of a fairy tale. There was no way all of them could be the same person, but seeing her perform, one couldn't help but wonder...and so the fan theories continued.

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These rumors were little more than tabloid fodder, but it went without saying that every Longhua really *was* the same person.

Thanks to having taken in Velgrynd's aura, Xienhua had gained de facto eternal youth. That made it hard for her to keep participating in human society without raising eyebrows, so she relied on Amari for help. And it wasn't just her, either. Those who had overcome the *yohma* possession by themselves, like Li Jinlong and Delia, had absorbed their *yohma* powers and reached the Enlightened level.

They were far from alone. Out of the rank-and-file soldiers and officers who'd found themselves involuntarily possessed, the great majority had been released from their *yohma* prisons by Velgrynd. But some of them became Enlightened as well, and all of them were being managed by Amari. Gensei Araki and Saburo Minamoto were their mentors, teaching them the evil-dispelling Oboro Shinmei-ryu sword style.

The fighters of the future were being raised there, and in time, they would form an international anti-*yohma* organization. And until the promised day came, their fight would never be over.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
3

DAYS OF UPHEAVAL

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My name is Caligulio. I used to command the Armored Division, which boasted the most powerful force in the Eastern Empire, and that whole time, I was little more than a fool.

I went on about how what I did was for His Majesty's sake, but really, my eyes were focused strictly on my own fame. Now I see how little meaning there was to advancing my career like that. I mean, a man from low-level nobility rising to command an entire force before age forty really *is* something to crow about. Receiving a barony from one's in-laws seems like so much garbage compared to being a division commander. It'd be foolish to use that as an excuse, but I don't think you could blame me for becoming arrogant.

And I still regret it all, of course.

Still, I should note that I started my career getting chased out by my in-laws. I was born into a knight captaincy, my family having selected me to marry a baron's daughter from the main family. I was happy, I suppose—until I was cheated on and forced to accept a separation. My wife, or my ex-wife, was irreplaceable to me at the time. I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and I thought I was the happiest man in the Empire. She said she felt the same way, so I thought she was the one who picked me, but I was wrong. I was complacent, really.

But a year later, when my father-in-law died, I was unceremoniously tossed out. I still remember it now...or it shows up in my nightmares now and then, that is. But there's no way I could ever forget how she looked when she addressed me.

"It was a good dream for you, wasn't it? A dirt-poor knight, getting to play a make-believe noble. But that's in the past now. My father ordered me to marry

you, but now I'm finally free. And it's your fault, you know. You couldn't even father any children."

I was so desperate, I wanted to scream. I couldn't understand what she meant at the time, but the bottle she thrust before me told the whole story. She had been drugging me the entire time.

Maybe I could have lodged a complaint and filed legal proceedings. But I was fighting a baron and his family. My ex already had a lover on the side, a wealthy merchant, and that made things even worse for me. He had already paid off all the baron's servants to talk trash about me.

So the merchant got the noble title and my ex got a life of luxury. All *that* even though my father-in-law had lectured me about how a noble must remain proud, even if he lives austere. I'm sure *he* never liked living that way. But that's all water under the bridge now.

Back then, I never thought about bringing my complaints to the people from the main family that took care of me—like family, too. My own parents died in an accident when I was still a boy, so nobody stuck up for me during any of this. So, sure, I guess it was just a matter of time before the baron kicked me out of that place.

Looking back, I think I might've gotten a lot of motivation from the whole experience. The anger and hatred I felt after being betrayed by the girl I love kept propelling me forward. I wanted to move up in the world and get my revenge, I suppose you could say. I was still in my early twenties. Young. Ready to use that hate-driven energy to work myself to the bone.

I toed the line with death more than a few times. I put up some serious results. I didn't hesitate to take on dirty work, and I was pretty good at undercover operations. I was friends with this other merchant, and I tried cutting him as much of a deal as my rank would allow me. I also took on some money-laundering work, passing around the cash to the nobility to build connections for myself.

So thanks to all that hustling, all that striving for the top, I was a field-officer-class soldier by my mid-twenties. I was a knight academy graduate, so I got to kick things off as a warrant officer—going up in rank every year or two, in other

words. Pretty fast, right? But it only worked because of the way power means everything in this empire.

By this point, I began building my own faction in the military, so I could gain a tighter grasp on it. That's when I met Minitz.

He was from nobility, but he *loved* to fight. Which was pretty unusual, yeah. Whenever he went back home, he always wanted to set right off for the front lines, despite how much more upper-class he was than everyone else. That baffled me.

But anyway, he was definitely a talent, so I made use of the guy. I wasn't looking to have him like or respect me, so I was never too shy about asking him for money or whatever. But he was weird that way. He actually *liked* all my orders, and he always carried them out. Of course, he was using me just as much the whole time, so I guess we were pretty much even. We happened to be a good match, considering the goals we had and all, but it's true that we had a trust going, too. As long as I kept hunting for promotions, I always needed to seek out new battlefields—and as battle-crazy as he was, I was sure Minitz would take any order I gave him, as long as he could keep using his connection to me to see some action. Besides, I didn't have any family anyway. It wouldn't hurt anyone if I died, which let me be as crazy as I wanted without repercussions.

So Minitz and I had this oddly trusting relationship going. Then Kanzis came along. He was famous for being a thorn in the army's side for a while, but all that mattered to me was how useful he was. On *that* front, he passed with flying colors, and I suppose Kanzis saw me that way as well. He started takin' a liking to me, too, probably because of how I'd say yes to pretty much any military op. He was known for his overwhelming strength, but his rep in the military was in the toilet. He'd defy orders all the time, sometimes going berserk during battle. He was transferred into my command because of how hard he was to handle, I guess, but to me he was a godsend.

Minitz, Kanzis... I used them as much as I possibly could. I'd come up with ops that any normal guy would hesitate to even touch, and I'd make 'em run them. But it kept paying off for us, and before much longer, we were so high up that nobody could bitch and moan about it anyway.

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So I reached the upper officer ranks in my early thirties.

My command didn't give me much time on the front lines by that point. That's because I lost my sight in my left eye, thanks to a certain someone attempting to poison me when I was younger. But that didn't mean I was any less powerful. Our nation had already opened itself up to a new power, called science, and that made it easy for them to create an elaborate artificial eye for me. I usually kept it under an eyepatch anyway, though. *It'd put the enemy off their guard*, I thought.

I had assumed that my strength would wither on me as I aged, but I felt more energetic by the moment. I looked about my age on the outside, but internally, I was just brimming with stamina. It was like I was constantly in the prime of my life; nothing scared me at all. Ranking duels were a particular interest for me, but I put my dominance over the military ahead of that. I could sense that a commander rank was within reach, and by my estimation, that'd give me more power than the Imperial Knights serving His Majesty.

So I kept building up my faction. I used old man Gadora in my drive to steadily strengthen the Armored Division; I had the merchants I knew provide money to modernize it as well. All the preparations were falling into place; I was building a résumé for myself; and so, just past my mid-thirties, I was named one of the Empire's three Generals of the Guardians.

Life couldn't have been going better for me. And I guess that's why, in between my duties, I began to think a bit—like, what's that baron family who kicked me out doing right now? After I had someone look into it, though, I was thrown into distress. None of it was my fault, but...*why*?

Well, it was obvious. At the time, I had obtained enough power to crush them all several times over. My banishment from their house was a pretty famous story, so it turns out that the military under me had taken action without me telling them to. Not that they directly knocked on their door or whatever. They just gave a careful word or two to our business relations, like "*Don't tell me you're still dealing with the people who did that to our commander*" and stuff. I'm sure the big-name merchants who were told that had no choice but to defer

to my will. I was on the fast track to the upper echelon of the army, after all.

Besides, unlike in the West, the imperial economy didn't really allow for free trade to start with. On paper, only the nobility or military were allowed to conduct merchant activity. Nobles had the right to name merchants to serve as their employees and conduct business in their name; these merchants could then earn a salary through the profits they earned in business.

That, I'm sure, is why the man who took my wife wanted a noble title so badly. That way, he could keep up his merchant work for whatever high-end noble he was working with, setting up his sons or daughters with noble marriage partners all the while. That title would then earn him the legal right to conduct business on his own. It was a classic pattern, something you saw all the time.

So, yeah, now that merchant was a baron and all...but I bet he hadn't been counting on me climbing *this* high up the career track. The guy whose face he'd laughed at while booting him out the door was now a general, shockingly enough. The military ran on a huge budget, leading to all sorts of business opportunities, and it was the high-ranking officers who decided which merchant got what kind of business. As one of three Generals of the Guardians, I'm sure it's clear what sort of say I had. I didn't control the entire budget, but the influence I had put me on the level of a noble earl or higher. No way some baron could compete against that, of course, and so all his military business connections were shut down.

Hearing that made me feel a little empty inside. I'd wanted to get revenge with my own two hands, but now it was already mine without my even having done anything. Still, I thought, that wasn't any reason to let up. I'd already been betrayed once. If I went all soft now, it just meant more people trying to take advantage of me.

I'd made it up to the rank of general in no small part because I couldn't father any children. Advance high enough in the military, and you were automatically awarded a noble title upon retirement. The more you achieved, the loftier the title. Me, I didn't have any kids and I wasn't gonna have any, so no matter how fancy the title I got was, that lineage would end in just one generation—no real threat to any of the other nobles.

The military hates it when nobles recruit their own private forces, and in turn, nobles hate it when military officers get rich. The military gets the power, the nobles get the money—that kind of separation was considered really important, and one side bleeding into the other was seen as taboo. That's why so many of the top military brass were single. It meant they could dive into battle without concerns about creating widows or orphans, yes—but really, this kind of competition with the nobility played a bigger part.

But now I was starting to have an idea. The baron who'd betrayed me was on the skids, sure, but his life hadn't been totally destroyed or anything, right? Really, it was like a divine revelation to me. I still had stuff left to do, didn't I? The only reason that family's still alive is because they're nobles. Low-end or not, it's a barony, so they can live decently off their imperial stipend alone. If I can just take that title from them, they'll be ruined, with nowhere to go.

And they weren't the only people I needed to purge. There was her new husband's merchant father, for example, and the earl who hired him. If *they* weren't around, I never would've had to go through any of that.

So there you have it. I had to eradicate the enemy, or they'd get me next. But destroying an earl required even more power than what I had already. And *that's* when I began to aim higher—and try to obtain the kind of force that could beat anybody on the planet.



"Right, so after that, I was pretty much in my own little world. You know, I could understand just how low-down and dirty it was, what I was doing and all, but it's like I couldn't see it, kinda."

"Yeah. Honestly, you weren't much of a pretty sight back then."

"You would've been perfectly justified abandoning me then, really. Then *you* woulda been a general, not me."

"Ah, that work was never my thing. Besides, I never hated you or anything. It was the same deal with Kanzis. Whether I'm a good guy or a bad guy, I want to deal with the people I like, essentially."

"*Pfft!* You always were weird like that."

"I'm aware...but I sure don't need you reminding me."

The men shared a laugh—Caligulio, the skinny officer in his forties, and Minitz, a man in a freshly tailored suit.

They were in the Elf Club, an exclusive members-only joint located inside the Labyrinth. It was the stage they'd chosen to reminisce and discuss their past follies, all while sampling a wide range of the club's drinks.

Normally the venue was off-limits to all but a carefully selected member list. You had to be on the list to enter, and only after undergoing a set of body checks and paying the entrance fee. They'd never have been allowed to set foot in it usually, but after the Tempest/Empire summit the other day, it had been opened to higher-up imperial officers. That move had been suggested by Rimuru, who'd said he wanted to put this war behind them and build a better relationship going forward, and the two of them knew that. That's why they hadn't hesitated to take him up on this offer.

"But, yeah, you know what happened after that. I took control of the whole army and got aspirations of taking over the world. Then *this* nation beat us, and here I am."

"'Beat' you makes it sound like a schoolyard brawl. To be more accurate, you couldn't even put up a fight."

"Heh-heh... No doubt."

"But I'm glad I got to see it, you know? Seeing for myself that Emperor Ludora and the Marshal—or Lady Velgrynd—weren't the most unimaginably powerful people in the world after all."

"I can't see how the thought makes you happy, but if you're glad, I'm glad. So are you planning to make up with your brother?"

Minitz gave Caligulio a self-deprecating smile. "I pretty much have to. He's the marquis banding together the nobility. With Sir Masayuki set up as the new emperor, it's our job to support him with everything we got."

Although Minitz was born into the family of a noble marquis, he'd joined the army anyway, out of a desire to prove his talents. Those talents had brought him this far, in no small part because of the preferential treatment he received

as a high-born noble. Still, there was no denying Minitz's real strength. Nobody thought ill of him at all, and anyone who did received a lesson on how stupid they were in short order.

So it was Minitz's younger brother who eventually became marquis, but he wasn't very fond of it. He resented Minitz, in fact, for palming the job (and all the stress it brought) off on him. Caligulio had learned about that just a bit ago, so he was relieved to hear his friend wanted to mend fences with the man.

A peaceful agreement was never possible for me, he thought. Minitz, at least, had the good luck of owning a family fortune and the freedom to use it however he wanted. He had the strength to back up his extravagant habits, though; if he didn't, he and his brother would have been branded debaucherous failures. Caligulio doubted that the two really disliked each other *that* much, though. Minitz's brother said it wasn't fair, the lot he received in life, but so would anyone else put in that position, really. It took someone like Minitz to get away with abandoning his noble title like that.

"Yeah... I'll be counting on your support for that, *Mr. Prime Minister*."

Minitz might have escaped his noble obligations, but as part of the new Masayuki-driven administration, he had been appointed prime minister, one of the most powerful posts in the whole Empire. The conversation between Masayuki and Rimuru had gone something like this:

"Y-you know, we were in that big meeting and all, and I didn't want to rock the boat...but the more I think about it, there's just totally no way I could be an emperor! I've never even studied politics before, and...well, okay, I did in high school and stuff, but that was just, like, skimming the textbook for the stuff I needed in the test!"

"Ha-ha-ha! No flaking out on that now."

"No?"

"Of course not! You see how I'm muddling through this well enough. You can grow into the role just fine!"

"You're being way too optimistic, Rimuru! Seriously, quit joking around with me like this!"

"Ha-ha-ha... You'll be fine, you'll be fine. Everyone will help you out, too."

"You've got the biggest 'not my problem' look on your face right now. I can tell. That, and I bet you're glad you have another friendly monarch you can schmooze with!"

"No, no, no... Besides, like I said, you got a lot of people you can lean on, don't you? Like Minitz over there. I think *he'd* be pretty reliable."

Minitz, sitting nearby, made eye contact with Rimuru—a serious mistake. He was pretty sure Rimuru was acting entirely on a whim, but either way, he had stood out too much in that conference for his own good. Being branded a capable man by Rimuru, he was promptly assigned to be an adviser to Masayuki...and that, once the dust settled, had evolved to the position of prime minister.

Great...

All Minitz could do about it now was laugh. He had Masayuki personally pleading with him for assistance, and it wasn't the kind of thing he could just turn down. Besides, when push came to shove, Minitz really liked Masayuki. It was better than getting browbeaten under Velgrynd's gaze all day.

This, of course, led to one little problem—the post of prime minister was already occupied. Minitz figured he could make this man his assistant, however. The emperor had the exclusive right to name his cabinet, so if the current prime minister wanted to complain to Minitz about it, he was barking up the wrong tree. He might have anyway, of course, but Minitz didn't care. He had come to know far, far scarier people in his life, and if the old minister gave him any guff, he'd just point him in their direction.

Yes... I suppose this will work out in time.

He had received more than enough of an education, as the heir to a marquis family. He may not have realized it, but his performance was hardly unsatisfactory. It might have been a slog at times, but as Minitz saw it, he was capable enough out on the field. So he decided to bounce Caligulio's jab back at him.

"Don't make me laugh, Mr. Secretary of the Military... And I'll remind you that

you're the only surviving division commander left, so you got a lot of work to do."

Under Emperor Masayuki, the Empire's military would undergo a massive round of reform. If Minitz took the cabinet position of prime minister, the current one would become deputy prime minister. Secretary of the Military was on the same level as that.

Masayuki didn't know much about government, but he did remember the importance of having a civilian politician oversee the country's military affairs. He mentioned that to his new assistants, and that was immediately reflected in the new system. In fact, though, all he said was "Don't we need a minister controlling the army?" He didn't order it, and he hadn't postulated any kind of grand theory about a civilian-appointed minister holding supreme authority over the military. As a result, the Secretary of the Military was still selected from among the army's commanders, a somewhat skewed take on the idea—and now Caligulio was now both secretary and commander of the army.

That was the concern behind Minitz's observation, but Caligulio laughed it off. "No need to worry about that. We won't have a war for a while to come—and besides, as long as *I'm* running the army, I won't rattle my saber at any foreign country."

Those were his honest, resignation-tinged feelings.

Given the geography of the Empire, there were no longer any neighboring states they could war with. The Jura-Tempest Federation and the demon lord Milim's domain were off-limits, of course. Fighting the Armed Nation of Dwargon at this point was unthinkable; the dwarves were backing them at the moment, and they needed to build and maintain a peaceable friendship with them. An airship invasion of the Western Nations was plausible enough, but it was doubtful the demon lord Rimuru would ever allow it. There really was no adversary left for them to point their spears at. The only ones were already within their borders—the powerful nobles that controlled the regional militaries, who might not know their place and could potentially be plotting rebellions as they spoke.

"We've already sent word across the Empire. The nobles should be replying

soon, but have you heard from Krishna?"

"He hasn't made any notable moves yet. Your brother's factions have all sworn their loyalty to the new emperor, and I think that's keeping the other factions in check for now."

"Well, even if the nobles did reply, it'd be the same thing. I don't think it'll be enough to silence the sons of the emperor before Ludora, or the families with blood relations to him."

"I'm sure. We just sent out word that Emperor Ludora has passed away, so I'm sure some people will mistakenly assume their turn's approaching. That would only come with Lady Velgrynd's consent, of course, but..."

"They'll likely allege that the imperial household law no longer has any teeth and should be ignored. The fools don't even realize how angry that'll make Lady Velgrynd."

Caligulio thought Minitz was right. The idea of rebellious nobles refusing to fall in line with this new emperor didn't scare him at all, frankly. His and Caligulio's victory was all but assured. The real problem was the hit the nation would take power-wise.

The faker who'd taken the place of Emperor Ludora (not that Caligulio thought he was that, given how he'd been serving him his whole life) had been in cahoots with an unknown invader called the Aggressors and attempted to throw the world into chaos. They had fought one of their leaders, a man who called himself Cornu, so they knew full well what the threat was. Velgrynd had come along to save the day, but if not for her, the whole Empire would have fallen. The being that had once been Emperor Ludora had wanted powers along the lines of a god's, after all; they couldn't dismiss the possibility that he'd seek to use the Empire's people as pawns in this endeavor.

Of course, nobody but a few people in the Empire knew what the emperor's face looked like, so if someone claimed to be Emperor Ludora, they could just reject him posthaste. The enemy wasn't likely to try something sneaky like that, after all. The Ludora that Caligulio knew was never one to open diplomatic talks with his enemies.

"Now is certainly no time for the nation to be fighting amongst itself."

"No, it is not. I'll put out some feelers along those lines."

"If you could, thanks. I want to gather up the remaining Imperial Knights and reorganize the Imperial Guardian force at once."

This would be Caligulio's first big job as Secretary of the Military, and it was more difficult than even he could have imagined. He had to begin, for one, by figuring out just how many of them had survived. Caligulio didn't even know exactly what missions the Imperial Knights were assigned to. Their locations were unknown, so before anything, he had to get in contact with them all.

Some would want to leave the force, no doubt. Krishna was one of them. He was practically worshipping the demon lord Rimuru as a god, and he had already declared his intentions to quit his post and go live in Tempest. Caligulio had asked him to remain in service until things calmed down—he was too good of a man to lose—but he seemed ready to defy that order the moment he had a chance.

It was Adalmann who ultimately stepped in. "It's important," he advised Krishna, "to clean up your own messes. If you leave while the Empire is still in a state of chaos, I'm sure it would sadden Sir Rimuru as well."

"Yes!" Krishna shouted back. "That was an extremely convincing argument, Sir Adalmann. The only thought on my mind was that I have been saved...but I need to bring Sir Rimuru's mercy to the ears of all the Empire's innocent citizens!"

That wasn't exactly the reaction Caligulio had expected, but Krishna was back at his post and hard at work, so he left it at that. No point dwelling on the details.

But Krishna was far from the only officer looking for a change of career. A hefty percentage of the Empire's soldiers were starting to voice a desire to remain in Tempest. Caligulio understood their feelings, and he didn't want to force anyone to come back...but any further defections could affect the Empire's future ability to fight, so clearly they needed to ponder this issue a little. A large number of people had died in this war. They'd had it coming, more or less, and it wasn't a problem worth rehashing, but that didn't mean they could simply ignore this problem.

The only Single Digits still alive, for one, were Bernie and Jiwu—just two in all. They would be directly answerable to Masayuki from here on, serving as his bodyguards. Velgrynd would have been more than enough on that front, perhaps, but they'd doubtlessly be helpful as advisers or go-to contacts for smaller missions, so Masayuki's request had been approved.

Caligulio saw fit to take advantage of all this to reorganize how the Imperial Guardians were set up. It would depend on how many surviving Guardians there were, but he didn't see a need to stick to the set number of one hundred. He intended to do away with the ranking duel system entirely; to him, numbers shouldn't be allowed to be so important among the soldiers. If they were strong enough and absolutely loyal to the emperor, he didn't mind opening the doors a little wider for them.

His plan called for them to be deployed in groups of three across the Empire's cities, firming up the imperial defense. Three in one place might not be enough to defeat a high-level Aggressor, but they could buy a lot of time anyway. Ideally they would remain highly mobile, covering each other and providing backup. The Empire had more than a hundred cities, though, so they needed a lot more personnel. The regional forces were still intact, however, which was why the Guardians could work with them to cover matters for the time being.

Either way, the Guardians would continue as a going concern, built mainly around Enlightened-class warriors and kept prepared for future combat.

"It's an uphill battle for both of us, isn't it?" muttered Minitz as he finished his drink.

"Yeah," replied Caligulio. "But it feels oddly worth it, too."

This was a passing observation, but he meant it. Thinking he was working to better the Empire, as opposed to just trying to earn a higher rank, made the days a lot more fulfilling.

"Plus, now that I've heard Lord Rimuru's plans, we need to restore order and stabilize the government immediately. If we're late on this, we'll be left behind by the rest of the world."

With Rimuru and Masayuki's approval, rail-laying work had already begun. In likely just a few more years, the Empire would enjoy a future where they were

fully connected to the rail network. Even the little bit that had been discussed at the conference made Caligulio quiver, but that was far from all.

"And, you know, what about our plan to rule the world's skies? I mean, that demon lord is ridiculous. He said it while we were all drinking, but I'm informed that he physically *cannot* get inebriated. He meant every word of it."

"Yes, Zamdo was quite excited as well. He even offered his personal assistance for the project. He's really more an engineer than a soldier, though, so I'm sure that's where his interests lie."

"So we'll have these 'magitrains' connecting every nation on the surface, and then we'll begin mass-producing our airships and build a stable market for them... It's a scary thing for someone like him to come up with, but I think we can make it happen. After all, the only reparations he sought after the war's end were the rights to our airspace. He didn't ask for anything else! In fact, he's helping us rebuild. How could we ever turn him down?"

"Indeed. His Majesty Masayuki gave the go-ahead as well, so that's not a problem, either. It's what happens in the future that matters the most."

Caligulio thought to himself as he spoke. Something about Tempest just didn't add up to him. The words of the demon lord Rimuru—words that sounded like he was making things up as he went along—would be placed into concrete, executable plans by the next day, or even later that evening.

He had apparently considered a plan to mass-produce airships ever since he'd known the Empire had them, but he was ready to provide an R & D base for the project immediately, which was unheard of. An entire floor of the dungeon was now serving as a hangar for airship repairs and upgrades.

Zamdo was having the time of his life working there. He'd been given free rein to order whatever materials he wanted without worrying about a budget, which put him in the habit of saying things like "So heaven exists right here after all!" on a regular basis. He was already amped up after surviving what he had, and this only added to his intensity. It made Caligulio jealous, seeing all of Zamdo's desires fulfilled like that, but he had to cheer Zamdo on. He would need to work hard if Tempest and the Empire wanted to retain friendly ties.

But enough about him. It was time to discuss their future.

The demon lord Rimuru's proposal offered broad support for upgrading infrastructure around the Empire. Having just been badly defeated, there was no way they could say no to that. The Empire could certainly provide its own labor, so they didn't have to rely on Tempest for everything. Caligilio's thoughts were very different from the Western Nations' on that front. As long as he wasn't clouded by his own desire, he was capable of intelligent, impartial decisions.

Along those lines, he concluded that what the Empire needed the most at the moment was the restoration of domestic order. The Empire wasn't in a state of disarray at all, but once the details behind their defeat became known, it would undoubtedly shock their citizens. Rimuru would be seen as the hateful enemy of anyone who'd lost their family, of course. Krishna and other officers were working to stave that off, but Caligilio needed to tackle the issue as well.

Also, as Minitz warily pointed out, the more powerful nobles were making ominous-looking moves. They would need to welcome Tempestian forces into their empire for the sake of future development, but they couldn't afford to let that lead to disputes, no matter what.

There was a mountain of problems to address.

"Yeah. But you know, Caligilio..."

"What?"

"Don't you think the demon lord Rimuru has it much worse than we do?"

"Mmm?"

A moment of thought, and Caligilio felt Minitz was right. They had been told about all these plans for future development, and they were just beginning to put in the hours to make them happen. But that went without saying. Things like restoring order and developing your home nation aren't things you do because you're ordered to. You beaver away at it daily because you want to make your home a better place. They were facing an unavoidable battle with the Aggressors sometime soon...but, as they'd just realized, they weren't all that nervous about it. They had too much work to handle in the meantime, burying and dissipating any potential anxieties.

"You think he's trying to have us not worry about it?"

"I'm sure, yeah. But maybe that's not all. It could be that the demon lord wants to handle the Aggressors with his nation alone. That or he doesn't see them as a major problem, but..."

Of course it was a problem. But the demon lord Rimuru was more focused on his grand future plans than any of that stuff. Caligulio and Minitz admired how bold a leader he was, and King Gazel likely felt the same way. The whole way Rimuru acted around them indicated that he didn't see the Aggressors as much to sweat about. Maybe it was just a bluff, or maybe he really *did* feel that way. Caligulio did think he was just trying to keep them from worrying themselves sick, but even so, he had to agree with Minitz.

If he's seriously thinking about dealing with the Aggressors by himself, we'll need to find a way to assist him. At the very least, we need to prevent any attempt at an internal revolt. We can't have anyone dragging him down like that.

Caligulio was ready to serve his leader.

So the two of them left the club after drinking for around an hour. The next day, they put Masayuki up on his palanquin and set off for home.

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The moment he reached the capital, Caligulio was swamped with work.

Some regions of the city had been damaged during the war, but there was no need to think about rebuilding immediately. They planned to work on that in tandem with Rimuru and the Tempestians later on. No, the first order of business was reorganizing the military. All surviving (or resurrected) soldiers and officers were now safely back in the Empire, and he quickly gave them new duties. Maintaining order was top priority, so he kept an eye on Krishna's reports and sent soldiers out to any region facing unrest.

Fortunately for him, some seven hundred thousand soldiers and officers remained loyal to him. Even those who wished to move to Tempest were being cooperative with this effort; Rimuru, after all, had promised them jobs after the turmoil had subsided. "Don't make up your mind right now," he told a large

group of them assembled at the coliseum. “Just take your time and think it over, okay?” That’s what he said after Rigurd came out and presented a fairly detailed immigration plan to them all.

Rimuru wasn’t trying to convince any of them, hoping instead to respect their individual desires. But the two-hundred-thousand-odd potential immigrants in the audience were pretty enthusiastic about the news.

“Aggressors? We’ll rip those guys apart!”

Certainly, they were ready for a fight. And while they had lost the power in their souls, they still had their surgically enhanced bodies. Some of them still merited an A rank, so they were nothing to sniff at.

So Caligulio wanted to figure out any way he could to keep the imperial capital peaceful. But then a bigger problem popped up. The *real* thorn in his side, as he’d predicted, was the nobility.

Nobles from up and down were demanding an audience with him, putting a damper on his work. He wanted to turn them all down, but some of them were big names whose support he wanted for future purposes. Minitz’s overtures and Krishna’s military coercion did what they were asked for as well, preventing any major crises from developing, but it certainly took a lot of stamina from Caligulio.

Just then, though, the demon lord Rimuru sent over a lifesaver—Testarossa, that most beautiful of demons.

The first job Testarossa took was delivering a speech to win over the masses; a talk that would soothe the frayed nerves of a shocked, defeated populace while fully ignoring the nobles. Caligulio worried that this was no job for a demon, a race practically born to strike fear in people’s hearts. But he didn’t need to, surprisingly enough. Demons lived off people’s emotions, and if you wanted to cleanly remove the terror and anxieties from the minds of an entire populace, they were the most qualified group you could find.

“What a surprise. Here you are—Blanc, or Lady Testarossa, who put the Empire through so much pain and strife...and look at how much you clearly care for our people...”

"Why wouldn't I? That is the job assigned to me by Sir Rimuru, our overlord."

"Well, yes, naturally, but I was expecting you to be rougher...or, I'm sorry, I mean that I didn't think you'd take such a reserved, moderate approach."

Caligulio chose his words carefully around her, sweating. He regretted being too honest, but Testarossa didn't let it bother her.

"We can't afford to have Sir Rimuru gain a bad reputation around here, after all. Of course I'd be more careful with how I hold myself...but that winds up thinning out the effect, too. Trying to strike the right balance is tough, you know? If you eat up *all* of someone's emotions, that usually has a bad effect on them in some way."

The observation made Caligulio wince. He certainly didn't want that...but Testarossa wouldn't make that sort of rookie mistake. She had ordered Moss to keep close track of her underlings, so success was basically a given.

But she had a point, too. Taking the moderate approach made it difficult to fully control the emotions of a crowd. Between having lost close relatives in battle and a new emperor, many of the Empire's citizens were simply too frazzled to remain calm. Not all their sadness had gone away, and the buds of anxiety and dissent were still there to grow. Caligulio had peacekeeping forces in place at key places around the city, ensuring that any rioting or conflict was prevented before it could begin.

"If anyone defied you, it would be a lot cleaner and easier to just kill their whole clan, but..."

"Ha...ha-ha-ha... Very funny..."

She wasn't joking, Caligulio thought. It made him respect Rimuru, the one who'd sent Testarossa over, all the more. Blanc *always* meant business.

So, in time, the citizens began to simmer down, with none of them foolish enough to attempt an armed rebellion. Seeing things progress to this point was a relief, but Testarossa already had other ideas in mind. She decided that, as the most effective and quickest way to provide mental care for the people, they had best introduce the new emperor Masayuki to them before long—in other words, stage a coronation. If he could give a speech as well, Testarossa

reasoned, the citizens would view it as the legitimate dawn of a new era.

“Huh? Me?!”

“Is that a problem?”

“No... Never mind...”

Masayuki gratefully accepted the idea. There were tears in his eyes, but they were meaningless before Testarossa’s smile.

“Oh? What are you doing, making Masayuki cry like that?”

It was Velgrynd who butted in.

“My,” Testarossa calmly replied, “what a regrettable way to put it. I’m not into *that* sort of play at all.”

The two beauties exchanged smiles. Their gazes smashed into each other, creating a fearsome pressure in the room.

It was Masayuki and Caligulio who took the brunt of it. Masayuki held out, praying that he could leave soon. Caligulio, on the other hand, tried a little impromptu meditation, easing his heart to overcome this storm. But no matter what either of them truly wished for, the coronation was now a done deal.

Countless citizens completely occupied the main square in front of the imperial palace. Masayuki was there, looking down at them from a balcony on one of its highest floors.

He had come here via Velgrynd’s teleportation, making this basically his first public appearance in the Empire. He was now dressed as an emperor should be, and as long as he kept his mouth shut, one could perhaps detect an air of dignity about him if they squinted hard enough.

The appointed time was here. Caligulio began things with a few opening words, followed by Minitz, the prime minister, offering a rundown of recent events. The Empire had faced a major defeat, and as a result, the previous emperor Ludora had passed away. The new emperor, Masayuki the Hero, had already been crowned, and through his actions, peace had been reached with Tempest; they would build a friendly relationship going forward, and they had also opened official relations with the Dwarven Kingdom. And so on.

In order to prevent a recurrence of Michael's Castle Guard skill, they needed to convince the people that Ludora was at the root of all the Empire's problems. If they could refer to him as dead and reduce the number of his believers, that'd be even better. That was the context behind introducing Masayuki as the new emperor, but a large number of people had trouble swallowing this, openly asking why someone not even related by blood was taking the throne. Velgrynd stepped up to answer them.

"Please quiet down, you silly fools. My name is Velgrynd. Velgrynd the Cardinal."

Hearing the name of the Empire's guardian dragon gave every one of its citizens pause. *Could it be?* they all thought in unison.

"By the laws of our imperial household, I hereby name Masayuki the Hero as our new emperor!"

As she spoke, Velgrynd unleashed her overwhelming dominance. An almost visible wave rolled over the audience—the famed "cardinal aura," its divinity clear as day in anyone's eyes. Then, like it was an afterthought, she motioned in a certain direction, speaking to the people.

"Behold, as we salute our new emperor!"

The moment she fell silent, the Divine Aerie of Fire began to spew lava. The massive volcanic eruption was easily visible from the center of the city. It was a little *too* gigantic to be called a "salute," and while it was akin to playing with matches to Velgrynd, it shocked the common citizens speechless. Now there was no doubting it. Some of them might have had doubts—maybe they'd set things up in advance, employing magic or explosives to trigger the eruption—but it was a divine, sacred mountain doing the erupting. Engineering that without the permission of the Flame Dragon who called it home would lead to wrath too horrible to picture. No one who called this capital home would ever have attempted anything so stupid.

And that wasn't all. Several bolts of molten lava shot out from the volcanic crater, reaching all the way to the capital—but they were all deflected by an invisible protective wall. It could be nothing but their guardian dragon in action.

"M-my god..."

“It’s her. The dragon god herself!”

“Our empire’s guardian dragon has manifested herself before our very eyes!!”

The excitement was palpable. As time passed, they began to realize just how monumental these events were. Velgrynd herself had given her approval. At long last, they realized that Masayuki the Hero was now truly their emperor. And while Masayuki’s center of popularity still lay in the Western Nations, he was also well known around the Empire.

“Whoa, whoa, are you serious?!”

“You mean *Lightspeed* Masayuki?!”

“Isn’t Masayuki the most powerful of Heroes the world has ever seen? Hell, no wonder the demon lord Rimuru couldn’t say no to him!”

Praise was raining down, as if read off a script by a team of talented actors. That was Masayuki’s power for you. He was famous everywhere—and now his unique skill had been powered up, extending over a broader range and having untold impacts on everyone that knew him. The result was the sort of cheering he had grown accustomed to.

“Maaaa-sa-yu-ki! Maaaa-sa-yu-kiiii!!”

It was in perfect harmony, like the voice of every imperial subject was united as one. *That’s Emperor Masayuki to you, sillies*, Velgrynd thought—but the emperor himself didn’t seem to mind, so she let it slide.

If anyone was truly livid about this, it was Testarossa. The citizens had the completely wrong idea that Rimuru wouldn’t dare try to cross Masayuki, a thought that made her furious to the core—but she was the one who’d inadvertently led them to that conclusion. She couldn’t complain about it to anyone here, so she just had to smile and put up with it.

So Masayuki now had the people on his side. It went far easier than anyone had anticipated, and thanks to that, the name of the “divinely ordained” emperor of the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire became known to the entire world.

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The capital's residents, driven by new hope, regained their old energy. The pain of those who'd lost loved ones wouldn't be forgotten that easily, but even they were now taking new steps, moving on with their lives. The normal routine was returning, and to Caligulio, nothing could have been more joyful to see.

But there was still a long way to go before he could truly relax. With the emperor having been officially named, those bothersome nobles were starting to show signs of activity.

The nobles were Minitz's duty, and Caligulio wanted to palm off all responsibility for them on him—but that was just him being selfish, and the nobles didn't care who they reached out to as long as they were connected to the new emperor. That's why he kept getting hounded for appointments.

He looked toward Testarossa for help. "This nation's nobles?" she matter-of-factly replied. "I don't think the great majority of them are any big problem." Caligulio didn't know what she meant, but he interpreted this to mean that Testarossa was making some key below-the-surface moves for him. Minitz was doing his job as well, so Caligulio decided to focus on what he could do instead.

Then, before even a few days had passed, the requests for audiences began to dwindle.

"Um, excuse me, Lady Testarossa, but..."

He assumed she was intimidating them into submission, but was too timid to ask. This stately lady elegantly enjoying some tea before him was Blanc, a demon feared by the Empire for ages. He still found that hard to believe, but it was the unvarnished truth. And no matter what vile, terrorizing methods she'd used, he wouldn't find it strange at all.

"Oh? Well, that's mean. Why are you looking at me like I just threatened your life? I haven't done anything bad to you."

All villains think that way—that they're different, somehow. Caligulio suddenly felt very small, even though he was in his own office; it'd be impossible for him to say anything like "how could I *not* be afraid" to this virtual queen of the underworld.

"No, um, ha-ha-ha, I don't have any suspicions about you or anything. I'm

thankful every day for all the help you provide me. I was simply wondering what sort of methods you employed to keep the nobility at bay..."

"I'd prefer if you didn't worry about that and just stuck to your own work, please." Testarossa took a sip of tea, then let out an elegant little sigh. "But all right. I'd feel guilty if I took *all* the credit for it, so I'll tell you. Let me begin with the conclusion: The nobles weren't any problem at all."

"Yes, but *why*, is what I was curious about..."

"First, the nobles of this empire are divided into three large factions. You're aware of that, of course?"

"Yes, my lady. There's the military faction, led by Minitz's brother, the marquis. There's the 'old money' faction, which plays a central role in the emperor's support...and finally, there are the countryside nobles."

The military was the keystone of the Empire, one of its largest organizations, and many nobles tried to curry favor with this unmovable institution. That made them one of the largest, most powerful factions, but despite the fact that a marquis (two ranks down from the top) was leading it, relatively few of its members were from high nobility. The "old money" faction, on the other hand, mainly consisted of the sort of highly connected nobles that had links to the emperor. They symbolized the concentration of power among their ranks; if you weren't at least an earl, you wouldn't even have a chance to speak in public among them. The regional nobles, meanwhile, were the least organized, just a rabble who'd come together because they wouldn't be allowed to speak up as individuals. They were only a group at all because they happened to share the same goals, and little more.

Testarossa nodded at Caligilio's rundown. "Right, exactly. Now, starting with the military faction...Minitz already has them wrapped around his finger, doesn't he?"

"No, no, he and his brother aren't getting along very well—"

"Oh? Not really. He was just all pouty, is all."

"Huh?"

"He had his elder brother take the marquis title for him, and he found the

responsibility to be crushing. He was just rebelling a bit—getting to grips with his position while still retaining his good name.”

Testarossa smiled a bit.

“It’s something weak people do all the time.”

“Is that true, my lady? How did you even find that out...?”

“Not telling, sorry. You’ve heard the expression ‘what you don’t know can’t hurt you,’ haven’t you?”

The truth was that Moss had investigated all that in a single night. He had no free time, what with Testarossa using and abusing him; really, despite being a Demon Peer and lauded as the “King of Ash,” he arguably had it the worst out of anyone in Tempest. But he had no one to complain to, so he just kept his head down and dealt with the harsh work conditions that were placed upon him.

Moss had snuck into the marquis’s residence and read through the journal hidden in his office. He’d then informed Testarossa of the secrets he’d found inside.

Even the marquis’s strict security may as well have not existed, as far as Moss was concerned. He’d also uncovered a few useful tidbits of information that could help improve their relations; these he casually dropped in Minitz’s lap. This was clearly a criminal act, but to someone who didn’t have a clear understanding of what “bad” was, it barely counted as a crime.

“Ah yes, ha-ha-ha. I’ll trust in you, then, Lady Testarossa. It’d be boorish of me to inquire further, wouldn’t it?”

Caligulio ran from the question. It was a smart decision. Whatever the background circumstances were, Minitz was on his way to patching things up with his brother—and if so, all was well. Best to just focus on the final results.

“All right. So that’s the military faction. What about the others?”

“Well, the countryside nobles demonstrated to me that they’re ready to submit to you.”

“Huh? Since when?”

"Oh, they fell in place immediately. The most important thing to them, after all, is that people can live in peace without starving. The Empire's rural areas are well stabilized by now, so the only concerns they had left were about our political direction."

"I—I see..."

"And by the way, do you know how the rural nobles fund themselves?"

"Well, mainly with the crops they harvest in each region. They retain what they need, pay their taxes, and then sell the remainder to their affiliated merchants. The revenue from that keeps the regional lords funded...is how I understand it."

"Yes, that's mostly right, but you're wrong on one aspect."



This was starting to feel bizarre to Caligulio. Why was someone like him, at the peak of the imperial military, receiving a lecture in economics from the demon that had put the Empire through so much pain? He didn't know, and it confused him.

Why does a demon know this much about human economic policy, huh? I was educated in it as a lower-level country noble, but I don't think most top-class military officers would know much about it...

And to think he didn't have it fully right, either? There were also regional handicrafts and specialty products, but that didn't seem like the correct answer. Caligulio didn't think of Testarossa as someone who would normally keep finding fault with him like this.

"So what is it?"

"The underground trade."

"What?!" he couldn't help but exclaim. There was no way black-market trade would be allowed in the Empire. He trusted in that, but the bluntness of her response threw him.

"Oh, is that strange to you?"

"Well, of course! The emperor of our land wields his power to ensure the equality of all his citizens. The nobility is a different matter, of course, but even a commoner can rise up in life through military service—"

"I know all that. I'm not talking about surface matters. The black market is a necessity for practical business. Do you know why?"

If she was calling it a "necessity," Testarossa must have meant it. But Caligulio still just couldn't believe it. Black-market trading was tantamount to treason against the emperor; if it were that rampant, imperial secret agents would have picked up on it by now. There was no way the late Lieutenant Kondo would've overlooked it, for example. They feared him as "the stalker of the halls of information"; Caligulio doubted he'd have just let this slip past him.

"I don't believe it," he blurted out. "Are you saying Lieutenant Kondo just let this slide?"

Testarossa gave him a chiding look. “Are you really that hardheaded? He *did* let it slide, because it wasn’t a bad thing at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, as a merchant, I’m sure being affiliated with a noble sounds nice, but who you get to sell to is basically dictated by the title of your employer. Do you think the merchants of low-ranked nobles can compete with their brethren serving earls and dukes?”

“Ah...”

“The answer is no. It’s impossible. You’re forced to do the bidding of whoever holds power over you. And that’s where underground merchants come in. Groups like the Echidna Club that ruled over the imperial black market, along with their successors—the Cerberus secret society—they were all able to exist because they were seen as necessary.”

“...”

Caligilio could feel the blindfold coming off. As Testarossa put it, merchants had a *need* to be free. They’d never aggressively pursue profit if they were working for a fixed salary. Trying to restrict that by force would just have been met with resistance, and besides, it’d put the customers they served in a bind. Kondo knew that, so he’d never tried to seriously intervene in the black market.

The same was even true for human trafficking, as publicly illegal as it was. If a village was facing famine and could no longer keep itself fed, there was a need to reduce the number of mouths. While legally forbidden, it had to be done, or a great many people would die—and if it came to that extreme, selling them off gave them a better chance of surviving than any other resort. That was a rather extreme example, but one that had been seen several times in the Empire’s history.

Inconvenient truths like that were all over the place, treated as open secrets by the government. One big problem was trade with foreign nations. Since the Empire had never so much as acknowledged the sovereignty of countries besides itself, foreign trade was officially prohibited. This, however, wasn’t something that any sane economic policy would allow to exist for very long. And that was how groups like Cerberus had taken root in the Western Nations.

Testarossa dispassionately lectured Caligulio about all this. He wailed to himself about why a demon was so up-to-date on such things. It made him feel like an oblivious idiot, and it saddened him.

"Well, thank you very much for the detailed rundown. I appreciate it."

"Not at all. But regardless, that made handling the regional nobles pretty simple, you see. I explained to them that free trade would be fully allowed going forward, and they all lined up to join our side. Plus, as Sir Rimuru proceeds with his plans, we'll be laying rails between the Empire's regional cities as well. That'll ensure the wealth gets spread across more of the Empire as a whole instead of being concentrated in a small handful of cities. Between all of that, they readily pledged their support for Emperor Masayuki."

Caligulio was certainly convinced. The Empire was home to some cutting-edge scientific advances, but they didn't have the time or money to connect all its cities. The reason was obvious—the great majority of the imperial budget went to R & D and the military. The transport of food and goods was also important, but the supply network only extended to the cities near the capital. Deliveries from the far regions were instead made via magic or airship.

Now these left-behind cities were a part of Rimuru's development plans. And once they had been informed of this, it was easy to win the favor of the regional lords. This negotiation hinged on a huge amount of money and labor streaming into these regions, but Rimuru—and Testarossa—could make all of that possible. They had researched the economic conditions of these lords, using that knowledge to their advantage in the talks. Caligulio was impressed—they weren't a disloyal lot to start with, but with *this* thorough of an approach, they were receiving fabulous results. He resolved to revise his own approach in the future.

"So that just leaves the old money."

"Indeed."

"And, knowing how you work, I presume you've built a dossier outlining all their illegal deeds?"

By this point, Testarossa had Caligulio's full trust. He didn't know what kind of scheme she had hatched, but if she said it was "no problem," he was certain

that she was right.

“Don’t put words in my mouth, now. You don’t see anyone foolish enough to commit outright felonies these days in the Empire. A lot of cleanup work took place over the past few decades, and I’ve determined that much of it was Kondo’s doing.”

So the *real* villains among the nobility had already been purged. Testarossa had been stationed in the Empire for a while now, but she felt that people around here were generally calmer in spirit than they used to be. A little research gave her the reason—it was because the truly abhorrent crimes had largely ceased to be committed. All that remained were necessary evils like Cerberus and small-time villains that could be safely ignored.

“But how did you cajole the old money to our side, then?”

“Well, I actually have a conference scheduled for this afternoon. I plan to reach a final agreement with them there, and I’d like you to join me, please.”

That was a clear order. Testarossa was supposed to be serving as Caligulio’s assistant, but he didn’t mind this at all. Faced with this obvious difference in talent and skill, all he could do was nod at her words.

*

Only four people were in the reception room—Minitz, the organizer of this meeting; Caligulio, the Secretary of the Military; Testarossa, the diplomat from their partners in Tempest; and Mithra Hilmenard, head of the “old money” nobles and their current negotiation partner.

Mithra was in his early thirties, still young, and some might have wondered if he was too inexperienced to be leading an entire faction like this. But that didn’t apply to him, for he had virtually every talent one could think of.

Mithra’s mother was once queen, the partner of the emperor before Ludora. This made her Ludora’s biological mother.

The Empire’s imperial palace employed a unique system where the role of “empress”—the legal wife of the emperor—was not a position anyone could take. *That* role in the emperor’s life belonged only to Velgrynd. Instead, several “queens” lived in the inner palace, competing against each other for

supremacy. These women were voluntarily offered by the nobility, and their bloodlines were all impeccable in terms of noble rank. Whichever of these queens became pregnant with the emperor's child first was deemed the winner, welcomed in as the official queen of the Empire. Their child, after all, was promised to be the heir to the throne.

Ludora himself had had several queen candidates of his own ensconced inside his palace, but he'd never favored any of them. They were sent over by powerful nobles hoping their daughter would be named queen, but in the end, they had all been sent back before any child could be conceived. There was discussion about the new emperor inheriting them, but it was decided that Masayuki had no need for this system—and this decision was made by a figure whose identity would likely remain a mystery for all time...

Regardless, Mithra's mother was one of the "winners" of the inner palace. She had completed the major feat of delivering Ludora, earning her the loftiest of reputations for all time.

As a reward, she was offered two options. She could either stay in the palace, exercising her extensive influence while Ludora grew up, or she could accept a staggering monetary payoff and marry herself off to the clan of her choice. No stops were left unpulled when handling the emperor's mother; her words held great authority across the palace, and even if she left that palace, she was never to be disrespected. Thus she didn't hesitate to take her leave and marry the duke of Hilmenard.

The child that resulted was Mithra Hilmenard, which meant Ludora was his half-brother. This gave Mithra unshakable power, enough to make people kowtow the moment they caught sight of him. He had a villainous visage, a face that suggested brutal violence might come at any time, and it daunted anyone who saw it. He had no eyebrows, and one glance from him could strike fear in the hearts of whoever it landed on, robbing them of any desire to defy him. He was neither over-nor underweight, and he wasn't particularly tall, but his sheer dominance was a force to be reckoned with. Even the very highest of nobility felt something ominous about him—they suspected he was up to unscrupulous dealings in the black market, or that crossing him even once would make their lives forfeit. That was what made him so qualified to lead the old money faction

—that force of dignity which refused to bend to anyone else.

In a fight, Caligulio would undoubtedly beat him; that was true even before the general had gone through his awakening. But it took more than sheer muscle to survive in this world. You couldn't expect a decent life unless you had ample food, clothing, and shelter—and if you rebelled against Mithra, you were guaranteed to lose all three.

What a monster to negotiate with, Caligulio thought. I had aimed to run the military someday, but now that I'm doing it, it's all too clear how hard a job it is. I can't believe I have to try dealing with freaks of nature like this...

Minitz was here, so it'd likely work out in the end, but if it were a one-on-one negotiation, he'd have been on the ropes. But this time, they had a valuable helper on hand.

Lady Testarossa, huh? She frightens me profoundly, but I couldn't ask for a better ally. And now that I know she's the fearsome Blanc herself, I don't think anyone could ever beat us.

Mithra before him was a scary sight, but Testarossa was scarier. That thought helped him regain his serenity. Newly calm, he recalled what the demon had told him a moment ago.

Well, hold on one minute... Lady Testarossa said "most" of the nobles wouldn't be a problem. Does that mean Sir Mithra is one of the problems...? But that's strange... Kondo, after all, would never show any mercy—not even to His Majesty's half-brother. Does that mean Sir Mithra isn't up to anything nefarious after all...?

He doubted it. It just seemed so impossible in his mind. Mithra scared people precisely because he was seen as this untouchable villain. If he made everyone fear and revere him like this at first sight, there's no way he'd be someone *normal*.

The clock reached the appointed time, bonging loudly—the signal for the conference to begin.

*

"So you're the hooligans attempting to usurp the throne? Let me hear why

you've called me here."

This pompous question was raised by Mithra.

"One moment, Your Grace," replied Minitz, catching the blow. "That is all a misunderstanding."

"What is? It's the truth, is it not?"

"We are following the official procedures of imperial household law. I would like very much for you not to call it usurping the throne."

"Oh, sure. Don't get cocky with me just because you have Lady Velgrynd as an ally!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Minitz bellowed.

Not even someone as calm as him could shut his eyes to this affront. Certainly, from an outside perspective, it must have looked like Velgrynd was siding with the Empire. But that was a very wrong assumption to make. The truth was actually the other way around—they were only able to maintain this peace because they'd *finally* managed to get on Velgrynd's good side for once. Loose lips sink ships, as they say, but with Velgrynd, the consequences were far worse. She could destroy entire nations—literally wipe them off the map. Keeping her happy was entirely up to Masayuki, and while he seemed to have a gentle disposition, what if he was more selfish instead? It made Caligilio shudder to think of it.

"Sir Mithra, Prime Minister Minitz is telling you the truth. Lady Velgrynd is a friend to Emperor Masayuki, but she is not an ally of our empire itself. If Emperor Masayuki wished it, she wouldn't hesitate to destroy our entire country."

"Yes, exactly. And I've even heard her state that if a nation ever burdened Emperor Masayuki, she would immediately burn it to ash. We cannot afford to anger her, no matter what!"

"...You expect me to believe that?"

"No, no, I can't blame you for not believing it. So, please, let's begin by hearing your opinion on this subject."

"Heh-heh-heh... You mean whether I side with the Empire, or oppose it?"

"Not that."

"What?"

Minitz promptly answered Mithra's arrogant question. He then proceeded to tell Mithra his true feelings.

"Listen to me. I don't want this to get out, but I'd like you to understand how I actually feel about everything, Your Grace. That is why I want to tell you the truth."

"Quit beating around the bush. If you want my opinion, just ask for it."

"In that case, let me ask a question first. Duke Mithra, do you want to rule over the Empire? Or would you like to join hands and help us out?"

"...What?"

Not even Mithra had expected this. He had been expecting a tough negotiation, but this sounded like they were perfectly okay with handing the Empire over to him. And this interpretation was absolutely correct.

Minitz had become prime minister through an improbable course of events; it was a role he'd basically had no choice but to accept. If Mithra wanted the job instead, Minitz would gladly give it to him. Stabilizing the Empire was priority number one, and that had largely been achieved. Minitz pictured a lot of room for change within the Empire's political structure.

Caligilio had seen through Minitz's thoughts, too.

Yes, I know we'd like his cooperation as we try to unite the nobles on our side. Letting Sir Mithra take this job wouldn't break our promises at all. But isn't that a little unfair, Minitz?!

This, he thought as he gritted his teeth, was exactly why Minitz's brother had a grudge against him.

"What, are you saying you'll give the prime ministership to me?"

"I appreciate how quickly you picked up on that. Now, will you listen to our viewpoint for a moment?"

“...Very well.”

Mithra reluctantly nodded, perhaps sensing he was out of the loop on some matters.

So Minitz began to speak. As he put it, Masayuki himself did not want the position of emperor—but if he abandoned the Empire right now, the resulting political instability could lead to serious disruption. They were also aware of a new, unknown enemy stalking them, and if they ignored it, it would create serious trouble for everyone in time. In light of that, Tempest and the Dwarven Kingdom had also welcomed Masayuki as emperor.

Velgrynd would listen only to the will of Masayuki. To put it another way, if he didn’t become emperor, she wouldn’t hesitate to abandon the entire empire—and even if she didn’t strike against it, losing their guardian dragon posed a huge problem. Along those lines, it was far better for all the citizens if Masayuki accepted his invitation to the throne.

“As I stated,” Minitz concluded, “His Majesty himself sees the throne as a heavy burden to bear. If someone were to rule in his place, I think it would be welcomed without major complaint.”

This made sense to Mithra. He understood that Velgrynd’s affinity was a vital question for the Empire. Masayuki was a must in order to keep her on their side; if they didn’t have him on the throne, she might very well leave the Empire entirely. This also meant, however, that as long as he remained emperor, it didn’t really matter if someone else actually ran politics. In fact, perhaps it’d be better for the Empire’s growth if they didn’t tether him to his post too much.

“The demon lord Rimuru,” Testarossa added with a sweet smile, “wishes to build a fruitful relationship with Sir Masayuki as well. If Sir Masayuki is to become emperor, then Sir Rimuru will provide the maximum amount of assistance that he can. So I hope it’s clear to you that this is not at all an attempted usurpation of the throne.”

Mithra had been informed of that aspect in advance. It was known across the Empire that despite having trounced them in combat, Rimuru wasn’t demanding much in the way of reparations. He wanted friendly ties going forward, and if that were the case, Mithra didn’t see any reason to doubt

Testarossa.

So what was the right move to make? He had been given two choices, but he wasn't limited strictly to those. If there were other paths available, he had the freedom to take one. However—as Mithra half-resigned himself to his fate—it was unlikely that any other path would bring him victory.



Would Mithra lead imperial politics as prime minister, or would he take Minitz's side and make the nobles follow him? To be honest, Mithra wasn't terribly interested in the decision. What he *really* wanted was to hole himself up in his mansion and devote himself to his passion of painting. Between his noble bloodline and his power as duke, Mithra was seen as a born ruler—but that was all a great misunderstanding.

His mother had been beautiful enough to earn the love of Ludora's father, after all. She was a strong-willed woman, her aura resembling Velgrynd's in a way, but that was only on the surface. Despite that dominating atmosphere, she was actually a very placid woman—if she hadn't been, she would have taken position as queen the moment she'd given birth to Ludora. She was allowed to enjoy every luxury possible as Ludora's mother, for the short period until he attained full independence, but she wanted her freedom over any of that.

It was a highly unusual choice to make, but not long after she earned that freedom, she fell in love with Duke Barsa Hilmenard. Barsa was a handsome young man, leading to rumors among the general public that it was Mithra's mother who wooed him first—the former queen having her way with whatever man she wanted. But it was absolutely the other way around, and it was pure love that brought them together and led to Mithra's birth. They were still passionately in love with each other, although that didn't matter here.

I have no great desire to be a politician, either. Dealing with all these office seekers and hangers-on makes me sick. But...

Much to Mithra's chagrin, he was a very popular, charismatic figure. He was smart, too, to the point that none of his more underhanded schemes had ever been exposed. This had given him a great number of devotees, and many of his

affairs would go running off in their own directions before he could do anything about them.

The worst example of this was when a certain earl had lost his social standing thanks to Mithra.

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Mithra had accidentally bumped shoulders with him one day. The earl wasn't watching where he was going, but he still refused to apologize about it. At the time, Mithra was still in his early twenties, so the earl no doubt saw him as unworthy of attention. He might've acted differently if he'd known Mithra was the son of a duke, but that's just speculation at this point.

"You!" he bellowed. "I'm an earl, you know! Where are your manners?!"

Mithra still recalled how he'd just stared at the earl in response. *If he's this angry over something so small, he thought, perhaps he has a calcium deficiency?* (He had just learned the term from an otherworlder friend of his.)

"What a bother," he muttered to himself. He wasn't a duke yet by this point, which meant the earl outclassed him. At the same time, he'd been taught that he should never bow his head to someone below his family's title, so he legitimately wasn't sure what to do. That's why he said those words—and things really *did* become a bother.

"You're bothering Sir Mithra!"

"What is a mere earl doing, haranguing Sir Mithra like this? What a sorry sight *this* is..."

Mithra's friends were already causing a commotion.

Just then, a group of knights clad in black appeared from some unknown hiding spot. Several of them accosted the earl.

"Ah, ahhh..."

The panicked earl only then recalled who Mithra actually was. But that

realization had come too late for him.

The captain of the knight team went up to Mithra, saluting him.

"Allow us to decide what to do with him."

"...All right, sure."

Mithra couldn't say anything else.

The newspapers the next day were filled with evidence of assorted injustices and fraudulent behavior on the earl's part. Whether all the crimes were true or fabricated, Mithra didn't know. The only clear truth was that the earl was soon arrested and stripped of his title.

It went without saying that the encounter made people dread Mithra more than ever. A mere brush of the shoulder had brought an earl to his doom. It taught Mithra just how much power he had, a lesson he'd find hard to forget.

Mithra would later have similar things happen on several occasions. He'd never meant any of it, but before he realized it, he had become one of the most formidable, awe-inspiring nobles on the scene.

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From those experiences, Mithra knew the power of his words. It turned him into a quiet man.

On this occasion as well, his dukedom's talented intelligence officers informed him that Ludora had, indeed, disappeared. Whether he was dead or just fleeing the throne didn't matter. What did matter was whether Velgrynd, the Empire's guardian dragon, would preside over Masayuki the Hero as the new emperor.

As the report he was given stated:

"The identity of the mysterious Marshal is believed to be none other than Velgrynd the Cardinal. She is attached to Sir Masayuki, and that likely means he has inherited the soul of the true Emperor Ludora."

Anyone with even the slightest reasoning ability would have understood the

hopelessness of trying to defy this. Unlike most royal families, bloodline wasn't a major factor when it came to imperial succession. The public might attach a lot of importance to it, but to the true power brokers in this empire, it was known that Ludora's soul was the most vital factor. Mithra, as a duke, was naturally aware of all this.

...If we play this wrong, it'd mean more than the end of my noble line. If my followers decide to riot over it, it'd be their lives at stake. I need to brace myself and take action.

Mithra was an intelligent noble—and this was the obvious choice for him.

Ideally, he'd like to keep a healthy distance away from politics while retaining the influence he held over the nobility. If he could keep hold of his noble title, money would never be a problem for him. His stipend would be enough to let him paint in peace without forcing himself into government work. It certainly wasn't impossible.

So that was Mithra's ultimate dream. Plan B for him was to retire back to his homeland. Focusing on the administration of just his countryside dukedom, sticking strictly to serving as lord of his dominion—that'd work, too. It'd keep his days somewhat occupied, but there'd still be time to paint. It'd keep the number of annoying people in his life to a minimum, too. He saw it as a good compromise.

The absolute worst case was anything that sparked Velgrynd's rage. That alone had to be avoided at all costs, and that's why he was fighting so hard over this right now.

So Mithra had decided to propose a plan of action. He'd use his notoriety to exile himself from the capital. He'd be his usual, arrogant self, enough that people would think he was just too much trouble to bother with. If enough of them turned against him, they could then contrive some sort of story, at which point he'd pretend to fly into such a rage that he'd give up his seat. Negotiations would be cut off, but then Mithra would pretend to realize the position he'd put himself in, and flee the capital to save face.

That was the kind of story he'd wanted to concoct, but instead, Minitz was giving him these two crazy options.

"Do you want to rule over the Empire? Or would you like to join hands and help us out?"

The answer was no to both questions. But saying that, he thought, was a bad idea.

So Minitz continued talking. Testarossa, the diplomat from Tempest, joined in as well, trying to justify their position. But Mithra didn't need all that explanation. He knew all of it in advance. It was vital in any negotiation, after all, to come in with a firm grasp of all the facts.

Well, what now? I don't want to choose either of those options. Get involved with national politics in the current state of affairs, and I'll just work myself to death, I'm sure of it. If I put in any more hours than I already do, I won't just lose my painting time. I'll have no time to play with my beloved daughter, even!

Mithra did, indeed, have a three-year-old daughter, as cute as could be. He also had a newborn son...but what troubled him was his wife's behavior. The moment his son was born, she'd stopped so much as looking Mithra in the eye.

She was the daughter of a marquis, and a woman Mithra had fallen in love with at first sight. He'd asked her to become his wife, and they were living together the very next day. But now she was distant, always brooding over something, and it had unnerved him as of late. Their marriage had begun with some sense of cold formality at first, but given the circumstances, that was to be expected. She had given him the son he had long waited for, and he wanted to take his time and help the love between them grow, but...

Yes... I have to steadfastly refuse this, or I won't even have enough time to talk to my wife any longer. I don't care that much what happens to the Empire, but I have to keep my own family from falling apart!

Mithra steeled his resolve once more. He wanted today to end with an amicable agreement, but now he'd have to inject at least a little strife into it.

It was time for his answer.



*"This is pointless. You're *not* usurping the throne? Save that nonsense for someone with the time for it, please. And—Lady Testarossa, was it? What right*

do you have to comment on our empire's internal affairs? I know the Empire lost to you in the war. But we've already established peace with you, in exchange for our territorial airspace and a treaty between our two nations. We now have diplomatic relations with each other, but do you think you have the right to interfere with our very sovereignty?"

Going this far all at once was a risk, but Mithra still committed to it. The person he was rebuking was the chief diplomat of Tempest, a nation with a terrifying amount of soft and hard power. She was the demon lord's fully ordained representative in foreign lands, and Mithra couldn't deny the possibility of another war if he angered her. He was fully aware that Testarossa was actually the demon Blanc—and that he was being astonishingly rude with a great demon feared by the entire Empire.

"Hmph! I won't tell you to leave this room, however. I'm sure that your leader has an interest in the future direction of his friends, after all."

"Well, I'm deeply obliged to you, then."

Mithra had been hoping to anger her, but she just shrugged it off. It threw him.

I thought she'd reject me out of hand if I went this far... What's she after?

He didn't want her flying into a rage on him, but her staying *this* calm was just as unexpected. Getting her *too* angry would be forfeiting his life. Saying what he had just now made him feel like a few years had been shaved off his life span, so going any further required due consideration.

What now? Should I take another step?

It was one boundlessly scary step to take. So he decided to aim his saber elsewhere.

"I am the half-brother of the great emperor Ludora, you realize. We don't even know if he's alive or dead yet, but here you are, deciding by yourselves to name this total stranger Masayuki to the throne. And *now* you're shameless enough to ask for my assistance? I completely fail to comprehend what is going on in your mind!"

Mithra kept talking, raising his voice a little. Depending on how she reacted,

he'd need to change his tune at a moment's notice. The real battle was now in progress.

But unfortunately, his bet backfired on him in the worst possible way.

"Oh dear, are you voicing displeasure about my decision? Because if you think you can avoid any consequences because you're related to Ludora, I'll need to teach you how wishful that thinking is."

G-gehhhh! Lady Velgrynd?!

A silent scream emanated from Mithra's mind. He was so shocked, he thought his soul was going to leap out from his throat. This was beyond merely losing a debate—he was completely cornered. He knew it was all over now, and the thought made him feel oddly relieved. That, perhaps, was why he felt driven to simply say what was on his mind from now on.

"Heh. You are Lady Velgrynd, our former Marshal and the guardian dragon of the Empire, are you not? I wasn't aware that you would be part of this conference. It's an honor to meet you."

First, he'd demonstrate that he wasn't particularly impressed by her. Deep down, he wanted to run from the room immediately, but it had already dawned on him that this was impossible.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I don't feel I'm worthy of the throne or anything, but considering all the people who call the Empire home, I think installing me as emperor would be the best option we have..."

Now Masayuki was there, too, coming through the door right after Velgrynd. This hadn't factored into Mithra's plans at all. The way things were going, he was forced to assume that his life was forfeit by now. But something still bothered him.

"Hoh? You seem rather unconfident, Your Majesty. Do you think you could take the place of my half-brother like that?"

He was trying to talk down to Masayuki as he spoke, but he half meant what he said, too. If he was going to be executed either way, he thought, he might as well try to bluff a little more.

"Ha-ha-ha! I was just a normal student until a little bit ago, you know? It's not a matter of being confident or not. I never even imagined being an emperor before."

"Heh. Pathetic. You think you can lead a mighty empire that way?"

Mithra's lips were moving on cruise control, but...

Huh? What kind of nonsense is he talking? I didn't realize from the way Minitz and Caligulio reacted that this isn't what my investigating staff told me...

Mithra's spies had told him the new emperor was an ambitious, power-hungry young man. He had overwhelming support from the citizenry, and even the demon lord Rimuru, who couldn't have cared less about the Empire, was reportedly an avowed fan of his. The nervously chuckling young man in front of him didn't seem to match that description at all.

What's going on here?

Mithra unconsciously turned toward Masayuki again.

"Well...um, to be frank, that's not really my thing, no."

"Huh?"

Mithra couldn't help but groan. He wasn't alone.

"Y-Your Majesty! I've asked you time and again to hold yourself with some more dignity!"

"Indeed. Recruiting Sir Mithra to our side would have a great effect on the future of our government. We need people we can share the workload with—for our sakes as well."

Minitz and Caligulio were both entreating him.

If that's how he's acting around me, it's already too late. Asking me to join them after hearing this travesty of a conversation...

Mithra couldn't have felt more strongly against it if he tried. But he also thought that leaving this room alive would be better than a summary execution. He was no fool; he understood that he no longer had any freedom in these talks.

"You silly fools. Have you forgotten that you promised not to force Masayuki into anything?"

"N-no, Velgrynd, they're not forcing me into anything! It's all right!"

"Sir Masayuki!"

"Your Majesty!!"

Velgrynd sounded just a little miffed. Masayuki hurriedly tried to assuage her, much to the eternal gratitude of Minitz and Caligulio.

"Oh, and Masayuki? I've been meaning to ask you—would you mind referring to me by the nickname Gryn from now on?"

"Um, okay. So...uh, Gryn?"

"Hee-hee! How nice of you, Masayuki. You're so honest with me—not at all like Ludora. If you don't mind how Caligulio and Minitz act around you, then it's nothing I need to intervene in. How fortunate for the both of you."

"Yes, my lady! Thank you!"

"I will never forget this favor!"

Velgrynd seemed to be over it. That was a relief. Mithra, watching all this, marveled at how tough their jobs must be.

I see... They want to reel me into this for more reasons than merely stabilizing the government. What they really want is someone who'll deal with Lady Velgrynd and take the heat off themselves a little. Still, though, this Masayuki...

Mithra began to see the emperor as someone very much like him. And, again, he wasn't alone.

"Now, um...can I call you just Mithra?"

"I still have not accepted it, but you appear to be emperor, yes. You may therefore call me whatever you want."

"All right, then. What do you think of me, Mithra? Do I just look like a normal young man to you, maybe?"

"What are you talking about? You are the emperor. There's nothing normal about you—"

"No, like, I'm not talking about that. I just want you to take a deep breath and give me your honest opinion."

"Again, what do you mean?"

Mithra couldn't understand what Masayuki wanted to say. But the results of this exchange would set his fate in stone.

"You think I'm just an average kid, don't you?"

"Are you asking if I think you're improper for the throne? Then to be brutally frank with you, you are a far cry from my half-brother. You don't have the capacity to lead anyone, much less an entire empire."

Saying it would no doubt spell his doom. But Mithra was already in a state of sheer desperation. If he was already helpless in Velgrynd's hands, he at least wanted it to be painless. As furious as Velgrynd undoubtedly was, he assumed she would at least afford him that luxury. But the reaction was even greater than that—not from Velgrynd, but from Masayuki.

"Mithra! That's amazing! You're exactly the kind of person I needed!"

"What?" Mithra replied, unsure what Masayuki meant.

"I mean," a suddenly roused Masayuki said, "thanks to my ability or whatever, people just assume I'm this totally amazing person."

He excitedly described his unique skill Chosen One, and all the suffering it had caused him. It had later evolved into the ultimate skill Lord of Heroes, a truly astounding ability. Anyone could see that giving the highest seat in the government to a complete amateur was a bad idea, but for some reason, Masayuki was always an exception in people's minds.

"What...?"

"No, like, what I'm saying is that having someone like who you understands what I *really* am...like, it makes me so *happy*...!"

Tears began to fall from Mithra's eyes.

"Masayuki... No—Your Majesty!"

The young man's pain was not unfamiliar to him. He understood it well

himself. And that wasn't all. As he now realized, if he was capable of understanding Masayuki, perhaps the opposite was true as well.

"H-hey, no 'Majesty' stuff, please! I just thanked you for seeing who I really am!"

"Ah yes, exactly. Yes, I understand you very well. I've experienced much of the same pain myself."

"Oh?"

"Listen to me. There was one time when all I said was 'What a bother' and that was enough to get a man arrested. Honestly, there were times when I thought about never saying another word my whole life. That was impossible, of course, but it's really hard, not being able to say what's truly on your mind."

"I totally understand you! In my case, I try doing that, but it just doesn't come across right. It gets interpreted in all these funny ways to just boost my reputation even more. It's like, give me a break—I wake up one morning and now I'm emperor?"

"A scary thought, yes."

"Right? It really *is* scary. My old friend Jinrai was just the worst when I first met him. He understands me a lot better now, but he actually tried to pick a fight with Rimuru on my behalf, you know? I can't count the number of times I wanted him to quit saying my name all the time..."

"Ah yes, that's very familiar to me. That's why I didn't bring anyone with me here. I'm too afraid to. There's just no telling what might come out of their mouths."

It had happened on more than one occasion—an out-of-line remark from one of his attendants leading to a breakdown in negotiations. For *this* one, at least, he simply couldn't afford that risk.

"It's so common, isn't it? I thought I was the only one this whole time."

"Ha-ha-ha! We've both had it hard."

Now Masayuki and Mithra were chatting like they'd forgotten anyone else was in the room. They were all smiles now, and the buds of friendship were

already forming.

"...I suppose that carrying Ludora gave your mother some manner of immunity to it. I've lived for a very long time, but I've never seen anything like this."

Velgrynd was just as surprised. But, out of respect for their newfound friendship, she decided not to remark on it.

*

With Masayuki and Mithra now fast friends, all ill feelings were banished. Mithra was now promising his cooperation, but since he didn't want any direct involvement with politics, he would remain leader of the noble "old money" faction and provide Masayuki with behind-the-scenes support instead. He wanted to keep his valuable free time, and as they spoke to each other, it became clear that this was the best way to move forward.

"I will continue to manage the nobility dissatisfied with the current situation, but should I find someone with the right talents, I will endeavor to suggest that they offer you their assistance."

"Thanks. We're really short on good people."

"That would be better for the military as well. Needless rebellion could cause us to lose good personnel. If you're helping us out, Sir Mithra, we can take our time to win over any potential rebellious elements."

So things worked out fairly well in the end.

With that, the conference was over.

"One moment," Testarossa said as Mithra stood up. "May I have a word with you, Sir Mithra?"

His heart skipped a beat. He recalled the venom he'd spat in Testarossa's direction as well. He thought that had faded into the background, given the amicable terms they'd come to, but perhaps he was just kidding himself.

"Yes?" he said, trying to keep his voice calm as he sat back down.

"Our conversation just now left me curious, so I did a little investigating. You have a secret skill, don't you?"

"Huh? No, I have nothing like that—"

Mithra tried to deny it once he realized the topic wasn't what he thought it would be. Testarossa cut him off.

"Oh, don't get me wrong. It's an unconscious type—ah yes, I see it's the unique skill Wicked Scoundrel. It's the type you can inherit and pass across generations, too. From your father, probably? Did people fear him?"

"..."

They were terrified by him. Mithra had been told that this was the destiny of every eldest son in the Hilmenard family.

"Well, if you become aware of it, I think you'll be able to use it to your advantage in future negotiations."

Telling him this was the sort of meddling Testarossa wasn't generally known for. She almost never did something like that, but she could be kind to the humans she'd taken a liking to.

"I had that sort of power...?"

"You sure do. I won't tell you how to use it, but—here, let me give you another big gift."

"Mmm?"

"Your wife's just as scared of you, too."

"What? That's silly. She's a very graceful woman. We've never had an argument. I haven't even raised my voice once around her."

Mithra laughed off the idea. Testarossa gave him a chuckle.

"Oh, it's very true. It's a piece of information I kept in my pocket, just in case it gave me an advantage in this negotiation. Your mother was probably immune to it, so it wasn't any problem for her, but the same can't be said for your wife."

"That's impossible..."

"But she's still family to you," Caligulio told a disturbed Mithra. "You understand that, don't you, Sir Mithra?"

"Right, yes," Minitz added. "You just had a second child, didn't you? I'm sure

your wife loves you very much.”

Velgrynd, however, was there to immediately shoot them down. As cruel as it was, it was still the truth.

“Oh, you silly people. That second child is the son that you’ve been eagerly waiting for, isn’t he? From your wife’s perspective, she’s given birth to a lawful heir, so now her job’s done. Have you even told her your true feelings?”

“How do you mean...?”

“Have you ever said you love her? Have you ever told her out loud ‘thanks for giving me this child’?”

Come to think of it, Mithra couldn’t recall doing anything like that. His face turned pale as he realized his foolishness.

“Putting your love into words like that,” Testarossa said, “is actually a very important way to ensure your love lasts. Why don’t you take this opportunity to express to her exactly how you feel?”

Mithra eagerly nodded at her. “I’ll be on my way, then!” he said before darting out of the room.

He made it home just as his wife was about to leave the house. He had just barely made it in time...and, understanding well the warning Velgrynd and Testarossa had given him, he heeded their advice. It saved him from having to experience a painful divorce.

Ever since then, Mithra was eternally thankful for the two of them. He vigorously supported the new emperor in whatever he did, becoming one of the Empire’s staunchest supporters.

With that, all three major noble factions were in the pocket of the new emperor Masayuki. They had anticipated that it would take several years to stabilize the new government, but they wound up pulling it off in just a few months.



The night after I befriended Sir Mithra:

“So Lady Testarossa was right all along, eh?”

"Pretty much. Some of that was luck, but having the demon lord Rimuru's support counted for a lot. So did Lady Velgrynd's presence."

I was enjoying a celebratory drink with Minitz at a restaurant in the Empire. Our concerns with the nobility were now largely taken care of, and the only problem that remained was the Aggressors. We had our spies deployed across the Empire to look into them, reporting back on whatever seemed amiss. I was sure they'd tell me if they found something, and we also had the reorganized Imperial Knights stationed in our provincial towns. We couldn't let our guards down yet, but we could at least breathe a little easier now.

As a result, I intended to drink to my heart's content tonight. We had a lot of fun, talking about the things we'd gone through and discussing our future hopes for the Empire. Looking back, I never thought I'd become this friendly with Minitz. He was a reliable worker, but I never meant for us to become close personal friends. Now he's an important war buddy of mine, a trustworthy friend helping me support Emperor Masayuki.

We were carrying on into the evening, getting just the right level of tipsy, when Minitz broached a new topic with me.

"By the way, how does it feel, having the kind of power that'd let you beat anybody?"

I thought about it for a moment.

"A little empty, actually. I feel like I have no goals left to reach for."

"Then you won't need this anymore, will you?"

Minitz presented me with an envelope. It was decently thick, presumably filled with documents.

"What's this?"

"Don't open it here," he softly stated before emptying his glass. He stood up, placing the glass on the table.

"Whoa, are you done for the night?"

"Yeah. That envelope contains a report on you. I did some digging a few years back, so I'd have something on you just in case. You can have it, though. I sure

don't need it now. There were a few points that bothered me, so I'm having a little extra investigation done right now. It was kind of a surprise to me, though, so maybe you're better off not knowing."

"Mm?"

"If you're not interested in your own past, go ahead and just burn it without reading it."

Minitz offered no more explanation than that. He just waved and headed out instead of answering any of my questions, never even turning back as he left.

I was alone now, and in no mood to drink any further. Minitz's words stuck with me. These papers definitely had something to do with me—some weakness of mine? I had no family, and I'm not going to deny that I've had shady dealings in the past, but I never participated in anything that'd earn me prison time. Minitz would know that, I assume...

The only guess I had was that it involved my former wife. My past, and all that...and come to think of it, I never did complete my revenge. By now, I could easily crush anyone I wanted, whether they were an earl or not. That "I could do it any time" sense of useless pride had caused me to give up on the notion entirely.

"Yeah, it might be a good idea to face up to my past already," I muttered as I left the restaurant. "It'll help me turn the page."

So I returned home to my office, and I opened up Minitz's envelope and read through the contents.

"No way..."

What I saw was shocking enough that I couldn't help but mumble that out loud.

Seeing the name "Earl Bulduff" made me realize that I'd even forgotten the name of my target for revenge. That was fine, but what was written beyond that was hard to believe. This Earl Bulduff was now the leader of a sect of countryside nobility—one small enough that I was safe ignoring it in general. The member list included the name of the barony my ex-wife came from, and the entire roster consisted of barons, viscounts, and other low-end nobles. I'd

have known about this sect if they were larger in scale, but considering they didn't even number ten people, they must have escaped my attention.

However, there was no overlooking this.

"...The nobles that joined this faction have likely had their family inheritance compromised?"

I hurriedly read on, wondering what this meant. All the families involved had been run by virtuous, upstanding men in the previous generation; they never dealt with criminals, and they ruled their lands properly and with respect. That's why they'd been cornered so easily.

It is believed Earl Bullduff forced an affiliated merchant to take on vast amounts of debt, allowing him to make this merchant do his bidding.

Thoughts began to race through my mind. If this was true, Earl Bullduff could never be forgiven. But even before that...

"Mamia!"

I couldn't help but shout her name. What if Mamia had actually loved me all along...? Once I had that thought, I could no longer sit still. I hurried for the door.

"S-Sir?! Are you going out this late at night?"

"Some business came up. Assemble my private guard at the airship dock. Get me an agent from the intelligence bureau, too."

"...! At once, sir."

The head butler of my household is a very capable man. One look at me, and he knew this was serious business. Saying nothing more, he quickly executed my orders for me.

*

I had a solid set of evidence gathered for me before sunrise. The report Minitz gave me was accurate; there'd be no talking his way out of this. But one person was pathetically crying at me, refusing to accept reality.

"It's over for you," I said.

"N-no! Who do you think I am? I'm Bullduff! Part of the Eight Wise Rulers, famed across the countryside! What right do you have to arrest me?!"

Even at this point, the foolish man refused to admit to his crimes. But Bullduff had good reason to try weaseling his way out of this. The nobility, after all, were given legal immunity in the Empire, which made it impossible to arrest them without a warrant released by the imperial palace. The knights of the Imperial Guardians, however, all had the right to write such a warrant, along with certain members of our information bureau.

And so:

"Earl Bullduff, your warrant has already been verified. We have testimony from the victims. Please understand that there is no talking your way out of this."

The agent I'd brought along with me had the right to arrest him, of course. Taking in someone as lofty as a noble earl was a major endeavor, but we had all our bases covered. I wanted to execute him myself, but that would have been going beyond my authority, so I held myself back. If I was the one killing him, I'd do it instantly and painlessly—and I had no interest in extending that mercy to this man.

"Q-quit being ridiculous! What right do you have to—?"

"Silence, Bullduff. Have you forgotten my face?"

I went right up to Bullduff, so he could see my eyepatch well.

"Wha...? Wait, are you Caligulio?!"

"Oh, you knew?"

"Of course I did! Your exploits are famed across the Empire. I heard you tasted defeat at the hands of those dirty monsters, but I'm sure you'll vindicate yourself before long!"

He seriously had the wrong idea here. If Lady Testarossa had heard that just now, his fate would have been even worse than it already was. I could tell him that...but better not. Get him too angry at me, and I might be dragged into doing something I didn't want to.

"I'm amazed that you aren't ashamed of yourself. You were laughing the whole time while I was kicked out of my baron family, weren't you?"

"...!! That...that's a misunderstanding."

I hadn't explained anything to him yet, but that statement was tantamount to an admission of guilt.

"This is stupid," I said, my expression remaining unchanged. "The Empire's supreme court will decide your fate. You'd better be ready for it. Their inquisitors aren't nearly as nice as me."

Bullduff turned white as a sheet. "Wait... Please, wait! Sir Caligulio! I'm sorry! I'll admit to it—"

"Take him away."

At my signal, the knights dragged Bullduff off. His failure to take this seriously was exasperating. The imperial supreme court's purpose wasn't to go over all the details behind his crimes with a fine-tooth comb. It existed as a tool for taking down political opponents and stripping them of their rights. Admissions of guilt didn't matter. Their inquisitors weren't looking for testimony from suspects; their job was to take suspects' dignity away and make them obedient.

"Have fun writhing in pain," I said softly as I saw him off in the distance, "and feeling the hate of all your victims...me included."

*

After sending the knights home via airship, I took my personal autobike and headed for a small, remote town. I drove for a while, and soon I began to see familiar sights. There, beyond the hill, the mansion was the same as it always was. I'd thought it huge back in the day, but it actually seemed pretty tiny to me now, less than half the size of my manor in the capital. Still, this place was important to me.

"This sure brings me back. It's barely changed at all."

I found myself unconsciously whispering these words. Maybe I was nervous. I was, after all, about to meet the woman who'd dumped me...or not. I knew now that that had been my misunderstanding. All I needed was courage.

It was a little past noon, and I recalled how my ex-wife would usually relax in the garden around this time. Trying to pump myself up as much as possible, I rang the doorbell.

"Yes? Who is it?"

The voice was familiar. It belonged to the assistant head butler of the manor, a man around ten years older than me.

"It's me, Caligulio. I never intended to come back, but I've got important business here. Could you call Mamia—er, Ms. Heath for me?"

I heard a slight gasp on the other side of the door. There was a beat, and then he replied "Very well" and led me to a reception room where I'd wait for Mamia.

Now all I had to do was open my heart to her before that man could return. By "that man," I'm talking about Baron Nezt Heath, the person who kicked me out and took over the Heath family.

He was out, called over to the house of his friend Viscount Zook, so he should have been currently traveling to the next town over. I knew this because I'd arranged it. I had sent the knights out last evening to arrest Bullduff's cronies, and as I had, I'd ordered them to keep their hands off Zook for the time being—on purpose, of course. We already knew that Zook was Nezt's superior, so once he learned about Bullduff's arrest, he was bound to reach out to Nezt.

Now, just as I'd hoped for, Nezt was on the move. A round trip between this town and the next one took a half day on the fastest horse. I had heard he'd left early in the morning, so he was unlikely to return until after dark. I needed to get everything settled before then.

"Sorry to make you wait, Sir Caligulio. I suppose I should say 'long time no see' to you?"

My first taste of Mamia's voice in ages made my pulse accelerate.

"There's no need for formal titles between us. Are you doing well?"

Mamia was notably thinner. She had makeup on, but she wasn't trying to hide the bits of gray starting to appear in her hair. I deduced that she didn't have the

money to beautify her appearance, which made a few facts apparent to me. This was a sudden visit, I knew, but a nobleman's wife would normally have paid more attention to her appearance than that. Of course, she's always my Mamia, no matter how she looks, but...

Minitz's report stated that Nezt liked to spend extravagantly, and what I saw indicated that he didn't value her much. It sorely angered me.

"Oh, I hardly deserve the right to drop yours, Sir Caligulio. I am merely glad that you seem to be fine and healthy."

Her attitude toward me was still hardened. She was nervous, unsure what I was doing here.

"So may I ask what brings you here today? Are you finally going to execute me?"

I saw that coming.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hee-hee! My husband left here this morning in a great rush. I'm sure he was up to no good—you must have some evidence against him, don't you? And I'm the woman who betrayed you. I can't think of any reason why you would have mercy on me."

Her eyes looked beyond fatigued, bereft of all hope. We had been separated for twenty years; I had gone through a lot in the meantime, and this was true for Mamia, too. I didn't know if I had the right to ask what she'd been through, but still, I had to clear up this misunderstanding between us.

"I do have a reason. You were my wife. And my love hasn't changed at all since then."

"Oh, don't be silly—"

"I'm not being silly," I avowed.

"What are you...?" Her eyes wavered a little. "I am a foolish woman. Lower than a dog. There's no value in you remembering me. I committed a major crime, one that can never be forgiven. I did something to you I can never take back..."

She choked up, tears streaming down her face. She put up a bold exterior, but her words made her recall exactly what she'd done.

That's right. Now I remember. Why had I hated Mamia so much, forgetting the one most important thing? My father-in-law, the baron, was a fine man, a lord that I respected. I took in his one and only daughter... How could I have been so stupid?

"You did nothing wrong. I was a fool. I failed to notice that man's little trick, and I hurt the one person I swore that I'd protect."

I spoke slowly, making sure I was understood. Mamia gave me a surprised look. Now, I was sure, she would listen to my story. I didn't want to waste the opportunity.

"It still pains me to this day that I chose not to believe in you. I understand what you and the Heath family are dealing with. Could you trust me one more time?"

"What is the meaning of all this?! Like I told you, I have no right to do that. And *you* have the right to do away with all of us."

"No, *I'm* the one without any rights. I abandoned you all. That was my crime. I swore I'd become a knight who protected you, and now look."

So give me another chance. I watched Mamia closely, hoping my request came through.

"Am—am I really allowed to believe in you again?"

The tears never stopped flowing from her eyes. I wiped them with a finger and firmly nodded.

"I'll never abandon you again."

Mamia flew into my arms, and I held her, swearing this from the bottom of my heart.

*

The servants of the Heath manor were assembled for questioning.

At the time, everyone who had worked in this house took collective responsibility for protecting Mamia. The one who drugged me was still there, so

all the required evidence was quickly gathered.

"I wish I had been told about this," I said to the head butler, who had officially taken the position after his father died.

"We were coerced," he replied, speaking on behalf of everyone else. "He took over the family's debts for them, but he said he'd turn them over to a criminal enterprise. If he did that, it would endanger the lives of both the lady and the master of the house...so when he told us that, we had no choice but to play along with the scheme he presented to us. I truly apologize for this. It's all thanks to how weak-minded we were."



So it was pretty much just as written in Minitz's report.

Back then, I didn't have the strength I have now. I think I was a talented knight, but my powers would maybe have ranked a B at best. It would have been impossible for me to have protected this house alone.

"Ah, it's all in the past. It's the future that matters."

"...Yes, you're right. I will accept all responsibility for this, so please, try to be lenient to the rest of the staff."

The head butler bowed low as the other servants voiced their apologies. That alone showed how ethical and upright a person my father-in-law had been.

"Please, don't get the wrong idea. It was my fault, too, and I'm not going to push the responsibility on anyone else. Just keep supporting us, all right?"

We were all at fault here, really. They felt a collective responsibility for the family, and I wanted to join them in that.

"Sir Caligulio!"

There were tears in the head butler's eyes, too. But, right after that, he raised an eyebrow, thinking about something.

"Hmm? I'd have understood if you wanted to support the lady of the house... but did you say 'us'?"

He noticed, huh?

"Um, Sir...Caligulio? What do you mean by that?"

Now Mamia was asking, too. Here was the moment of truth. The idea of being rejected here mortified me, but I drummed up my courage and began to speak.

"Well, I mean exactly what I said. We're all at fault here—meaning that the divorce itself was a mistake. We need to take it back. Don't you agree with me?"

I spoke as calmly as I could, despite my emotions. Honestly, pushing this line of logic was a stretch. My and Mamia's divorce had been filed with the relevant imperial judicial office, as was her and Nezt's marriage certificate. That was all a done deal, and normally it'd have been impossible to overturn...but I was sure

Minitz would figure out a way for me.

"...You mean we'd go back to being a married couple?"

"Exactly. Not a fan?"

I felt like my heartbeat was drowning out my voice.

"Are you sure it's all right? Because what I did—"

"That's what I want. And I'd like you to accept the offer."

"But I... The drugging..."

She wanted to say she'd drugged me, I'm sure. But that had all been taken care of. His Majesty Rimuru had fully restored my body, and he had informed me that all my reproductive functions were intact. Any lingering effects of the poison, I think, were long gone.

"No need to worry about that. I'm pretty sure that's no longer a problem for me healthwise. So would you like to try life as a married couple again?"

It was a request I made with all my heart. I thought proposing marriage to someone once was good enough. I'd never expected to do it twice with the same woman. But if I couldn't make this work, I was sure life would continue to feel empty.

I waited for Mamia's response, more nervous than I had been before any battle. Her eyes began to shine, as a smile unraveled over her face. She was beautiful. The beauty she had lost over the past twenty years immediately came back.

"I'd be glad to."

My empty heart was filled with joy. And at the same time, the servants cheered for our reunion.

I had completed my goal. There was still the matter of dealing with that little man Nezt, but his position as the baron of Heath would be erased as well, so he'd meet his doom soon enough. He would go back to being a merchant, which meant he'd no longer be immune to arrest. His crimes still belonged to him, of course, so I doubt he'd be seeing the light of day again—and since those crimes had been committed on a noble family, his own relatives would likely be

implicated, too. I was sure his father was going down with him.

“Everything is going well here. You can go ahead and put him in custody.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll capture and take care of Viscount Zook ourselves, then?”

“Yes please.”

I let my staff handle the little details. That wrapped that up. I had patched things up with Mamia, and I now returned to being the baron of Heath.

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“I guess I should congratulate you on your marriage?”

“Sure. It’s not exactly remarrying, though.”

Minitz and I were drinking again at our preferred restaurant in the capital.

“Hee-hee! Well, either way, I hope things work out between her and you.”

“Thanks. And thanks for handling all that paperwork for me.”

“Yeah, you better be thankful. It was tough. If people brought up statutes of limitations and stuff, I wouldn’t have been able to turn anything around. I needed to be a bit forceful at times, which I’m sorry about.”

“I did hear you had some difficulty.”

“Yeah, kind of. But you don’t have to worry about it. Think of it as my wedding present.” Minitz smiled.

“I appreciate it,” I replied, stifling a laugh.

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He then peppered me with questions about our married life.

“Oh, stop praising your wife to high heaven!”

“What’s wrong with that? I’m just telling you, marriage is wonderful! You should stop living the rich bachelor lifestyle someday, y’know. You need to find a woman who’ll be your life partner!”

"Ah, shut up. Quit trying to mess around with my private life."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, you should have been there when I drummed up the courage to finally say it!"

"That's the fifth time you've said that."

"So what? If you want to hear about it that badly, I'll tell you as many times as you want."

"Damn, you're pretty drunk, man. I didn't expect you to get *this* hostile."

...I had a feeling that I was rambling on about her, not caring about his reaction. *But it didn't really matter*, I thought. No point dwelling on it.

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After some more chitchat, we got down to business.

"So those documents you gave me..."

"Did they help you out?"

"You said you wanted to have something on me, just in case. But that was a lie, wasn't it?"

"...Oh, you noticed?"

"Of course. We're talking about something that happened twenty years ago here—over ten at the time you did that investigation, even. So how did you get all that private information in such exacting detail? Not even the IIB could do *that* extensive a job!"

"Heh! I thought you were drunk, too. You're pretty sharp, pointing that out."

With Minitz having admitted to it, I was now sure about my convictions.

"Was it Lady Testarossa?"

"You got it. She gave them to me. Said they might be useful."

"She's one fearsome woman."

"You said it."

She struck me with nothing but terror. What kind of information network would you need to have gathered *that* much info on me?

I mean, we're talking Blanc, the demon that menaced the Empire for years upon years. The emperor's guard supposedly sealed her away after the Bloody Shore incident, but at this point, I'm sure that was faked, too. She let herself get sealed off—or maybe sealing her away was bound to fail anyway. That was what made Lady Testarossa so strong—that brain of hers. She was even a thorn in Lady Velgrynd's side, I heard, despite the huge difference in power. That told the whole story, really.

"The outlook of our military is, if you attempt to take on Lady Testarossa, you'll likely lose on the strategic front. It wouldn't even be a fight, in other words. You better keep that in mind as you work out how to deal with Tempest going forward."

"Oh, don't be stupid! I know that full well without *you* telling me. Even if we're not at war, I'm sure every negotiation with her going forward is going to be an ordeal. I have to praise the insight of Sir Rimuru for naming someone like her his chief diplomat."

I suppose I didn't need to give Minitz the warning. We were in agreement with each other, which was a relief.

But either way, I imagine we're going to keep our cooperative relationship with the monster nation active. For as long as Minitz and I are alive, at least. What happens after *that* is the key question. The administrators of the Jura-Tempest Federation have life spans that're basically infinite compared to ours. With our empire, meanwhile, people will be constantly leaving and joining our government. Lady Velgrynd is indifferent to politics; she might reluctantly offer assistance if asked, but I still worry about future generations.

With Mamia as my wife, I've restored my desire to cherish my family life. With that comes the concern that some unforeseen disaster may strike the Empire later on. We really need to work out a way to ensure we don't wind up at war with Tempest again. That, plus the right education to maintain peace, is something we owe all our future generations.

"We've got a tough journey ahead of us, huh?"

"Yeah. There's a mountain of things to do."

Minitz must have reached the same conclusion I had. I smiled at him as I tipped my glass.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
4

MUMBLINGS OF A BLUE DEMON

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MUMBLINGS OF A BLUE DEMON

Hello, everybody. My name is Raine. What? You don't know who I am? Don't give me that shit. You *better* learn my name, or else you're in for it. Go back to school, kid.

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Oh, pardon me. I think I lost it a little there. No, no, I'm usually quite modest and graceful, but sometimes I fly off the handle a bit. Just every now and then, you know.

But since some of you don't seem to know who I am, allow me to introduce myself. As I mentioned a moment ago, my name is Raine. I work as a servant—no, as a maid. I serve as a faithful maid to the demon lord Guy Crimson.

I've known Sir Guy for a long time. Looking back, I knew him even before the creation of the world. How long ago was that, you ask? How the hell should I know, huh? Do *you* remember the exact time of day *you* were born? You don't, do you? It's that sort of thing. I'll be ignoring stupid questions from now on, thank you.

Regardless, having been derived from the great spirit of darkness, I was invincible. Or I thought I was. I was a little full of myself, I won't deny that. Consequently, I committed a grave mistake. I joined hands with one of my sisters, a person I had an affinity for, and I attempted to stage a surprise attack on one of our other siblings, someone stronger than us. Looking back, I was such an idiot. He was incredibly strong. I thought fighting him two-on-one would make for an easy victory, but we lost big-time.

The person who beat us was the demon lord Guy Crimson, known at the time as Rouge. And while I'm at it, the sister who fought him with me was Vert, now known as Mizeri. We're very good friends. My work is Mizeri's to do, and her salary is mine to receive, after all. We're still coworkers today.

"Raine! Quit goofing off and get the cleaning done."

Tch. I just introduced her, and already she's tearing into me. Stupid loudmouth.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Nothing, nothing."

"No? I hope not."

Close one there. Mizeri's got a real sharp mind like that. She always notices whenever I take a break, and it's painfully difficult to pull the wool over her eyes. I'll get back to cleaning—just for a bit, anyway, so she won't get mad at me again.

Regardless—right, right, I was in the middle of my introductions.

So Mizeri and I lost to Sir Guy, but that unveiled a certain fact to us. If you can break a demon's "core," they'll be eradicated for good. However! If you're a talented Primal like all of us are, you can resurrect yourself no matter what happens to you!!

With True Dragons, this process resets their personality even though they keep their memories, but in our case, the personality remains the same, too. Lady Velzard, the Ice Dragon and companion to Sir Guy, "reset" her younger brother in this fashion in order to reeducate him, but that won't work with Primals like us.

Isn't that, like, totally amazing? I wish I could boast about it all day to you, trust me. But, sadly, there are some disadvantages to this. The resurrection process takes a lot of time, but that's just a little detail. The toughest part is that although you're immortal and all, you have to be eternally subordinate to whoever you lost to. In our case, that was Sir Guy.

This discovery triggered a sea change in the power balance between demons,

creating a new, heavily skewed sort of status quo. You could call this all our fault—or you could say it was thanks to us, to put a rosier spin on it. Mizeri prefers to see it from the former perspective, but I’m more a fan of the latter.

Did you know that? You aren’t prejudiced against me, are you? Stop looking at me like I’m some wicked child. Besides, you should be paying attention to me. I’m clueing you in on a little demon secret: specifically, how to kill demons.

In a way, that is. It’s impossible to fully destroy a Primal, but you *can* make them servile to you. It’s not exactly as forceful as slavery, so it’s not like you have to follow any order given to you or anything. If I wanted to defy Sir Guy, I could. Not that I would. He *can* force us to obey him a little, after all.

Next, I’ll talk about the demons directly descended from the Primals. Normally, except for that idiot Noir, Primals create a whole lot of progenies. They have to follow orders from their boss of the same color, so it’s like having a useful army of maids at your beck and call.

Using the term “create” might cause some confusion. I don’t want to go into all the little details, but here’s a basic rundown. A newborn Lesser Demon has no color associated with it, you see? It’s intelligent, but has no sense of self, and it’s really weak, too. This is mostly the type that humans can summon, what we call the “enslaved” type. When these demons gain sentience, they’re called the “independent” type. When they evolve into Greater Demons, their natures and personalities result in a set of unique characteristics, which make it clearer exactly which color family they belong to.

That, or a more powerful demon might scout them in order to create their own faction. That may be the more common approach to building a following, actually. Mizeri’s a hard worker, so she still manages her own faction today. She runs several organizations, the Sons of the Veldt being the most well-known one, and they even have clout in the human world.

Me? Well, I can’t be bothered with all that.

...Don’t roll your eyes at me, you. What? I’m the same as Noir? What utter bullshit! I *do* have a faction of my own, you know! Being compared to Noir pisses me off, so don’t make that same foolish mistake again, please. Ugh.

But back to the topic. Newborn demons don’t get involved with factions, but

once they evolve into Greater Demons, that's when they get divided up by color and join one. Some demons are born with a color already associated with them; that's often the case with reincarnated demons. Demons are immortal, so if they die, they just get reborn like that. Even these, however, can be destroyed if their core is shattered, I think. Demons are pretty tough, though, so maybe even losing their "soul" like that may still be survivable. That's especially true if you're closely aligned with the Primal colors. If you're lucky enough to defeat one, though, you also have to break their core, or your victory will have been pointless.

By the way, you don't have to be particularly fearful of a newborn, weak-willed demon. They might have battle knowledge, but they're just wimps with no experience, so even destroying their temporary bodies might be enough to kill them. They're nothing worth losing sleep over.

So, yeah, those are our secrets. And figuring all this out might just have made our loss against Sir Guy worth it. If anything, I think I did a pretty good job there.

*

It's with this self-sacrificial spirit that we continue to serve Sir Guy, but it's actually pretty fun for me. Sir Guy has taken a step back from the struggle for supremacy in the underworld in order to go live on the planet's surface for a while. He's a man of integrity, despite everything, so he took us along with him.

He even told us "*you know you're free to live whatever lives you want, right?*" but count me out of that. I want to stick with the *winning* team. And there's no way Sir Guy would ever lose, so I think I'm in the best position I could possibly find right now. It'd be kind of neat if Sir Guy *did* lose, but regardless.

Here was my answer to him:

"No; our duty is to be of use to you."

What do you think? I'm just the most perfect maid ever, wouldn't you agree? You won't find another maid as faithful as I am...or so I thought...

"Precisely. You are our king. We are your subjects. That is the eternal, unrelenting truth."

Damn it, Mizeri. Acting like *such* a good little girl, and *now* look at her! And

the worst part of it is, she probably means every word. It's always an adventure, trying to deal with this rival of mine.

Of course, I might see her as my eternal rival, someone I'm burning to get back at my whole life, but—you know—Mizeri seems to trust me well enough, so I stopped trying to teach her a lesson. You just can't beat her, I don't think. Maybe it's not exactly what either of us wanted, but either way, we're as inseparable as ever.

So after a bunch of wandering around, we settled down at our current base. It's in a frigid land, one far too cold to support life, but I'm a demon so it's no big deal.

Okay, just kidding.

I mean, for example, when I tried washing some clothes, it didn't work because they just froze solid. I punched a dress, frustrated, and it just shattered on me. (Yes, I was pretty angry.)

So, yes, there were some trip-ups along the way, but I'm doing fine here.

"You should be more regretful!"

"Raine, I really think you should be more considerate of me..."

Sir Guy gave me a warning, so I was more careful around him afterward.

Problems like these are exactly what my army of servants is for. Do your best for me, okay? You're here to make my life easier, after all! And ever since then, I haven't made a single mistake. I've grown a lot, you see.

Speaking of my work, it involves a lot more than just doing the laundry. Some people call me an "omnipotent maid," and that really *is* how talented the two of us are. Cooking, laundry, song and dance, musical performance, even art—we cover it all to handle Sir Guy's requests. I'd occasionally mess up the cooking and laundry, but we're all capable of learning from our mistakes, aren't we? The same is true of demons, so let's just forget about the past.

My personal talent, by the way, is painting. I just love abstract art. I had Mizeri model for me earlier, and she was so moved by the results that she started crying.

"No, I was furious."

"Then it was a great success!"

"You, I swear..."

Mizeri's acting all annoyed with me, but I don't care. I wouldn't describe her as "furious" so much as, you know, just bursting with emotion. That's something pretty unusual to see from a spiritual life-form like a demon. It made me almost scared of my own talents.

...Oh, and this goes without saying, but when I paint Sir Guy or Lady Velzard, I always stick to pure representational realism. I've got it down perfect, so they always praise me a lot.

"Oh, sure. You *can* paint if you actually try. That's what made me so angry at you..."

Sounds like Mizeri's saying something, but let's just tune it out like always.

By the way, let me tell you about one of my other hobbies.

Life in the frigid wastes can be pretty grueling; it's no place for anyone to live, really. There's an incessant blizzard outside, just a solid sheet of white. That's our constant background, but within our Barrier, it's always a lovely summer's day. We even modified the geography to construct a lake, complete with a white, sandy beach. Sometimes I go over there and just relax on one of our beach chairs, having my demon lackeys serve me. It's the best entertainment I know.

I couldn't tell you just how much energy I waste on my hobbies. Just thinking about it, I can't resist grinning like an idiot. Sir Guy loves it, too.

"The things she comes up with—yes, Raine's just the best."

"I have to admit it. You really are amazing, Raine."

Hee-hee. Even Mizeri praised me. Hopefully I can keep taking advantage of hobbies in my regular work like this.

*

Oh, right—there's one other important job I have, one I shouldn't forget. The demon lords occasionally hold a Walpurgis Council, and it's my duty to guide all

the participants to the event site.

Originally, as the name suggests, Walpurgis really *was* just a nice little dinner party with the three demon lords of the time—Sir Guy, Lady Milim, and Lady Ramiris. Lady Milim is the niece of Lady Velzard, and her power is beyond comprehension. There were times in the past where she'd lose it and just go on a rampage, and I can't even begin to describe how rough that was. We never die, so we could have joined that battle, but it could have led to the destruction of the entire planet—so in the end, it was me, Mizeri, and Lady Velzard stamping out all the aftereffects of the fight.

If you think I'll do *that* again, you got another thing coming. If Lady Ramiris hadn't lent a hand, we might have been down for the count before things finally wrapped up. Sir Guy's a big fan of hers, and so are we.

We respect Lady Milim, too, of course, so if these three demon lords were coming together for a little dinner, of course we were going to give our all to the menu for the occasion. But after a few incidents and events and so on, the Walpurgis Council started to take on a different significance. We simply had more demon lords running around, essentially. It was Sir Guy's job to ensure the human race didn't destroy itself, and he brought on a few more people to help with the workload.

The first one—the fourth demon lord overall—was Sir Daggrull.

He, as a matter of fact, had been the one who'd taken the most damage in the battle between Sir Guy and Lady Milim. He was helping us out as well, you see, ensuring the battle didn't wreck the whole world. He certainly hadn't benefited much from it, though, given how most of the land he ruled over was reduced to a barren wasteland...but that's none of my business, so I'm not going to dwell on it.

There's magic available to us, of course, so he still found a way to make the land livable, but he couldn't stop the rapid desertification too well. Things have calmed down by now, but he had a real headache or two at the time. I wished him good luck, of course...from our safe little paradise all the way up here, but still.

The next demon lord after that was Lady Luminus, the Queen of Nightmares.

She was the only daughter of the lord of the vampires, and that made her incredibly strong...but let's talk a little more about her father first.

That person, you see, was a sort of demigod—the first one ever created by Sir Veldanava—and he was going to serve as a god of humanity before things went awry.

He had been seeking intelligent life way back in the day, mainly because he wanted a friend to talk to. There were angels and demons by that point, so that desire was fulfilled, but next he wanted to see a bit more diversity. So he tried giving a little help to the species building civilizations on the planet. That was going to be the job of the demigod he created, although it sure didn't work out that way. He was only a few steps removed from immortal, after all, and he didn't really have anything to be a god *of* at the time—that was the problem. I mean, the demigod technically didn't even have a gender, much like us demons.

Thanks to that, he had to wait tens of thousands of years for some surface species to prosper well enough. I don't know all the details, but that's how I understand it.

But the demigod didn't give up. Sir Veldanava expected a lot from him, so he kept carrying out these forbidden experiments. What a bum! He loved beavering away at all that scientific stuff instead of creating any descendants. It's not up to me to decide whether that was a good thing or not, but I can tell you this much: He was an idiot and a complete nuisance to all of us! I couldn't even tell you how many times those "experiments" brought humanity to the brink of total collapse.

Despite that, however, all that futzing around on his part *did* create the race known as High Humans. So while he didn't create an eternal, immortal race of demigods, he *did* contribute a lot to the development of humanity.

...You don't believe that, do you? Well, you'd be right not to. I sure don't. It's not like I was there to witness it or anything.

From what I've been told, the demigod analyzed his own body to create two different species. One was the High Humans, and the other was the vampires, you see. It wasn't exactly the kind of birthing people were expecting from him, but it wound up paying off, so I guess all's well that ends well?

Anyway, by the time Sir Guy was summoned to the surface, there were humans spreading all over the place. The High Humans, I mean. They had built this gigantic country, bigger than anything you see right now.

But here's the thing: Both of these species had their pluses and minuses. The High Humans had inherited a lot of powerful magic force, but their mental makeup was an issue. They were silly enough to summon Sir Guy, after all; they must have assumed they were at the very peak of intelligent life. In another world there's a saying that goes something like *pride goes before the fall*, and that's exactly how I would describe it. The whole thing fell apart in the blink of an eye.

The vampires, meanwhile, had some big problems of their own. Although maybe that actually worked in their favor? *They're* still around, after all.

They all had powerhouse bodies and massive magical force, coupled with near-immortality and a mature, more developed mentality. Which is all great, but their inability to do anything while the sun was out was a real liability. They could never *truly* rule over the world like that.

So that dumbass demigod continued with his experimentation. I was around by this point, so I pretty much remember the stuff he was up to. The elementals had already split off from the great spirits, so the four major elements had already spread across the world. These elementals began to take in magicules, and in time, they manifested physical bodies as well. And that demigod was helping them along the whole time. The earth element created the high dwarves, the water element created the sirens, the fire element created the flame imps, and the wind element created the high elves.

This much was allowable in itself, but then that demigod began to go way out of line. That moron actually began experimenting with crossbreeding them, creating all sorts of new species. For a graceful lady like me, the mere thought is simply disgusting.

This led to all sorts of new races, such as elves, dwarves, ogres, beastmen, and so forth—but those are only the *successful* examples. A lot of failures were banished into the dark corners of history, and sometimes they'd even devolve into inferior monster versions of the original—the goblins, for example.

Sir Guy was highly troubled by all this. He felt this needed to be addressed sooner or later—*buuut*, as long as Sir Veldanava wasn’t deigning to take action, he couldn’t punish the demigod on his own initiative. The way he saw it, the world had become a lot more needlessly complex than it had to be—but, at the same time, a lot more interesting as well. But that’s *Sir Guy’s* business, you know? Personally, it was no skin off my nose at all, so I was just fine with it.

“You just like watching me stew in my own juices, don’t you?”

“Oh, no, not at all! You misunderstand me, Sir Guy. I am your ever-faithful maid.”

I gave him a beautiful curtsy. Being able to perfectly hide my intentions like this was the result of regular, constant effort.

So anyway, despite overcoming this and that danger, the demigod was still giving us a lot of trouble. But—get this—it was ultimately his own experiments that did him in.

“Ahh, my daughter! You are my greatest creation yet—”

“Your day of judgment is here. Disintegration!”

He had it coming, really. His “daughter”—another demigod, created from his own body—immediately rendered him into a pile of ash, amazingly enough. You could say he took just one step too far that time. It was a great relief to me, but don’t tell anyone about that.

Those were the top secret events behind the creation of Lady Luminus, the fifth demon lord, and you *better* not breathe a word about it to anybody else, all right?

So as the demon lord numbers grew, we eventually had a sixth one join the flock. That was Sir Deeno.

By the way, is it all right if I speak my mind freely for a few moments? ...Oh, I already am? Well, no need to hold back, then. Let’s just say it. I *hate* having to call him “Sir” Deeno. I mean, he’s just a pile of garbage. He never lifts a finger to do a single moment of work. He’s the walking definition of depravity.

I mean, it’d be one thing if all he did was not work, but it’s even worse than

that. He pushes work on *me* instead! I can't have this. He's *not* getting away with it any longer. If he's gonna do that, he should bother Mizeri instead. Then I could forgive it.

But when I made that suggestion to him, what do you think he said?

"*No, but when I ask Mizeri, she gets all angry at me, y'know?*"

That! Are you *kidding* me?! I get just as angry! And if he puts it *that* way, it means he sees Mizeri as a lot scarier than me, doesn't it? I mean, I get yelled at a lot, too, and it's not that I *don't* resent having to deal with Mizeri sometimes, but...

What? He and I are a lot alike? What are you, stupid? Are you trying to disrespect the Primal Demons? Some things, you know, are much better off left unsaid. If you don't understand that, don't blame me if someone tears you limb from limb. That's your friend Raine giving you a friendly word of advice.

*

Anyway, there were now six demon lords, and that made our Walpurgis Councils a lot more like business meetings. It used to be just a fun meal between friends, but now it was more like *work*, I guess you could say? It's all such a pain, so count me *way* out.

"Raine!"

Just kidding. I'm their guide to the meeting, and I'll do my job.

Everybody seems so busy, though—well, everybody except one person, but... Oh? It just occurred to me. We're all working on this like a full-time job, but it doesn't feel like our main job of managing humanity is getting any easier, does it?

Take Sir Guy, for example. He's beyond busy, with Mizeri helping him out all the time outside Walpurgis meetings. I really need to give them all the support they need. When it comes to cooking and laundry, just leave it to me.

Next, Lady Milim. She's surprisingly dedicated to her job. If a little squabble arises between two countries, she steps in and punishes both of them; if a powerful magic beast attacks an area, she'll go around helping people out. Sometimes her behavior isn't very demon lord-like, but it's all certainly in

character for her.

Lady Ramiris, meanwhile, is practically a shut-in by now. She never even ventures outside the labyrinth she created for herself. But that's fine. I owe Lady Ramiris a great deal, so she can do anything she wants, as far as I care. And I guess the same is true for Sir Daggrull, too, huh? All the cleanup work after that bout of mass destruction sure doesn't *look* easy to me. I'm sure he's got no time to devote to other matters, and everything he does to reduce the spread of the desert on his lands is a huge boon to us.

The one who really impresses me is Lady Luminus. She's so talented, not at all like that lout of a demigod. While I wasn't paying attention, she brought the entire vampire race under her rule—and she's even protecting the humans as well, the species that resulted when the High Humans lost their powers. Vampires used to see humans as nothing but a food source, but now they're following Lady Luminus's orders and taking care of them. I have to say, I'm amazed she ever got them to do it! What a job she did. I mean it.

On the other end of the spectrum, meanwhile, is *that* lout.

"Sir Deeno, why don't you actually try to work a little for a change?"

"Oh, like *you* have any right to order me around!"

It makes no sense. Could there *be* any worse of an insult than this? I really don't think so. I suppose Deeno and I were just fated to be at each other's throats all the time.

So given how things are, I wasn't sure that even six demon lords were enough for the workload. Thus, we began to send out feelers for some new personnel—but then Lady Luminus chose that moment to retire.

I'm sure it's because the new person we found was too much of a dolt for her to abide by. He constantly treated Lady Luminus and Lady Ramiris like second-class citizens, occasionally flying into a rage to show off his powers to us, and I'm sure it stretched her patience to the limit. Lady Luminus looks like a beautiful young woman, after all, and it's easy for a lowlife like the new guy to mistake her beauty for weakness. The easiest way to deal with this, she'd perhaps reasoned, was to install a demon lord that clearly looked more threatening than her at first sight. So Lady Luminus stepped back, and Roy came

up in her place.

"I will continue supporting all of you from behind the scenes. Roy will serve as demon lord to the public in my stead. Are there any objections to this?"

If Deeno had said this, he'd have been derided as trying to goof off yet again. But Lady Luminus was a much more trusted contributor than that. The way things were going, everyone accepted the proposal at once.

So began the start of a truly new era, a time when powerful magic-born began popping up all over the place and becoming demon lords. At the very least, they needed to be demon lord seeds, and those who satisfied that requirement—Kazalim front and center among them—and had the ambition for the job began to join our ranks, one after the other.

This marked another turning point for our Walpurgis Councils. By this, I mean the nuances that still define it today—they're held if three members agree to it, and they're used for working out treaties and agreements between demon lords. It's also the place where members decide whether to accept a new demon lord or not.

If you ask me, I think the councils are really going in the wrong direction—but Sir Guy's getting what he wants from them, so I have no complaints. If he's okay with it, then so am I—and that's how a new system began to be established.

*

So I took care of matters in and around Sir Guy's life, occasionally serving as a guide for Walpurgis sessions. Demon lords would occasionally get added to or fall off the roster, and before I knew it, they came to be collectively called the Ten Great Demon Lords.

That was around when that slime showed up—the demon lord Rimuru. The first time I saw him was at the Walpurgis convened by the demon lord Clayman.

Ah, I *do* miss Clayman.

I suppose I should praise his courage for having nominated himself as a demon lord despite being weaker than me. He was very good at the boring bureaucratic work of running a demon lord's domain, so he was actually quite helpful despite everything else about him. A real useful man, you could say—

one who'd always accept an annoying job if you complimented him enough.

Who knows where it began to fall apart, though...?

It was really a shame, the way he met his end, but I can't really say anything about it except that he chose to take on the wrong adversary. Mizeri was the one who picked up Sir Rimuru, but on her way back she told me, "*I'm not too sure Clayman has much longer to live.*" She wound up being right, too.

I was appointed to serve as emcee for the meeting, but the moment the topic veered toward Sir Rimuru, things sort of began to happen all by themselves. It was something of a thrill to watch unfold, but some aspects of it bothered me, too. Not about Sir Rimuru so much as with the guy's attendant.

"That wasn't part of Noir's family, was it?"

"I think it was. I could sense his presence when I went to pick up Sir Rimuru, so there's not much room for doubt."

"Oh, no way! He's selfish to the point of insanity. Why would he ever bow down and serve someone else?"

"Well, who can say? I have no idea what he might be thinking, and I don't really want to dwell on it, either."

Good point. I think Mizeri had it on the money there. Noir, after all, was as fickle as he was selfish—he was just like me and Mizeri in that sense, but I'd rather not get involved with another person like that. I mean, he fought Sir Guy to a draw! A draw, all by himself, against someone Mizeri and I had ganged up on and lost spectacularly to. I've never fought him personally, but that fact alone gave me an aversion to him.

Or maybe that's me trying to sugarcoat it. I don't have an aversion to him; deep down, I know I can't beat him. I mean, I don't think either Sir Guy or Noir were seriously duking it out with each other. It had just been a fun little bit of jostling around from their perspectives, but I couldn't keep up with the blows they were exchanging.

I've got my pride as a Primal to consider, you know, so there's no way I'm ever going to admit it. It's just that, deep down, I really don't want to get in a disagreement with Noir anytime soon.

This is awful. I'm going to be fighting Noir. Why is this happening to me...? I know I've been a good girl. It's just strange. Did someone find out I've been stealing snacks from Mizeri? No—I blamed that on one of my Arch Demon underlings, so I'd imagine the heat is off me for that.

I'm still wondering why, but maybe I should take a new perspective on this. I want this to seem like more of a great opportunity for me. I hate him, after all. He doesn't lead his own faction; he just does whatever he wants all by himself, and he loves getting in Sir Guy's way. He could manifest himself physically any time he wanted, but he has no interest in that, much to my annoyance.

Along those lines, the fact that he's still an Arch Demon instead of bothering to evolve into anything better just drives me up the wall. It's like he's rejecting the whole system this thing runs on. There's no doubt in my mind that it's Noir egging on the three remaining colors to make this a three-way deadlock—if he's a demon, he needs to follow the rules and pursue his evolution already!

I really need to sit down and set things straight with him. He's strong, yes, but so am I. I don't *think* I could beat him, but never say never. A battle is all about having the right matchup in place. Noir doesn't know my powers, so I think he's letting his guard down. If I take advantage of that, I might just be able to beat him, for all we know.

I'm quite good at keeping things positive. I had a plan of action, and my mind was in the right place—and that was how I felt as I set off for the battle.

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"You know, I *did* feel this intense, murderous gaze upon me, but I was a little occupied at the time. But would you mind calling me Diablo, please, Bleu? ...Oh, right, you've been given the name Raine, yes?"

Hearing that gladdened me a little. I always thought he never took an interest in anyone but himself, but there he was, actually remembering my name and everything. Hee-hee! Maybe I should start giving him a little more credit.

"That's right. The name 'Raine' was granted to me by the great Sir Guy, the

Rouge color of the Primal Demons. I'm not like you, named by some mongrel demon lord from parts unknown."

Feeling a bit better now, I decided to goad him a bit. I called Sir Rimuru a mongrel, even. I like slimes, actually—I think they're cute—and Sir Rimuru seems like a well-qualified demon lord, so I had a pretty rosy opinion of him. I thought that, you know, this would be a good tactic to take against Noir, or Diablo.

It turned out to be a bad idea.

"Huh? Do you want to die? Or, that is, do you want to be erased from this world forever? Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Let me make your wish come true, then."

His eyes were deadly serious, too. I mean, Diablo never lets anyone know what's going through his mind at any time, so I didn't expect that he'd bare *that* much emotion and get seriously angry at me.

"Let's fight, Diablo! Ah, I can't wait for this. Ever since I sensed you fighting Blanc in the eastern lands, I've been hoping for a chance to battle you."

I was still talking a big game, but on the inside, I thanked my lucky stars I'd thought to invoke Ubiquital Mist. By creating a copy of myself in advance, I can get right back into the fight if one of them is destroyed. Otherwise, I'd never go up against an opponent I'm not sure I can beat.

By the way, I really *did* take an interest in the battle between Diablo and Blanc. I've fought Blanc myself before—out of envy, you know. Diablo kept giving Blanc all this attention, so I wanted to see just what kind of power she had, is all. If I recall, we fought to a draw, mainly thanks to Ubiquital Mist. But the fight itself was really a loss for me—no, actually, let's still call it a draw. I didn't lose. I'm a smart, capable girl. The only person I'll ever admit having lost to is Sir Guy.

But as I pondered this, our battle was growing intense. Maybe I had taken this a little *too* seriously. I drew from all the powers that I had, attempting to corner Diablo. We were even in terms of magicule count; maybe I had a decent chance after all? But I wasn't foolish enough to let thoughts like that relax my guard. After all, I knew that Diablo wasn't really trying against me at all. I hated to

admit it, but it was true.

"Are you being a sore loser? I'm sure you're still too new inside your physical body to break out your full powers, but that's no excuse, you realize."

I said that and all, but I knew the truth. This guy may have been a creepy freak, but he was no idiot. He was one of the two best demons out there, the only two I personally acknowledged as posing any sort of danger to me. He wouldn't make the kind of rookie mistakes lower-level creatures would.

But this was unexpected. Before I knew what was happening, these layered magic circles appeared around me, with glowing letters drawn on them. Like, hang on! And aren't these spells *holy* magic, the type demons are weakest against?! It'd have been impossible *not* to be surprised by this. I now had Disintegration, Lady Luminus's trademark attack, coming at me from every side possible.

It was at that moment when I realized that I might—*might*—not win this.

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You were worried, weren't you? I was all right, of course. What? Wasn't I just bragging about how Ubiquital Mist ensured I'd be fine anyway? Well, you don't need to be picky like that. Girls don't like that sort of behavior, you know. Don't think—*feel*. Sharing your emotions like that impresses girls a lot more. Me included!

But Diablo was being beyond rude to me. I can't believe he was bringing up another opponent while we were still fighting. I mean, Testarossa? Who's that? If she's *that* special, then bring her over here.

I was beyond indignant about this treatment, but when I learned later that he was referring to Blanc, I was shocked. I mean, what? I need a moment to calm down. Why does even Blanc have a name now?

Yes, I'd been expecting Diablo to see through my performance; he had always been sharp, ever since his Noir days, and so I kind of saw it coming, as annoying

as it was. If anyone but him had claimed that this multilevel Disintegration *still* wasn't his most powerful skill, I'd have laughed in his face.

Right now, though, the Testarossa question was more important—not just for me, but for Sir Guy as well, who had been watching the proceedings from his hiding spot. That's how serious it was.

Diablo had been singing the praises of the demon lord Rimuru this entire time. Constantly going “Oh, Sir Rimuru, Sir Rimuru!” It was downright frustrating to hear, but then he'd casually throw out these incredibly important pieces of information in between all that prattling. It was so underhanded of him, but that's just how he was, and that angered me even more. Sir Guy was getting annoyed, too, I could tell, but he was holding back for now because of the opponent I was fighting.

Over time, I finally managed to get some more info out of Diablo, but it stunned me into silence. It turned out that the demon lord Rimuru had recruited the other Primals to his side as well. I didn't want to believe it—and the moment I had that thought, I knew that I had been strategically defeated.

Unfortunately, it was the truth, and it couldn't have been any worse. Blanc was now Testarossa, Violet was Ultima, and Jaune was Carrera. We had managed to build an equilibrium between three different groups within our little clique, but it had all fallen apart in an instant. I really wish this change had taken place over the span of decades or centuries, but reality can be cruel like that.

We shouldn't be held down by restrictions, after all. We need to live freely. I've often thought that that's how demons ought to live...but, you know, what's wrong with competing with each other? It just doesn't seem right to me, having us unite beneath the same banner. The resulting force would be so strong, there wouldn't even be any point in fighting any longer.

But now he's just gone and *done* this? Great. I'm starting to seriously fear the demon lord Rimuru now. Up till now, the top two people on my list of deranged maniacs were that idiot demigod and the annoying, insane Noir/Diablo, but today—right now—Rimuru's cruised up to the top spot.

Here was a guy I knew I had to constantly watch out for. I couldn't afford to

antagonize him at all costs, even if it meant sucking up to him. Unlike Sir Guy, I'm a good girl. I'd never think of making him angry; instead, I'll follow the trend and sincerely call him "Sir" Rimuru. Yes. I just decided this. Let's go with that.

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So we retreated, leaving the rest to Diablo.

It was a very rare thing to see. I mean, Sir Guy's true goal was to deal with this huge power he sensed was about to go off on this planet.

"Yes, well, I'm sure Sir Rimuru will take care of it...no matter what happens."

That was Diablo boasting to us yet again, but seeing Sir Guy accept it at face value was unbelievable. I'm just a simple maid, though; it'd be beyond rude for me to question his decision.

So we let Sir Rimuru do whatever he wanted, and in the end, that wound up being the right choice to make, which was a relief. Sir Guy was so worried for Lady Luminus, after all. She ruled over the Western Nations, which made work a lot easier for Sir Guy, so no wonder. I felt the same way, too. There was no way I could do her job.

Regardless, everything seemed to have been resolved, so good for us. It was a shame that Mizeri had failed at her mission, but she'd been pitted against Blanc/Testarossa, so I couldn't really blame her.

"Was she strong?"

"I didn't fight her, but she certainly *seemed* to be. At the very least, earning a name and body let her evolve into a Demon Peer. She's much stronger than your average demon lord."

I'm sure. She was a handful even when I fought her, so if she'd evolved, it might just be too much for me to handle. She was never one to care very much about wins and losses anyway. As long as she got what *she* wanted out of it, she had no problems accepting a tactical defeat. Even if she lost, it never rattled her. She was third on my list of maniacs, although she had just been bumped down to fourth.

...Oh, but the demigod's long gone, isn't he? She's still third, then.

Wow... Doesn't this mean that the top spots on my list are all on Sir Rimuru's side? Carrera's a menace, too, and Ultima can really trip you up if you approach her incorrectly. If he managed to tame all of them, I really have to respect that.

"Let's try not to pick a fight with Sir Rimuru, all right?"

"I'm wondering where that thought came from, but I know what you mean, and I firmly agree. If anything, I wish that I'd given you that advice."

"Well, *that's* rude. I'm smart enough to mind my behavior around people like that."

"Are you? You were the one who suggested we take on Sir Guy, if I recall. I have trouble believing you."

Oh, come now. That was just a little youthful indiscretion, you know? I've grown since then, and I won't make the same mistake again. But either way, that's how the two of us began keeping an eye on Sir Rimuru.

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Bad news! Bad, bad news! Sir Rimuru really *is* a freak of nature! I just met him for the first time, but it was *crazy*, how insanely intense he was!

What? Didn't I see him at Walpurgis? Shut up. I'm saying that Sir Rimuru is so crazy, that last meeting doesn't even matter!

That's the only way I can describe it, and I don't think anyone else would do a better job. I mean, listen to this. Sir Rimuru actually decided to evolve *us* as well! Can you believe that? But it's true! I may be a demon, but I always tell the truth.

But now I think we can help out Sir Guy quite a bit. In terms of strength, we're now to the point where Sir Guy would *barely* give us passing marks. If I decided to take on everyone in the Octagram, I don't think we'd beat any of them, but that just goes to show how wonderfully talented the current crop is.

Well, okay, I bet we could beat Lady Ramiris, but I don't think she counts in this example anyway. If she went into her *complete* form, I think we'd lose big. And I'd love to teach that bum Deeno a lesson or two, but if I ever tried acting on that urge, I'd be the one left crying. That's why I let him off the hook. He should thank me for being such a tolerant person.

Oh, but I've gone offtrack. Let's go back to our evolutions.

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It all began when Diablo called Sir Guy over. This meant we'd be visiting Sir Rimuru's nation, but Sir Guy didn't much like how Diablo was egging him on. I thought about asking to stay at home, since I was bound to get dragged into this conflict, but that would have been shirking my duty. Joining him was definitely the right choice anyway.

Sir Rimuru had apparently never met Lady Velzard before, so they exchanged their first greetings. Then, after that, he very politely introduced himself to me as well. He's certainly easy to fall in love with, isn't he? I thought about pretending to be this oblivious little girl and trying to flirt with him as much as I could. Not that I did, of course. I know how to read a room, and I was sure my life would be forfeit if I'd tried it. It was the right choice to make.

So began a nice, harmonious tea session. I observed the proceedings from behind Sir Guy, and it struck me that he and Sir Rimuru shared a decent amount in common. They had the exact same reactions to certain things, and I could tell both of them had their hands full with Diablo. Along those lines, they seemed more alike than not to me.

It went without saying that I had a much better opinion of him now. But that wasn't all that struck me. First, there was Sir Rimuru's attendants. One of them was introduced as Benimaru...but why did he seem so much stronger than your typical demon lord? And the same was true for Shion next to him, too. She had clearly grown stronger since the last time I met her. I could detect a vague aura of evil around her, making me wonder if she had gained some skill giving her an advantage over demons.

What could it be? Because I seriously wasn't sure if I could beat her in battle any longer. But if I ever admitted that, it'd have been tantamount to saying I was no longer worth anything. And I couldn't have *that*.

So I tried to keep myself cool and collected, but it took a concerted effort, you

know. Besides, those weren't the only two who were strong here.

...Um, wait a minute. This aura... It doesn't belong to Testarossa or any other demon. There's at least three or four others here. Why are there all these demon lord-class people serving this demon lord? I thought only Sir Guy could get away with that, but perhaps I need to reconsider.

As I resolved to do that, I began to smell the aroma of tea. Time for a break, then? But we're maids, so it wouldn't be mannerly to enjoy tea together with them. I assumed I'd have to wait for another chance, but the next thing I knew, I was being guided into the adjacent room. It turned out they had set out some slices of cake just for us. I tell you, I can't say enough good things about Sir Rimuru. In terms of the consideration he shows for others, he's *certainly* qualified to be a king, I can tell you that much!

Now it was time for the taste test. This was a strawberry shortcake, it looked like. Hee-hee! I don't like to brag, but I fancy myself as something of a pro in the kitchen. I once captured and held a chef from a first-class hotel until he taught me all his techniques, so I'm reasonably certain that I'm better than some hobby cook.

What I'm trying to say here is that it'd take more than just okay results to impress someone like me—*chomp*.

"Oh, this is *good!!*"

Huh? Are you kidding me?! This is, like, incredible!

It looks so simple on the surface, but one bite, and you're exposed to a complex harmony of flavors. They must have gone through the trouble of building each individual layer, then stacking it all up. There are different types of cream between each layer, I think? This *must* have been an incredible amount of work, right? And given how uniform the taste is, I can see they carefully calculated the distribution of all the ingredients, too.

"Amazing..."

Mizeri was just as impressed.

In the realm of baking, we mainly specialized in dishes utilizing high-end ingredients, such as fresh fruitcakes and sugar-laden pancakes. Honestly, I

never thought you could bake a cake that required *this* much technique to pull off correctly.

"Was this made with otherworld techniques?" I couldn't help but ask.

"That's right," Shion replied. "This was developed as part of a friendly competition between Mr. Yoshida and Lady Shuna. It's a strawberry shortcake that uses three different kinds of cream. It uses a tiny amount of powdered blackspell rice, too, so it's well suited to monster palates as well."

This Mr. Yoshida; is he an otherworlder, I wonder? Lady Shuna, I knew already —she was the one who guided us to this room and served us the cake and tea. She moved with learned, refined motions, like nothing at all could scare her. I am renowned as a perfect maid, but I had to give her high marks for her service. And if she's this good of a pastry chef, too... I've got some competition, I see.



As we were relaxing, enjoying our cake, I decided to speak up to that hateful Diablo.

"By the way, is it me, or have you grown stronger since the last time you fought me?"

It had been on my mind for a while. Just one look, and he felt like a completely different person. I couldn't ask him until now—not with Sir Guy and everyone in the conference room—but now was my big chance, and I wasn't going to let it slip. I'll remind you, after all, that Mizeri and I hadn't been able to gain any new powers since we'd evolved into Demon Peers. I mean, we *had* grown stronger thanks to the assorted experiences we had...but apart from that, we had not evolved as living creatures at all. Meanwhile, here's Diablo making it look *sooo* easy...

"Heh... You truly are a pair of fools, aren't you?"

That was how Diablo chose to respond. I have no idea how he's so skillful at getting under my skin like that. Would anyone mind if I punched him? *Go right ahead*, my conscience told me. But just as I was about to act on that impulse, Diablo kept talking, interrupting my train of thought.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... It is all thanks to my master, Sir Rimuru. I have performed well for him, and he has offered me a commensurate reward!"

Ugh. This bastard. Acting like he's *sooo* much better than us. Well, two can play that game.

"Ha-ha! He has, huh? I suppose that means you're nothing special at all, then. I agree with you that Sir Rimuru is a great person, there's no doubting that...but that's another story. *You*, on the other hand—it looks to me like you're relying on him for *everything* in your life."

Well? What do you think? I said it, and I'm not taking it back. You evolved thanks entirely to Sir Rimuru. Your *actual* strength isn't anything special at all!

But:

"Yes. That's correct. Is that a problem?"

That bum Diablo confessed to it at once, not even trying to argue. And he's

actually *smiling* at me, too, like he's happy that I understand this so well! I *hate* him. He makes me feel like such a moron.

"Can you stop this, Raine? I think it be hard for Sir Guy to beat him in a verbal argument, even. The only way *this* is going to end is with you crying."

Not even Mizeri was on my side. And the worst part was that she sounded like she was right.

So, at the end of my rope, I flashed Diablo a dirty look. Then something unexpected happened. With a satisfying *thwap*, Shion rapped Diablo right on the head. I couldn't even *tell* you how happy this made me—and to top it off, she started scolding him, too.

"Quit with all that insolence, you brownnoser! Stop being so rude to our guests at once."

Watching this unfold made me pump my fist in the air. I just couldn't help myself, and a quick peek at Mizeri revealed that she was gleefully smiling, too. And why not? This was so hilarious, I just wanted to burst out laughing!

Things quickly devolved into a heated argument between Diablo and Shion, with the two of us wholly ignored. It went on until Lady Shuna entered the room. I had no qualms about calling her "Lady" Shuna by this point. Seeing Shion hold her own in a verbal battle with Diablo was impressive enough, but the way that Lady Shuna immediately shouted both of them down was truly a sight to see. *I could learn a lot from that*, I thought.

And if anything, the biggest surprise of all was that this argument was strictly a verbal one. Both Mizeri and I were taken aback by that.

Lady Shuna had come in to call us back to the conference room, so we meekly followed her. She even informed me along the way that they'd decided to give us the recipe for that cake—at the request of Sir Guy, she said. I wasn't sure how this day could get any better for us, really.

So we were taken to the room where Sir Rimuru and his associates were waiting. I immediately took the opportunity to express my feelings to him.

"You impress me greatly, Sir Rimuru. That cake was nothing short of excellent."

Oops. I was too late. Mizeri got it out first. It took me a moment to recover.

"And I understand you are kindly providing us with the recipe as well? I am nothing short of honored, my lord."

Sir Rimuru smiled a bit, like it was nothing special. "Well, I appreciate the thanks. If we're going to keep working together, that's exactly the sort of relationship I want to foster with you."

We were doing nothing but taking from him, and he called it "working together." Such a broad-minded person. But I had no idea what was in store for me.

"You should thank him more," Sir Guy suddenly said. "Rimuru's just agreed to give you some of his power."

And so we were granted the great honor of being evolved into Devil Lords.

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You see? It's crazy.

I can't even guess what's going on with Sir Rimuru. Even looking back now, the only adjective that comes to mind is "crazy." But I'm making effective use of the powers I've been given, so if he ever has a problem we might be able to address, I swear that we won't hesitate to help him. How could we? Our magicule counts are still rising by the day, and we're more of a help to Sir Guy than ever before.

This all happened thanks to Sir Rimuru, and I think it's only fair that we should seek to repay the favor. Of course, he already has Testarossa and the others working for him, so I'm not exactly certain if he would ever need the powers of someone like me...

But enough humility. Today, once again, it's time to wage a practice battle with Mizeri. Training like this every day is a must if we want to gain a grasp of our newfound powers.

So off to the training field I go— Oh? What's a guest doing here at this time of

day? ...Ah, but now's no time for jokes like that.

"Raine! Someone has broken through our barrier."

"I know. But this is—"

It seems now is no time for a leisurely chat, much less a mock battle. I think I had best stop talking to myself now.

Here's hoping I'll get to see all of you again very soon!

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime



SPECIAL
BONUS

VESTER NEEDS YOUR ADVICE

(ORIGINALLY WRITTEN FOR A SLIME
MERCANDISE CAMPAIGN RUN BY ANIMATE,
AN ANIME RETAIL CHAIN IN JAPAN)

SPECIAL BONUS

VESTER NEEDS YOUR ADVICE

(ORIGINALLY WRITTEN FOR A SLIME MERCHANDISE CAMPAIGN RUN BY
ANIMATE, AN ANIME RETAIL CHAIN IN JAPAN)

My name is Vester, and it was always my dream to conduct useful research for the world at large as I served the great Heroic King Gazel. It didn't quite work out for me that way, but instead I became a minister in the Armed Nation of Dwargon, following in the footsteps of my father.

Or that's who I *used* to be, I suppose. But thanks to my own foolish envy, I lost that position long ago.

The corps of engineers I was assigned to at the time was working with elven technicians to develop a new kind of weapon. It was a top secret "magic-armor soldier project," as we called it, and a man named Kaijin was chosen to lead it. He was a commoner whose family ran a blacksmith forge, but he had a broad range of knowledge, and the constant effort he put in won him the adulation of his staff. He tended to get hotheaded at times, but there was no denying his talents as a boss.

But no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't see eye to eye with him. Not because he was a commoner, mind you. Even at the time, his abilities were more than worthy enough for him to be called a master craftsman. And that's why I was so jealous of him.

Kaijin had become well known through his family business alone, but he was also putting up serious research results. I, meanwhile, was a humble researcher, a one-trick pony by comparison. I came from nobility; my father was a marquis,

and I was already destined for a ministerial position in time. While my father was still capable of reigning over his holdings, I would serve in the army and devote myself to research, but it was to be nothing more than a hobby for me.

It was tremendously frustrating. I have no talent for politics. I don't have the coolheadedness of my father, and I certainly don't have the raw charisma of King Gazel. But even so, the staff at the marquis's manor were all top talents, and I'd be guaranteed an environment where I could thrive in politics without really trying. What's more, some of them were in ministerial positions themselves.

But things like government administration and policy were all decided by King Gazel and his cadre of elders. My seat would be for little more than show; I wouldn't be missed if I never attended a meeting, and no matter how hard I tried, I'd never actually help the king at all. I was sure at the time that I'd never be allowed to do anything substantial for my nation.

That's why I was so opposed to Kaijin. *He* could serve our king even in his blacksmith role. I've got nothing but research talents, and it just seemed so unfair to me.

Besides, I didn't have the time to leisurely devote myself to research. My father had fallen ill; his condition was only getting worse, and the day when I'd become head of our noble holding was near. I needed to put up serious results soon, or my life would end without King Gazel ever taking notice of me. The thought of that was too painful to bear.

So I ignored Kaijin's opinion that we needed to keep the pace of our development slow and steady. I forcibly conducted an experiment that led to one of our spirit cores—the keys to our whole project—going out of control. The whole thing was a failure, and the entire project was shut down, never seeing the light of day.

I was in a daze afterward, but my family maneuvered for me behind the scenes. Somewhere along the line, Kaijin left the military, shouldering all responsibility for the incident. The next thing I knew, I was a minister.

Now I wasn't even in a position where I could give an honest apology to anyone. I had grown blind to the fact that the only joy I found in life was when I

got to harass Kaijin about something—a terribly boring way to live.

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“Yeah, sorry about back then.”

Out of nowhere, something drove me to apologize to Kaijin. He shot me a funny look, like he didn’t know what I was talking about.

“Sorry about what? Rimuru didn’t give you the budget to increase production on those models, or?”

“No, he’s already given his approval for that. His Majesty cajoled Sir Mjöllmile into giving us all the funding that we need.”

“Great. So why the apology?”

“Oh, I’m talking about long ago. You know—pestering you, running you out of the military. Half of it wasn’t me so much as my staff doing my bidding, but still... I know it’s too late, but I realized that I never said sorry for any of it.”

“Yeah, it sure *is* coming late. But didn’t you apologize to me for that ages ago?”

Kajin gave me a chuckle. I think I did once, not long after I came to this country. I’d meant every word of it, but still, I wanted to give him an official apology sometime.

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Every single day in this nation is a cavalcade of surprises. I know that sounds like nothing more than an excuse, but I wanted to get that off my chest before anything else.

He’s too busy to *think* about it right now, he tells me!

King Gazel could be a pretty capricious man, but Sir Rimuru is the most wildly free and uncontrolled person I’ve ever met. Just look at him—counting on me for such an important job.

The first difficult job I had was educating the monsters. When he asked me to

teach them the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, the (admittedly rude) first thought in my head was “Is he nuts?” (By the way, the “abacus” he provided as a tool for teaching math turned out to be quite a useful device, enough that we adopted it in Dwargon. Sir Rimuru produced a sample for us, and the design of the model we used was pretty much identical.)

And I was teaching them more than basic comprehension. There were classes devoted to practical skills, too, and I was charged with teaching them manners as well. Manners! To monsters! Could I be blamed for thinking this whole operation was a farce?

I asked Sir Rimuru what the point of that was, and he just smiled and said, “Well, you know, I want us interacting with humans going forward.” That sounded insane to me, but I had no right to refuse him. I just nodded and said “very well” to him.

The work, however, turned out to be much more engaging than I’d assumed. The female goblins I taught, led by Lady Shuna, were quite enthusiastic about learning how to properly carry themselves. The males were no slouches, either, learning how to politely handle visitors, hoping to mitigate their often vicious-looking appearances.

All the monsters I worked with were much more eager to learn than I’d expected. It was fun for me to teach them. We agreed that I’d keep this up until they could prepare a research lab for me, but even now, I regularly participate in these classes—that’s how valuable that time is to me.

So, in the meantime, they finished building the lab inside a spot called the Sealed Cave. Looking back, they didn’t give me much more than the bare minimum, but the thought of devoting myself to research once again made my heart soar. In the process, I was introduced to Gabil the dragonewt, becoming close friends with him as I realized that we shared the same mission. His outside-the-box ideas greatly motivated me, encouraging the spirit of inquiry that I had almost forgotten about.

I wasn’t at all sure what would happen to me when I was first brought here, but by this point, I have nothing but appreciation for King Gazel. I can honestly state that I’m happy here. But that doesn’t mean my life’s wholly free of

problems. And that's what I had just come to Kaijin's place to discuss.

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I had already given the apology I was thinking about, so it was time to delve into my main business.

"Really? Well, I appreciate you saying that."

"Sure, sure. But that's not all you're here for, right?"

"Oh, you could tell?"

"Of course. You've always been in the habit of bringing up a thorny issue only after going through a round of idle chitchat first. Putting it off, kind of."

He might have had a good point. I'd been acquainted with Kaijin for a while, so he probably knew my disposition well. I braced myself and stated my business—no point beating around the bush.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I wanted to discuss something with you."

"Discuss? Well, it can't be anything *that* serious if you got your budget."

Our budget *was* important, but no, it wasn't that.

"Oh, it *is* serious. Much more so than my budget."

"...Is it?"

I got the idea that he couldn't picture me being troubled about anything more important than my budget...but never mind that. It was a thorny issue, but I was sure Kaijin could find me an answer.

"Well, over in Sir Rimuru's lab..."

"Whoa, whoa! You're talking about the top secret lab he keeps for his personal stuff? You sure you should be talking freely about it?"

I really shouldn't have been. I knew that well enough without him telling me... but I just couldn't keep quiet about this any longer! After all, I knew for a fact that Sir Rimuru was giving physical bodies to hundreds of demons at once in

there! There were also a few Arch Demons among them—I'd seen those fearsome creatures receiving bodies with my own two eyes. I'd even witnessed Sir Rimuru giving them names! How could I begin to express the horror I felt?

Yes, I had a duty not to disclose any secrets, but this was really something I had to tell King Gazel about, wasn't it? And Sir Rimuru never asked me to keep quiet about this, bear in mind. We already have a technology-sharing agreement in place, and I'm free to provide the results of my personal research to Dwargon anytime I want.

But...well, you know...

"All right. I'll try to keep it abstract, then. In that lab, he's currently mass-producing the kind of war power that would allow him to take on the entire world at once. I thought, you know, that King Gazel should know about this as well."

Kaijin had a valid point, so I tried to be as indirect as I could. But his reaction was a lot more vigorous than I anticipated.

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait, *wait!* Vester, what is this stuff you're saying outta nowhere?!"

"Mm? Was that too abstract for you to make sense of it?"

"No, you idiot! In fact, it's about as *non-abstract* as it gets!"

Was it? I didn't think so. I was still hiding the more important parts.

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't worry, Kaijin. I'm sure *you'd* be agonizing over it too if I gave you all the details. But for now, I just want to hear your reaction to that."

"You expect me *not* to worry about that? Because you've always had this habit of trying to escape from reality whenever something bad happens to you like this."

I found that pretty rude of him. But I was too worried about what I knew to let that bother me.

"So what do you think I should do?"

Should I keep it locked up in my mind, or should I report back to King Gazel? Kaijin gave my question some thought, scratching his head as he answered me.

"Vester, I think you're a little tired out. Why don't you just head home for today and enjoy a drink or two?"

He grinned at me. Great. He's running from the question.

"That's not really an answer, you realize!"

"Oh, lay off me, you idiot! And quit dragging me into something *this* vital!"

That was perfectly justified of him, but I wasn't going to back down.

"Aw, don't say that! You're doing me a favor here!"

"I abandoned my country, you realize. I don't have the kind of responsibility a Dwargon marquis like you has."

"Oh, don't be so distant! You're a boss to me now, Kaijin! I respect you a lot! Didn't you always used to tell your staff that noble titles didn't matter nearly as much as social standing?"

"Sure, sure, bring *that* up now! Is this why you were apologizing earlier? You always *were* crafty like that..."

Our verbal scuffle continued for a little while after that, with me trying to drag Kaijin into this and him trying to make a clean escape. But I could already see where this was going. Kaijin was a responsible man, and I knew he'd never just try to run from me if he'd heard this much of it.

"Tch... All right. Give me the rest of the details."

"I knew you'd say that eventually."

As expected, Kaijin agreed to hear me out. I gave him a satisfied smile.

*

So we went over to a high-end tavern located inside the labyrinth. Dwarves and drink are never far from each other, and while I look more like an elf on the outside, it's still a favored hobby of mine. And all the wonderful drink they manufacture in this nation! The staff at this tavern's thoroughly trained to not reveal secrets to anyone, too, so even if they overhear something they shouldn't, they'll never tell a soul. We were guaranteed to be safe in here, so it was perfect for discussing delicate affairs like this.

"So what are *you* thinking about doing?" Kaijin asked. I decided to be honest with him.

"If I stay silent and something bad happens afterward, I'd feel terrible. I haven't been told to keep quiet about it, so I feel I have a duty to file a report."

Kaijin gave my response a thoughtful nod. "Yeah. That wouldn't count as an illegal tip-off under the terms of our original agreement, I'm sure. Besides, aren't you still officially a marquis of Dwargon?"

I was. It was something even I forgot about on occasion, but my home nation had never stripped me of my noble title, and I'd never voluntarily given it up. I mean, really, I was just back at home in a daze, and the next thing I knew, King Gazel kidnapped me and sent me over to Sir Rimuru. There hadn't been any time at all back then to work out what my position in Dwargon would be.

The nobility in the Dwarven Kingdom do not own their domains. All land is technically owned by the king, and we pay rent to the government to gain the right to oversee it. The definition of "domain" is likely quite different from other nations' as well. Dwargon has only three large cities, located in the central, east, and west sides of the nation. Beyond that, you had the manors that line the bases of our mountains and the living spaces built into the mines excavated within natural caves.

These living spaces, divided into wards, are what the nobility manage. We were overseeing family registers, to borrow a phrase from Sir Rimuru. That means we look after the residents of the ward that we run, accept the taxes they pay us, and carry out our other duties as nobility. The number of families we oversee depends on our noble title, but as a marquis, I actually made quite an income.

After committing as bad a blunder as I did, costing me the confidence of King Gazel, I was sure that my title would be seized as well. But I was still being treated as a marquis to this day, and that meant my yearly tax revenue was still streaming in. The talented stewards that supported our family were taking care of all that business for me, even now. My family was still receiving their payments, and since I hadn't been officially exiled from my homeland, I was actually free to go back and live there whenever I wanted.

I didn't want to do that, of course, and I didn't plan to. Living here was just too much fun by comparison. My personal servants had also joined me here, and I was enjoying a more luxurious lifestyle in Tempest than I had over there. The food's great, the drinking scene is spectacular, and I can do all the research work I want. It's like heaven to me. Sir Mjöllmile can be stingy with my budget sometimes...but now I'm drifting well off-subject.

"Mmm, yes, I am. And considering my position as marquis, not telling King Gazel would be akin to betraying his trust."

"I don't think keeping quiet is the same as betraying him, but yes, I do think it's your duty to make a report."

Yeah, I guess so...

I didn't really need him to tell me that anyway. But the problem was, *how* would I report it?

"So you think I should just say it all? Like, he's building enough firepower to destroy the world?"

"Whoa, whoa, did you drink too much? And for that matter, is it *that* grave of a thing in the first place?"

Mmm... This *is* some good drink. I couldn't get enough of this mellow taste. It was refreshing, aromatic, and just so wonderfully mild. I could feel it freeing me of all my concerns. But...yeah.

"You know about Ultima and Carrera, right?"

"Oh? Well, of course, but seriously, are you all right? I'm getting whiplash from these changes of subject."

"I'm not changing the subject. And I'd *have* to be drunk to talk about this kind of thing."

"Wait, so are you telling me...?"

"You guessed it. Those two are part of the firepower he's building."

"Huh... I see. Well, that'd certainly explain why the police overseeing the adventurers are so damn strong. I never saw them in the Tempest security forces, so I figured they were some kinda secret force out training in the

wilderness somewhere.”

I began to think Kaijin was finally grasping the seriousness of all this. Nobody in Tempest ever dared to defy the city’s police force, and nobody dreamed of complaining about any of its court verdicts. Why? Because they regulated the conduct of criminals with absolute, overwhelming power. Anyone who saw them could tell that they were insurmountably powerful fighters; in terms of adventurer ranks, even the lowliest police officer would spill over the A mark.

“But... Wait, what? So the police is their world-conquering firepower?”

“Yeah. It’s the perfect camouflage, isn’t it?”

“Well... I’m not so sure, but...”

Kaijin looked confused. I could understand why. The thought of these fearsome, world-destroying demons serving as the police force protecting our citizens...

“So assuming I told King Gazel about this, how do you think he’d react?”

“W-well...that...hmm. This *would* be hard to tell him, wouldn’t it?”

“Right? There’s no way anyone would believe me. People might even start disgraceful rumors saying that I’ve gone mad. I think I’d still have the king’s trust, but all the intermediaries between him and me would try to cast doubt on it, I’m sure.”

“Yeah,” muttered Kaijin, finishing off his cup. He was staring at me, no doubt cursing me for getting him involved. So I gave him a smile.

“What do you think I should do?”

“Well...now I’m not sure you should just meekly tell him. It’s a tricky question for me, too...”

Kaijin and I fell silent for a little while, pondering the correct answer. The monotony was only broken by Sir Deeno, whom we had invited over.

“Whoa, Vester! It’s no fair, you two having all the fun. You shoulda called me in sooner! And buy me a drink while you’re at it, too! Then I’ll listen to whatever problems you got for me!”

He gave me a broad, reassuring smile. I wasted no time asking him.

“All right, Sir Deeno, what do *you* think I should do?”

I was drunk. Which meant that I completely forgot that *he* was a demon lord as well.

“Forget about it! Just palm the responsibility off on someone else! And if he gets yelled at, that’s just bad luck for him!”

Sir Deeno shot us a thumbs-up to accentuate his point.

“No, I really don’t think—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” he continued, interrupting the concerned Kajin. “Like, honestly, I’ve been asked to report a bunch of things, too, but I ditched *that* responsibility real quick. I got raked over the coals for that, so I promised myself that I’ll do more reporting...but it’s up to me *who* I report to, right? So I just told whatever random guy I decided on, and that wound up working out just great. *They* wind up getting yelled at, and *I* can hold my head high and say I did what was asked of me. I feel so refreshed every day now. *Highly recommended!*”

And with that sage advice, Sir Deeno ordered his first round and began drinking. I suppose he was already done with this conversation. Heh... Now I feel like an idiot for agonizing over this.

“Right! I think that’s exactly what I’m going to do!”

“Excellent! Good idea, Vester! No wonder you’re my boss!”

Having a demon lord like Deeno give me that encouragement made me feel a bit proud of myself. It was odd.

“He’s poisoning your mind, man. You can’t use this guy as a reference. Think it over!”

Kajin had been carrying on for a bit now, but even his prattling sounded comforting to me.

“Let’s drink! It’s on me tonight, guys. Let’s see how far we can go!”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit!”

“Whoa, whoa, are you all right?! Because I think even top management like

you can't afford to go crazy in this joint—"

"Hey, quit sweating the small stuff, old man! Just chill out and let's have at it!"

"*You just want to drink on someone else's tab!*"

"Well, yeah. How's that a problem?"

"It most certainly is not! My mind's free of troubles now, Kaijin, so now it's time to celebrate. Let's paint the town red!"

I felt like king of the world, and before long, the party began in earnest. Hopefully I won't have to deal with a bunch of other stupid trouble tomorrow—that was the only wish in my mind as the three of us clinked our full glasses.

*

"Sir Vester, you must be very tired," said the agent I gave my report to.

Looks like he didn't believe me after all. That was exactly what I'd anticipated, but I still had no regrets. After all, I had done so much regretting the moment I saw the tab after I sobered up that I think I broke my "regret" emotion for good.

"Yeah...maybe you're right, ha-ha-ha. But don't say I didn't file the report, all right?"

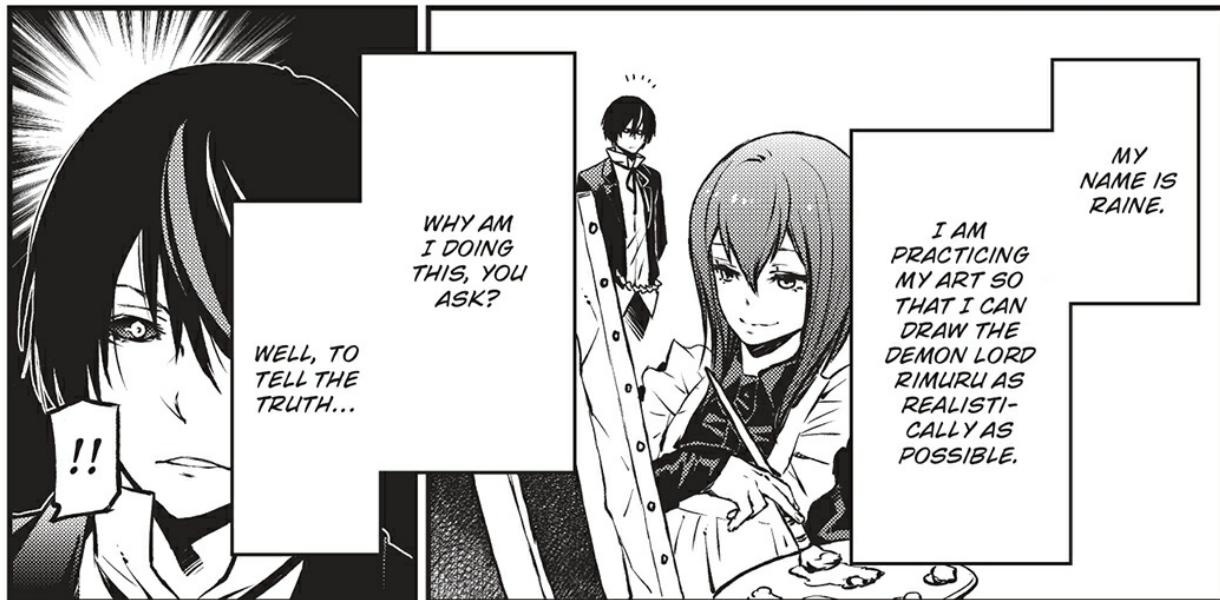
With that, I ended my regular contact call.

My report would be verified much later, but nobody questioned whether I was responsible. *Some* did, actually, but the nameless agent took all the heat based on our magical call records. It really *did* turn out the way Sir Deeno said it would. I'm so glad I thought to discuss it with him.

←READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT!

The Blue Period

Art: Taiki Kawakami



10



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