

# That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

12

FUSE

Illustration by  
Mitz Vah





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Reincarnated  
as a SLIME  
12



It was the emperor himself who saved Tatsuya.  
Luck was on Tatsuya's side that day.

He appeared in a garden accessible by only the emperor and a few close associates. The emperor happened to be relaxing there that very moment.

"How interesting," Tatsuya heard a voice say.

"Perhaps this is fate at work." Then he passed out, and when he woke up, he was completely intact, not a scratch on him. His luck had saved his life—the same life he'd once abandoned, which he now swore to use to repay the emperor's kindness.

# That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

(12)

FUSE  
Illustration by Mitz Vah

  
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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 12

FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by Mitz Vah

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PROLOGUE

**THE JESTERS'  
ESCAPE**

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

## PROLOGUE

### THE JESTERS' ESCAPE

Yuuki Kagurazaka is a genius.

Even back in his original world, Yuuki had a special power—a sort of supernatural observational force, one you could call psychokinesis. He was born with this power, but he never felt any urgent need to do something with it. After all, he knew if he told someone about this power of his, he'd be made into a spectacle. Life was thus rather humdrum for him, but he enjoyed it well enough. His parents were kind to him, and he had a decent number of friends. He never found it hard to scare up some money when needed, so he had access to basically anything he wanted. He had absolutely no complaints.

But one day, Yuuki was befallen by sudden misfortune. Right when he entered middle school, his parents passed away in an accident. It wasn't their fault; their car was hit head-on by a truck driver who fell asleep behind the wheel, and they died instantly. Only Yuuki, sleeping in the back seat, survived. He thought it was unfair, of course. He hated the driver who caused the accident, but there was nothing he could do about it. Japan was a nation of laws and regulations, and personal revenge wasn't part of that picture.

The ensuing court case revealed a number of things. The transportation company the truck driver worked for had bitten off more than it could chew. They put the brunt of that on their field employees, who toiled on even though they knew they were overworked. The driver, too, was a victim here.

So was it the transportation company's fault? Well, the facts didn't paint a clear picture there, either. If they turned down a job from a big firm, they might not have gotten another order from them again. It wasn't easy to say no to a longtime client. The transportation company should've responded by improving their business structure, but skilled drivers were tough to come by, and they

didn't have the financial wherewithal to bring on and train younger talent.

*That's so messed up*, Yuuki lamented. The world was just so unfair, and he was just so powerless.

Who should he hate for it? To be honest, society itself had serious problems. Yuuki considered exacting his revenge on society, but that was beyond his own capabilities. As a genius, he thus knew his own limits. The world had advanced to completion, in essence. Supernatural powers or not, having a little strength on your side didn't mean you could change anything by yourself. You weren't gonna beat an army, and even if you could, there was no future awaiting you past that. Yuuki thought about giving in to despair, destroying all of society, and rebuilding it from scratch...but that'd cause nothing but misery for vast numbers of people, and he just couldn't commit to that.

If Yuuki wanted to change society, the only way was to pound the pavement and attract more people who shared his beliefs. He could then become a politician and improve his nation in his own image—that was the only plan Yuuki came up with. A long, patient path. One that was possible if he really put his mind to it, but it'd only bear fruit decades into the future.

Yuuki was at an impasse...and before he made his decision, he wound up traveling between worlds. But whether this was a stroke of fortune or misfortune for him was another question entirely...

It was the sheer malice of the demon lord Kazalim that brought Yuuki to this world. Kazalim had lost his physical body, retaining possession of just his spiritual one, but he still hadn't lost his powers as the Curse Lord. He was biding his time, making the necessary preparations to resurrect himself, and he'd execute his plan only when he summoned a body suitable for his spirit.

Of course, he carefully examined the constraints he'd put on this summoned target. Failure was absolutely out of the question for this ritual, so he'd use his powers of domination to carve a cursed seal before the summoning. The summoned target's heart and mind would be crushed, completely unaware of what happened; Kazalim would then seize the power within their soul, snatching away the body and resurrecting himself.

Kazalim's sole mistake was summoning Yuuki for this ritual. None of the

curse-driven magic the demon lord tried on him worked.

With his genius-level talents, Yuuki quickly surmised how this world operated. In the midst of the journey, he obtained all the powers he wanted—the powers to change the world. It was pure, unadulterated energy, a power from the soul that he could alter to his liking. The name of it: the unique skill Initiator. He had told Rimuru that he lacked any special skills, but that was a bald-faced lie.

The first thing he initiated with this power was Anti-Skill, the ability to cancel out anything hostile coming his way. That immediately foiled Kazalim's scheme—not only was Kazalim defeated, but he even had to capitulate to Yuuki.

Now Yuuki found meaning to life in this world. Here, it was eat or be eaten. The laws governing civilization were still incomplete, and it'd be a while until they even approached perfection. Therefore, it was left to him to become this world's leader—and guide it in the right direction.

Yuuki had decided to tackle this unfair world head-on. It was a challenge that drove him forward. This world was his for the taking.

\*

Yuuki had escaped the chaotic scene at the cathedral with his three servants, Laplace, Footman, and Teare. The group promptly tried to flee the Holy Empire of Lubelius—they considered staying nearby and gauging the situation but ultimately decided that remaining there was too dangerous. The berserk Hero Chronoa wasn't the kind of pushover Yuuki could control; she was a fearsome figure, one who saw any living, breathing being in sight as her enemy. Granville must have known that when he offered to fight alongside Yuuki. He hated to admit it, but *this* time, his enemy had the upper hand.

"What a travesty, though, eh? We finally gave the demon lord Luminus the slip. We were one step away from nabbin' a Hero, the greatest weapon anyone could hope for...and *now* look," Laplace lamented.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh!" Footman chortled. "Her strength was nothing I've seen in this dimension. It is a pity we couldn't bring her to our side, but against *her*, everybody there would've been killed, no?"

That was the logical conclusion, but Yuuki wasn't sure things would go that

easily.

"Yeah, who knows? 'Cause in the end, the demon lord Rimuru's a freak of nature, huh? And Luminus and Leon were on-site, too, so we're talkin' three demon lords and a small army of decent magic-born. No matter who won, it sure wouldn't surprise me," Laplace replied.

"Precisely," said Teare. "Granville is a former Hero himself, so he's quite strong, too. I can't even fathom who would come out on top."

Laplace and Teare weren't as optimistic as Footman. Like Yuuki, they were also contemplating a possible victory for Rimuru's side.

Certainly, for Yuuki's purposes, Chronoa annihilating everybody on the scene would be the best way to end the day. That'd rub out Rimuru, a tremendous nuisance; Granville, a pain in the ass; Luminus, a likely future threat to him; and even Leon, the nemesis of Laplace and his cohorts. With all of them gone, the West was as good as under Yuuki's control—and while Chronoa would still be a handful, she wasn't that scary to him if she lacked any sentience. For all he cared, they could just bait her with some monsters and banish her to the other side of the desert or something.

If an adversary was all strength and nothing else, Yuuki wouldn't even see it as a threat. That was why he hoped, at least, to find out who survived, but...

"No, we were right to run. If we got involved, I don't think any of us would've come out unscathed. And besides..."

His instincts told him something bad was about to happen. They needed to figure out their position in this free-for-all, if only so they could form a strategy, but Yuuki trusted his instincts and chose to flee anyway. If Chronoa was defeated, the surviving demon lords would no doubt be openly hostile to him. Rimuru had probably noticed Yuuki's betrayal by this point; he couldn't talk his way out of that any longer.

With this defeat, they had lost their base of operations, their position, and everything else in the West—and all, Yuuki thought, because he was foolish enough to fall for Granville's offers. He was thus willing to accept this result as his just deserts. That was why, when it was time to flee, he didn't hesitate for a moment. This firm decision-making acumen was one of his greatest assets, and

it had seen him through some difficult spots time and time again.

Yuuki assumed this would be another one of those times. But he soon came to realize how sorely mistaken he was.

Suddenly, as Yuuki's group quickly traversed the landscape, a single man stood before them, blocking their path. Next to him was a blue-haired girl whose beauty immediately drew your attention, wearing a dark-red maid outfit that looked extremely out of place.

"...?!"

"Who're you?"

Yuuki froze, sensing the danger. The man ignored Laplace's question, his eyes transfixed on Yuuki; nobody else mattered to him.

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! If you mean to get in our way—"

Footman took a step forward, ready to eliminate this duo. The next moment, he was sent crashing to the ground by a new figure—another girl, wearing the same dark-red maid outfit as the blue-haired one. This girl's hair was green; she was none other than Mizeri, who had been on assignment in Englesia until a few moments ago. The appearance of Testarossa put an end to that mission, and so she flew over.

And with Mizeri here, the blue-haired figure must have been Raine. The two of them served only one man—the demon lord Guy Crimson, Lord of Darkness and the most powerful being in the world. His rouge hair, darker than blood, fluttered in the breeze, his crimson eyes twinkling like gems as he beheld Yuuki.

"Hey. The first time we've met, I think? You've been attracting my interest."

Guy's gaze was frozen upon Yuuki. No one else was permitted to enter his sight. Yuuki, detecting this, wasn't sure whether to feel happy or sad about that. Given the way Mizeri just dispatched Footman, he had a decent idea of his foes' powers. And not just that—the colors of their hair, and the unusual maid uniforms, matched those of a curious group Kagali, Kazalim, and Clayman had all told him about. This man before him stood at the very peak of the world—a peak he wanted for himself. If he had the ambition to conquer the world, Yuuki would have to face him sooner or later.

"Ah, so you're Guy Crimson, hailed as the most powerful of the demon lords? It's an honor to meet you. My name is Yuuki Kagurazaka. To think that *you'd* come to *me*—did you want to join forces?"

Yuuki grinned at Guy, never letting himself be overpowered. This was, he knew, very wishful thinking. One of Guy's maids had just knocked Footman to the ground; there was no way they came here to extend an olive branch. He knew that, but he still put up a friendly facade. That was how he negotiated—making an outrageous statement or proposal and gauging the other side's circumstances and goals from their reaction.

"Aaahhh-ha-ha-ha! You're funny. That's quite an attitude to take in front of me. And maybe that wouldn't be such a bad offer, but it looks like you and Leon are enemies, eh? And besides, aren't you traveling to the East now? Because personally, I ain't a fan of Ludora gaining any more war power."

Negotiations were off the table. Yuuki didn't expect Guy would take the offer from the start. It didn't faze him—he was too busy scrutinizing whatever information he could glean from Guy's words.

Ludora was the emperor of the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire. Guy's name-dropping him meant the two had a relationship—and most likely not a friendly one.

*...So they want to eliminate us before we can reach the East? I really don't want to tangle with the strongest demon lord here, but if this is what it's come to, so be it...*

There was no avoiding a battle with Guy. Escape was futile. Silly little tricks were meaningless in this situation. Going after Guy with everything they had, Yuuki decided, offered them better chances.

"Hmm... Well, all right. If you're opposed to us, that serves me just fine as well. This way, I can test out the powers of the strongest of demon lords before I come to the East."

Yuuki meant to antagonize Guy. At the same time, a great excitement welled within his heart until it spilled out and coursed through his entire body. Right then, at that moment, he had decided to take the powers he had bottled up and unleash them all against the strongest demon lord. Defeat, he thought as

he sized Guy up, wasn't even imaginable to him.



Yuuki was certainly confident. In fact, in a one-on-one match, he was sure he could beat anyone. He could tell Chronoa was a pretty dangerous foe, but nothing more. With a concerted effort, he could win, if only after a struggle—but they were sharing a venue with multiple demon lords who were clearly not on his side. Leon, Luminus, even the incredibly softhearted Rimuru, had likely noticed Yuuki's true intentions. Rimuru had realized some time ago that Yuuki was his enemy, but that actually benefited Yuuki back at the cathedral—had he tried using Rimuru to his advantage, Yuuki would've fallen into a trap. Yuuki didn't know that at the time, but either way, he had the right idea about Rimuru now.

Yet with all his confidence, not even Yuuki was stupidly bold enough to take on three demon lords *and* Chronoa simultaneously. He didn't need his instincts to tell him that retreating was the best option. Now, though—this was different. The man standing in front of him was all the warning he needed—and once he realized that, Yuuki resolved to handle matters with everything he had.

Guy flashed a bemused smile. "Oh, you think you can beat me?"

"Well, kind of. I was planning to knock you out sooner or later anyway, so this is just accelerating the timetable a bit."

Yuuki's attitude quickly stoked the murderous ire of Raine and Mizeri—but they'd never open their mouths without their master Guy's permission. The demon lord was the absolute ruler, and any concern for his safety was therefore a sign of disrespect. Guy was a capricious demon lord, merciless to anyone he deemed not worth his time. Raine and Mizeri just barely earned that acceptance for themselves, but get on his bad side, and they'd be killed in an instant, no doubt. That was the clear difference in power between Guy and his maids.

Laplace couldn't move. He was like a frog transfixed by a venomous snake. If he tried to assist Footman, Raine would certainly retaliate. It was four against three, numerically speaking, but the yawning gap in strength was extremely cold comfort to him. He might be able to take on Raine and Mizeri alone, but

with Guy around, he didn't stand a chance.

Yuuki seemed ready to take on Guy, but Laplace saw that as a foolhardy challenge. *Forget it. Anyone but this dude! Chronoa was on another dimension herself, but this Guy Crimson's a cross-my-heart monster, I tell ya. This ain't even gonna be a fight. We can't run, and who knows how long the boss can hold out...? I s'pose that's gonna be the key to survival here...*

Laplace deserved praise for identifying even a small slice of Guy's potential force. But beyond that, his strength of heart—the ability to consider fleeing instead of collapsing to the ground heartbroken—demonstrated his true worth. He knew about Yuuki's strength, but Yuuki was hiding exactly how much he had from them. Would it even work against Guy?

Still, even if Yuuki was no match for Guy, Laplace intended to rescue Footman, take Teare, and get out of there. Yuuki would no doubt pick up on this and give him a hand—that's how much Laplace trusted him. The only problem with this plan was that Raine and Mizeri were abnormally strong menaces themselves. They weren't careless enough to give Laplace an opening to save Footman; he hesitated to make any untoward moves against them. He wanted to find a way to rescue his friend...but the problem, it turned out, had a ready solution.

"Hey. Let him go."

The order came from Guy to Mizeri, who (of course) offered no resistance, immediately releasing Footman.

*...Well, that was easy. Now I guess we got an escape route after all.*

Laplace was almost beginning to feel optimistic about his chances when things took a different turn.

"Don't worry—if you beat me, I'll let you all go unhurt."

Guy seemed to be contradicting himself. What did defeating him have to do with letting Yuuki's group leave? It was hardly reassuring at all. Thus, distressed and depressed, Laplace decided to just watch the proceedings, praying for Yuuki to win.

\*

Yuuki was the first to act. His supreme confidence—driven by the firm belief

that no magic or skills worked on him—led him to unleash a kick on Guy. It was a sharp, heavy kick that seemed to shift halfway, its trajectory veering in midair before finally landing hard on Guy’s head. But it was Yuuki’s face that wound up wincing.

“Eesh... You’re so *solid*.”

His Anti-Skill worked against all things, penetrating the defenses of any foe—but despite being directly attacked, Guy stood there, totally serene and not demonstrating an ounce of pain. There was no trick or trap involved. It was just that Guy’s body was more solid than diamond itself, and the mix of toughness and flexibility was a truly ominous threat. That’s just how Guy was.

“That barely triggered an itch. Some battle this is. Humor me a little more, would you? ’Cause otherwise I’m killing all of you.”

With a smile, Guy conjured flames in his right hand. It was the elemental magic Napalm Burst, a searing fire reminiscent of a dragon’s long, twisting form. At a temperature of several thousand degrees, it could instantly vaporize any human being; and now those draconic flames were wrapping around Yuuki’s body.

“You’re wasting your time with magic!” Yuuki shouted, trying to throw the self-satisfied Guy off guard—then leaped away, a chill running down his spine.

“Huh. You got some good instincts, don’t you?”

Guy smiled as he asked the question, but Yuuki was too busy rolling on the ground to answer, frantically trying to put out the flames. Anti-Skill *did* work, and it *did* prevent Guy’s spell from injuring him. But the magic fire, which should have immediately extinguished itself, simply kept on burning. Even worse, it consumed oxygen just like a normal fire. Left unattended, it would have starved Yuuki’s lungs of air and killed him.

What felt like ages to Yuuki was just a few seconds. That’s why he took no damage, but if Yuuki failed to notice and kept attacking Guy, that would have sealed his fate. He’d instead focused on putting out the fire, as ridiculous as it made him look.

Then, gauging Guy’s reaction, Yuuki considered one possibility he sincerely

didn't want to believe in. He hated to admit it, but he needed to check how feasible it was. So standing back up, Yuuki asked the question, not really expecting an answer.

"...Why didn't you follow up and attack me again? This isn't some kind of chivalrous duel."

"Ah-ha-ha! Quit playing dumb. You must've realized by now, right? I've picked up on the secret to your powers!"

"..."

*I knew it*, mused the disgusted Yuuki. His Anti-Skill was omnipotent, capable of annulling all forces—but when faced with the sort of Arts that fused magic together with skills, he couldn't cancel both at once. That was the only flaw to his skill—and therefore his sole weakness. Plus, no matter how much he could power himself up, Yuuki was still just a human being. Perhaps he could generate antibodies to dispatch any poison attacks, but he couldn't go for very long without oxygen.

This weakness—one created simply by being a living creature—made Yuuki comprehend the extent of his disadvantage.

Guy stood there, composed.

"See, there's this man I know who can cancel all forms of magic...but if we ever fought, I'd still win. Why? Because he can't cancel out anything *besides* magic. And as far as I know, there's no way to perfectly block the laws of physics in this world. Put all your focus on one point, and you'll open up a hole somewhere else. It seems like *your* ability applies to skills as well as magic, but..."

He looked down upon Yuuki, airing his thoughts instead of landing another strike. The detached, casual air was all carefully calculated. It'd be easy to kill Yuuki, after all, but that wouldn't be any fun. Instead, Guy wanted to break his heart and force him to admit defeat in his despair. He already had him worked out—Yuuki's attack told him all about what made him unique, and he had come up with countermeasures.

No matter how well he could dispel magic and skills, he was human—and thus

eminently beatable. Humans were weak, sporting frail bodies laden with vulnerable points, and it wasn't even worth formulating a strategy for killing them.

Even in terms of core physical ability, there was a wide gap between Yuuki and the demon lord. With Yuuki's kick earlier, Guy left only a single small barrier in place as he tried blocking it, but it didn't even leave a scratch. Look at their respective magicule energies, and it was comical to compare them at all. Guy was on the level of a True Dragon, and for him, it'd be simple to launch another magic spell while Yuuki was busy dispelling the first.

"But just killing you on the spot would defeat the whole purpose of me showing up. Why don't you try entertaining me while I'm here?"

Guy lorded over Yuuki and taunted him. He wanted to corner Yuuki, make him unleash his full powers, and only then would he utterly overwhelm him and claim victory.

Yuuki, meanwhile, could tell what Guy was thinking—painfully so—but he had no response. The breezy confidence vanished from his face as he coolly analyzed the situation and pondered a way to make it out alive. He was a rare genius, and his genius-level brain told him that the difference in strength was cataclysmic. But he didn't give up, instead mentally groping for any and all alternatives.

The only hope he found was that Guy took him so lightly.

*Yeah, with this much of a difference, I can see why he'd look down on me. But he's also just a tad bit arrogant.*

Yuuki still had some tricks up his sleeve. One was the supernatural ability he was born with; another was Avarice, the skill he took from Maribel. The third was Instigator, capable of creating skills on the fly as needed. With those, he thought, he could make it through.

*Not killing me when you had the chance was a real bad idea!*

Gathering his breath, Yuuki turned back toward Guy.

"Well, just because you've spotted a few of my abilities doesn't mean you're safe to order me around yet."

This wasn't sour grapes. He really believed this. If an opponent became riled up and lost their cool, that made them more likely to commit an error. That was the aim behind his taunting—but as he verbally parried with Guy, he also ran his powers up and down his own body, powers he usually kept bottled up. His spiritual force flowed, focusing itself around his soul, and he was using it to enhance his physical body—from human to Enlightened, and from Enlightened to Saint.

It was an evolution, one that lifted him even higher than Hinata, and when it was done, Yuuki stopped breathing. A full Saint was equivalent to a spiritual life-form—Hinata was still too much a prisoner of her own physical body, but Yuuki was already a level above her. Respiration was no longer required.

Having disposed of his human weaknesses, Yuuki was now striking a much stronger presence. If you converted his energy stores to magicules, they were now closer to Leon's or Luminus's.

But Guy wasn't moved. "What a disappointment," he said, wholly non-agitated. "Is that your full power? Then we could duke it out a million times, and you'd *still* never beat me."

"Yep... And in that case, let's have some fun!"

With Yuuki's signal, the battle began anew. And then...Yuuki found out exactly why Guy was considered the strongest being.

\*

Nothing but despair ruled over the landscape. Yuuki was now sprawled on the ground. Before Guy's overwhelming power, absolutely none of his attacks struck for damage. No petty tricks would work on him. Even Yuuki's greatest attacks, moves he spent untold hours honing, failed to land a scratch upon Guy.

"God dammit!!"

Yuuki lacked the strength to so much as stand up. Turning toward Guy and cursing him was about the best he could manage. But his heart was still unbroken, something he deserved high praise for.

Laplace had burned the battle into his memory, never blinking once.

*It makes no sense to me. It ain't that the boss is a wimp. It's that Guy's just too*

*much...*

Yuuki was, indeed, stronger than Laplace imagined. He had some kind of eerie, supernatural force, and he used it to test out a variety of approaches with Guy. From simple throwing stones to fiery blasts, heavy pressure, and spiritual interference—all were lightly shrugged off. Even with over thirty times the muscle of an average human, even with attacks lobbed at hundreds of miles an hour, it was just child's play to Guy. Not even Anti-Skill, the keystone of Yuuki's defense, could fully disable Guy's magic.

"That's not gonna work on me any longer, y'know."

As he warned, Guy had apparently found a way through Anti-Skill. It was a shocking revelation for Yuuki. Kazalim and Clayman had taught him much about the Ten Great Demon Lords, including the fact that Guy and Milim boasted another echelon of power. But not even these advisers could've known just how much of a gap there really was. If they had, they never would have endorsed his world-conquest fantasies.

*So this...is what a Catastrophe-level guy is like...?*

It was well after the fact, but now Laplace realized there were things in this world that must never be prodded. Even he had some powers he kept secret from his own friends—but they were meaningless before an opponent like Guy. That showed how overwhelming a foe he was. No tactic imaginable could bring this demon lord to his knees. Even Yuuki, a man clearly more powerful than Laplace, was helplessly toppled as if he were an infant.

At this point, escaping alive was next to impossible. Someone, Laplace concluded, would need to make the ultimate sacrifice. But he kept up his usual calm demeanor as he took a step toward Guy.

"Yep, I'd expect nothing less from the great demon lord Guy Crimson. We're the Moderate Jesters, y'see; kind of a jack-of-all-trades outfit, and our boss—Mr. Yuuki here, I mean—hired us for some assorted odd jobs. So now that he's been defeated, we're not really under any obligation to continue serving him—"

"...?!"

"Laplace, what are you—?"

It was incredibly petty, but Laplace seemed ready to betray his friend at that moment. He didn't know Guy personally, but the demon lord's selfishness and arrogance were the stuff of legend. He had no interest in the weak and refused to so much as talk to anyone he didn't consider worth his time. Taking this attitude toward Guy all but ensured Laplace's instant death...but it was also guaranteed to turn Guy's attention toward him, and Yuuki could doubtlessly use that opening to make good his escape. It was a chance Laplace was willing to bet on.

The one absolute rule among the Moderate Jesters was to never betray your friends—and *especially* not your client. That was why Laplace believed Yuuki would immediately understand his intentions. Footman had a temper and tended to act before thinking, but his friends were always on his mind. Teare, meanwhile, was stronger than Clayman but so timid that she shied away from exercising her full force. Both of them had a tendency to get carried away, but they could be trusted to take care of Yuuki. Thus Laplace decided to sacrifice himself.

"I just wanna help you, Mr. Guy, sir. So could you at least spare my life?"

He couldn't have announced his betrayal more clearly. Footman and Teare acted confused; Guy showed Laplace a bemused grin.

*All right. Gotta keep angering him!*

Laplace had no intention of dying. He knew he didn't have much hope against Guy, but maybe there was a way to get out of this alive. Thus he didn't hesitate to speak once more...but before he could:

"Ah-ha-ha! No need to force it, Laplace. Oh, man... Do I really look that helpless to you?"

It was Yuuki who spoke, staggering to his feet.

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...

Yuuki was prepared to die. But at the same time, he could feel insatiable

resentment filling his heart. He was disappointed in himself, and it riled him—and Laplace's words only deepened his anger.

No way Laplace would ever betray him. This was all an act, he correctly surmised—a performance made because he trusted in Yuuki, despite his cavalcade of blunders. That made him as happy as it did sorrowful.

*If I had even more power...*

The thought bubbled up from within his heart of hearts. It was a desire nobody could ever answer—but something deep inside him reacted.

*...You want power? Then take my hand.*

*Huh?*

Yuuki was confused for a moment. He wondered if his mind was playing tricks on him...but the voice was far too clear and distinct for that.

*Let me take over, and you'll score the most powerful force imaginable. Even world conquest would be easy as pie, I think, if you took my hand. Now make your choice...*

The voice's offer made Yuuki extremely uncomfortable.

*Shut up. I'm me, all right? You're not my friend. And I'm not cheap enough to achieve my goals with the help of someone I don't even know!*

He couldn't have been clearer. Yes, to him, an ambition this big only gained meaning because he'd fulfill it himself. It was a stance Yuuki refused to budge on.

...

The voice fell silent, apparently unsure what to say. And to Yuuki, if the voice was gone, it no longer mattered to him.

Desperate though this moment was, something else weighed on Yuuki's mind. Guy, it seemed, had some kind of purpose for him. That might've just been because he wanted to enjoy this battle with Yuuki, but there had to be some other reason. He did say he wasn't "*a fan of Ludora gaining any more war power*"—but turn that around, and if Yuuki didn't side with Ludora—let alone the Eastern Empire—then perhaps there'd be no reason to kill him and his

friends.

And as for why Guy didn't kill Yuuki right then...?

*Eesh. I couldn't overpower him at all, but from here on out, it'll be a battle of wits, won't it? And rather than forcing such an awful role upon Laplace, I've got a much better chance if I do this myself!*

Yuuki roused his spirits and got back to his feet.

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...

Brushing his bangs out of his face, Yuuki smiled defiantly in spite of the desperate situation. "Yeah, I never thought you'd be *that* powerful, but now that I fought you, I'm sure of it. You don't want to kill us at all, do you?"

"Hmm? What makes you think that?"

"Well, I mean, if you really wanted to, you could've massacred us a long time ago. So why did you keep beating me within an inch of my life but no further?"

Yuuki couldn't have sounded more confident with the question. Anyone would think it an incredibly reckless thing to do, facing an opponent like Guy who had just demonstrated such impenetrable might. But Guy still seemed entertained.

"Oh, you noticed? Well, you don't need to know why."

Yuuki shrugged at this denial, but he expected as much. So he calmly moved on to step two.

"Okay. I got an offer for you, then."

"An offer?"

"Yeah. If you let us go, I think we can help you out a little."

"Help *me* out?"

"Right. I guess you don't want us cooperating with the Eastern Empire, but I'd like you to reconsider that."

“Go on.”

“What I mean is: If we’re trying to conquer the world here, then sooner or later we’re gonna have to fight the Eastern Empire. And I just spent the past however many minutes learning how strong you are—I can feel it in my bones. I think it goes without saying that I don’t plan to challenge you for a while to come, okay? So it’d be more natural for me to head over to the Empire and take it down first, right?”

This was coming completely out of left field. It left Footman and Teare in the dust, certainly, and Laplace simply stood there as well, helplessly confused. He had just hatched a plan, was all but ready to die for it, and Yuuki—his one lifeline—had stomped all over it. Now, he thought, it was solely up to Yuuki’s negotiations. The ball was in his court, but his fearless attitude gave Laplace an unstoppable cold sweat down his spine.

*It’s crazy—the premise is just crazy. So why is Guy enjoying this?!*

Laplace was right. Something about Yuuki’s offer made Guy grin ominously.

“Are you still trying to challenge me?”

“Of course. I’m looking to conquer the world, remember. And I can’t win against you right now, but I’m gonna surpass you someday. You’ll see.”

As roughed up as he was, barely able to keep himself upright, Yuuki remained defiant. He maintained his bold stance, as if the thought of being killed for his insolence had never occurred to him.

Against someone like Guy, this was absolutely the correct tack to take. If you foolishly tried begging for your life, he’d immediately lose interest—and all that awaited you next was destruction. He may not have realized it, but Yuuki had made the best choice possible.

“And if you four topple the Empire, would that benefit me in some way?”

Yuuki braced himself. They were at the crux of this discussion. He returned Guy’s piercing gaze and nodded emphatically.

“That’s right. I don’t know why yet, but *you* don’t want the Empire to conquer the West, either. Am I wrong?”

“...”

Guy and the emperor Ludora had some history; that much was certain. It all came down to this. Yuuki pleaded his case, mixing in a bluff or two.

“And I’ve got a lot of enemies to defeat, you know. Yes, I want to lend a hand to the Empire for now, but I’m not gonna affiliate myself with it. I’ll eat away at it from the inside, and I’ll use it for my own goals.”

“Hmm. I see. So if the Empire shares a goal with you, you’ll help, but beyond that, there’s no telling what will happen? And you’re thinking about borrowing the Empire’s forces to take down Leon and Rimuru. Aren’t you, you bastard?”

Guy sharpened his eyes upon Yuuki, seeming to see through everything. There was no taking back what Yuuki said. Guy and Leon’s relationship was a mystery to him, and there was no way he’d know what Guy thought of Rimuru, either. He couldn’t know how his words would be construed—but still Yuuki made no effort to hide his ambitions.

“That’s right. I’ll conquer them all, and then I’ll beat *you* last, demon lord Guy Crimson.”

He deliberately made himself sound as brazen as possible. The rest was up to Guy’s judgment.

*Following Laplace’s lead would’ve gotten us killed anyway. Sorry, man, but you’re gonna have to play my game instead.*

He silently apologized to his comrades. It was all or nothing, and Yuuki was nothing if not greedy. He was making a dangerous bet—if he was going to survive, he wanted everyone else to as well. But the bet paid off.

“The Moderate Jesters, you said? Ah-ha-ha! Your ambitions certainly *are* a joke, aren’t they? A joker card meddling with all the other pieces in our game. I like it. You’re making a pretty convincing offer. You’ve got courage, at least, and for that I’ll let you go this time.”

Yuuki never did find out what Guy’s mission was. All he knew was that he and his team were safe. Raine and Mizeri voiced no complaints about the decision—as Guy proclaimed, Yuuki and the Jesters left the scene without further incident.

\*

Once Guy was no longer in sight, Yuuki and his group headed for the rendezvous they had arranged with Kagali's team. They assumed they were safe now, but nonetheless, everyone wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

The moment they sighted Kagali waiting for them, Laplace turned to Yuuki and spoke.

"Are you *kidding* me? I can't believe this. All those declarations you made to a living monster like Guy..."

"And," added Teare, "you even made him let us all go! I thought we were done for back there."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Well, I believed in the boss from the start," said Footman.

"You weren't thinking a damn thing the whole time," retorted Laplace.

Yuuki cast Laplace a sidelong glance, then sat down on the ground, exhausted. "What do you want from me? It was the only way we *might* have gotten out of there alive. And it worked, too, so I don't want to hear any complaints about it, okay?"

The damage he suffered was far more emotional than physical. He went to lie down right there, limbs spread out, and closed his eyes, body language indicating he'd tolerate no further argument.

Left with nothing else to do, Laplace and Teare explained matters to the oblivious Kagali.

"He *fought* with Guy?! I-I'm amazed you lived to tell the tale..."

Her first reaction was abject surprise. It didn't take long for it to turn into sheer exasperation for Yuuki.

Ah, thought Yuuki as he felt the breeze against his cheek, *it's great to be alive*. Then he had another thought. That mystery voice he heard beckoning in the middle of battle—what *was* it?

*A split personality of mine or something? No, that's ridiculous... But hang on. I don't think there's some hidden power within me, although I can think of one possibility.*

His thoughts had taken him to a power he had obtained just recently—the unique skill Avarice. With it, he figured, the more he desired something, the greater his powers would grow. Nothing he threw at Guy in battle had any effect—including Avarice, the strongest of the sin-based skills.

*The skill's a total mystery. And when it comes to magic and skills, I guess, you can always find something better than what you got, huh? Guy's magic overwhelmed my Anti-Skill—I need to figure out how that worked...*

Considering Yuuki's sheer confidence, getting so easily defeated by Guy came as a shock. But Yuuki wasn't about to give up. He had survived, and he needed to think up a plan for next time. His ability to turn the page like that was part of what made him such a powerful foe.

He truly believed he'd obtained power beyond any demon lord; that he was the strongest of all—and even if he wasn't, with enough research and the right strategy, he could defeat any opponent. With the backup provided by Kagali, Laplace, and many others, he had created a decent-size force for himself. All was going well...but he had experienced nothing but failure lately, and now, that day's encounter with Guy had utterly shattered his confidence.

But that was, in its own way, a stroke of good luck.

*This has gotten so, so exciting. And that's how a game works, right? The more difficult it is, the more impassioned you get...*

Yuuki wasn't fazed one bit. Already, he was deliberating with himself.

Even with Initiator, Yuuki couldn't read Guy's abilities. Given its unusual propensity for creating its own skill sets, Initiator should be easily able to analyze a target's unique skills. The opponent would have to actually use the skills for it to work, but Yuuki believed that, faced with his powers, nobody would go around hiding their hand.

But it hadn't worked on Guy. And at this point in time, that meant his opponent's skills were something beyond even unique. He wanted power. More power—enough to beat Guy with. Deep in his heart, the flames of greed roared high.

*It must mean there's a chance I can still evolve my Avarice skill. Lord knows*

*I'm greedier than anybody out there. If I can give it some of that greed...*

Reaching that conclusion filled Yuuki with a nervous excitement that made him tremble. He thought about it a bit. Losing to Guy reminded him of the unfairness of the world. He wanted to resist it and emerge victorious—that was his prime desire.

He closed his eyes, turning toward the voice inside him. His consciousness sank deep, deep, into the furthest recesses of his mind.

*Willing to join hands with me now?*

*No. Not that.*

*So why are you here?*

*I have an errand for you.*

*An errand?*

*Yep. I thought you could give me your powers.*

*Don't be silly.*

*I'm not. I'm serious.*

*What kind of stupidity is—?*

*Sorry. You're in my way.*

*...?!*

The next moment, Yuuki pictured his desires until there was nothing else left in his mind's eye. He all but begged for the realization of his true goals, using his powerful will as a weapon that bowed to no one.

He was challenging himself to battle. And then the World Language rang loud:

*Confirmed. Conditions satisfied. The unique skill Avarice has evolved into the ultimate skill Mammon, Lord of Greed.*

Yuuki opened his eyes, defiantly grinning. Then he spoke softly—too softly to be heard.

*"I'll be sure to make good use of your power."*

That day—that moment—that location—marked the birth of the world's most

heinous magic-born.

## ROUGH SKETCHES



*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
1

# THE SOUND OF SOLDIERS' BOOTS

## CHAPTER 1

### THE SOUND OF SOLDIERS' BOOTS

I returned home the day our musical exchange program came to a close. Venom and the rest of the security detail weren't hurt. Neither were Baton and his orchestra. In fact, everyone was safe.

So I gave the kids, who were under Diablo's protection, a week off. They weren't physically injured, but better safe than sorry. The experience certainly taught them the difference between training and real battle, I'm sure, and it definitely seemed to blunt their usual bubbly personalities. There might've been some mental trauma involved, so I told them to take a good rest.

As for Luminus and Leon, we all decided to hold a meeting in due time. We had trouble agreeing on a location, but ultimately we settled upon Rimuru, the capital of Tempest. Luminus's empire of Lubelius would have its hands full rebuilding for a while, and Leon's domain of El Dorado was apparently dealing with its own heavy stuff at the moment and wasn't in much shape to accept foreign VIPs. Tempest, for the time being, was in the clear on that count, and I had no reason not to make the offer. Hell, we already had *two* demon lords living there anyway.

I recalled the winged Ramiris and the freeloader Deeno as I gave the go-ahead to Luminus and Leon, who wound up arriving in Rimuru the next day, leaving me zero time to relax and unwind. Leon made a stop back home to prepare before coming along. I thought this was needlessly quick, but he and Luminus wanted to compare stories and get working on ideas first thing. I had my own questions for them as well, so I indulged them on that.

We met at my most ornate reception hall—Luminus, Leon, and me. Since it was just us three demon lords, I figured it was only appropriate to show off a bit.

Only those involved with the fracas in Lubelius were invited; I wanted to hear everyone's story, and then I'd decide just how much I'd divulge about Chloe.

Things being what they were, we had a tacit agreement to keep all this secret from the rank and filers in our respective forces. Thus I was accompanied only by Shion, Diablo, and Veldora. I really wanted to keep Veldora out of there—he'd get bored halfway through, I knew, so I just wanted him to hang in his room for me. But for some reason, he was adamant about coming, bellowing "*How could I not participate in this?!*" and all. If that's how far he was willing to go, I had little choice but to reluctantly agree. Shion, meanwhile, should have been recuperating from what were demonstrably serious injuries, but she was right as rain in almost no time. Ultraspeed Regeneration really ain't no joke. Once again, I was reminded of how downright scary it was.

So I was standing side by side with Diablo, Shion right behind me. Hinata was seated next to Luminus, Louis and Gunther accompanying them at the rear. Behind Leon were two knights—Arlos and Claude—standing bolt upright. After that, there was only Chloe, the star of the show. She was back to her usual young self, but I figured we should treat her as a grown-up.

I had a long, rectangular conference table set up in the chamber and six padded seats put in place for us. Veldora and I sat adjacent, directly facing Hinata and Luminus, and Leon and Chloe scored the end spots.

It was time to kick off this impromptu demon lord summit of sorts.

\*

First, I had Chloe explain things, going over what happened in Lubelius while Hinata added the occasional comment or two. The story was, to put it lightly, unbelievable under normal circumstances—but after the metaphysical experience I'd had, I was completely willing to accept it.

"...And so thanks to Hinata and Rimuru's aid, I managed to escape from my infinite cycle of death and rebirth."

Once Chloe wrapped things up, everyone looked ready to respond as they gauged one another. Veldora, never one to read a room, kicked off the debate.

"So the Hero who sealed me away back then was—"

That's not particularly important, is it? I certainly didn't think so, but then Hinata replied, "That was me. Now we're tied one-to-one, aren't we? Isn't it nice, getting to taste defeat for a change?"

"Wh-whaaaaaaaat?!"

"Oh, do you have a problem with that? Because I'd be happy to play a tiebreaker right now."

"*Gnnngh...* Very well! If you insist, I shall tap upon my true forces—"

Well, *this* sure wasn't getting us anywhere. The normally cool-as-a-cucumber Hinata always turned extra petty around Veldora. Guess I'd have to step in.

"Okay, that's enough!"

You can tackle that question when you're *alone*, guys.

"It's vital that you show that foolish dragon some discipline, Hinata," Luminus chided. "Should you challenge him, be sure to inform me. I will *gladly* provide assistance."

Quit fanning the flames, Luminus.

"Look," I said, changing the subject, "all's well that ends well, okay? But what I'm wondering about right now is, um— I got killed, didn't I? So was someone from the Empire behind that?"

To me anyway, this was a vital question. The Empire was acting as suspicious as ever at that moment; if that was about to become open hostility, we needed to be on our guard.

"Probably," Chloe replied. "And I think the same person killed Hinata as well. The Empire had a pretty capable fighter on its side, so maybe you guys all took them on at once or something. I didn't see the light that cut through Hinata, though."

Ah. Well, if someone out there managed to kill Hinata, then whacking me before I became a demon lord didn't seem outrageous.

"I've evolved into a demon lord, but that's no reason to let my guard down."

It may have been a different axis of time, but if someone's killed me once,

then of course I was gonna be on the lookout for 'em. If we wound up facing off against the Empire, I'd have to watch out.

"That's a good idea," said Chloe. "The Empire's a lot more dangerous than you think, Rimuru. Veldora went berserk after you were killed, but the Empire repelled *him*, too."

During this Veldora battle, Hinata was murdered—and then Chloe was sent back in time. The memories of what happened after Hinata's murder existed within Chronoa's mind—but only in bits and pieces. Chances were, though, the enraged Veldora and Chronoa clashed with each other, and then the Empire made its move in the midst of all that chaos. We all saw what Chronoa could do, so we knew that simply joining a fight with her involved was pretty amazing already.

It could be—was likely, even—that the Empire's war power was way beyond what we'd assumed. Luminus and Leon seemed to agree with that; we were all starting to see the Empire as a dangerous threat. But as the reception hall began sinking into a gloom, Veldora went off on another wild tangent.

"I find it hard to believe I'd simply go *insane*," he said, sneering.

The reaction across the room was unanimous:

*Are you kidding me?*

Running his mouth in the midst of this weighty discussion, like a golfer teeing up... Well, it *had* to be Veldora, I suppose—

"Wait, wait! Why are you looking at me like that?! A gentleman like me would *hardly* lose his temper so catastrophically!"

Um, if I may—you *definitely* went on an extended rampage long ago, and it's easy to imagine you in that state.

But—hey—maybe in this other time line, he killed me after I resurrected him, which then set him off in a violent rage. Because honestly, that scenario gave me some warm fuzzies.



"All right," I said, smiling a bit as I assuaged Veldora, "let's leave it at that for now."

The Empire is dangerous, we concluded, so it was time to move on.

Next came the memories of Chronoa, as far as Chloe could recall them.

After the Empire defeated Veldora, the world plunged into a great war, East pitted against West. It dragged along, the Eastern Empire holding the advantage—and in the midst of this, Milim made her move. My death must have antagonized her against the Empire, and she wasn't afraid to demonstrate her hostility. That made Guy intervene, and once again, we had Milim vs Guy, the world's worst possible matchup. Daggrull and Luminus also clashed on the battlefield, apparently, spreading the flames of war further.

At this point, Chronoa fought against someone and lost her life. She had sped into battle, fighting as far as her spirit could take her. All that remained was her Will of Destruction, so she was mowing down the big and powerful left and right. As a result, she didn't remember who finally bested her.

"And only so many people have what it takes to beat Chronoa, huh?"

"Guy, I'd imagine."

"It could only be Guy."

Luminus and Leon immediately replied to my musing, and I agreed with them. We didn't know how the fight between Guy and Milim panned out, but really, Guy was the only person capable of killing Chronoa. Or maybe not, for all we knew. We had no idea what Guy's motive could've been.

"So what made Chronoa so supportive of me, then?"

Despite what Chloe told us, I still didn't see how Chronoa and I were connected. She was resurrected after I died; we never would've met each other, but clearly she had a *thing* for me. I may not be too quick on the uptake, but even *I* would notice that much—and that was true from the very beginning, wasn't it? She even gave me a big hug and a kiss after I summoned her for Chloe. *Why all that the first time?* I'd thought, but I suppose Chronoa had her reasons.

"Well—"

*"Because you saved me, Rimuru,"* Chronoa said, finishing Chloe's thought. *"In the future world, where all I did was rampage, you were the one who saved me. I'm sure of it."*

"Hey! I was about to say that!"

*"Oh, let me at least tell him that much. I'm you as well, after all, so it's the same thing, isn't it?"*

To the outside observer, it looked like Chloe had a particularly flashy multiple personality disorder. Apparently Chronoa butted into conversations whenever Chloe let her guard down. I'm sure they both had a lot to get used to.

The two of them proceeded to take turns talking. According to Chloe's (or Chronoa's) memory, I apparently wasn't so dead in the future after all. The Empire defeated me—we were certain of that—but it looked like I managed to come back to life somehow. Which... Neat, I guess? I can't speak for myself, but my faithful friend Raphael would never make a mistake. It sounded like Raphael took its damn time, but in the end, it still found a way to keep me alive.

By that point, though, the world had changed profoundly. Veldora was gone; Tempest was in ruins. A massive war had erupted between East and West, and demon lords were waging bloody battles for supremacy over one another. In which case, I could pretty easily imagine my feelings about the whole situation. I'm *me*, after all, and chances are I'd devote myself to tracking down anyone who survived. Maybe I couldn't rescue everybody, but I could at least lend a hand to those I was closely connected to. That was just what I did, it turned out, and in the end, I found Chloe/Chronoa.

Chronoa's recollections were too fragmented to answer the bigger questions, but either way, we had a grasp of the general flow. I ran into Chronoa, fighting her on multiple occasions, and I'm sure I managed to win her over again. But as Chronoa told me, the fate of the world was already sealed by then.

*"As you all predicted, I fought against Guy. I don't remember the events leading up to that, but I'm positive Rimuru wasn't there. Then, just as I was about to die, Rimuru held me close—and the next thing I knew, I saw Rimuru and Chloe from the past."*

So Guy was there after all; that didn't surprise me. The question was what exactly happened before Chronoa's death...but I presumed that was where her journey back through time began. However, that still didn't adequately explain how she arrived at Chloe's time line. Maybe there was a chance I did something to engineer that?

"Had I evolved into a demon lord by that point?"

"*Yep. And you were even more powerful than you are now.*"

Uh, hang on, can she tell that just by looking at me? I liked to think I was pretty strong at this point, but it was hard to believe Chronoa would misjudge someone's prowess. I suppose losing my closest friends drove me to do some pretty wild stuff. Now, of course, none of this had any bearing on me at the moment, but we *did* have the Empire to think about. Maybe I should've viewed this more optimistically. Like, I still had room to grow—that sort of thing.

Regardless, if I was stronger than I was now, my Great Sage must've made the transformation to Raphael by this time. If so, I could totally see it doing something wacky like transmitting the memories from Chronoa's spirit into the young Chloe.

...

Ha! Can't deny it, huh?

And now, I felt, I had a handle on what happened in the future. "Hey, all's well that ends well, right?"

"That's a pretty casual approach to take," Hinata snapped.

"Oh, don't be that way," I replied, giving the sneering Hinata a gentle smile. "Chloe's just fine, as you can see, and Veldora's already been resurrected. All we gotta do is keep an eye on those two, and we won't have to worry about them going berserk. So the only problem left to deal with is the Empire, isn't it?"

"Indeed," said Luminus. "If Daggrull decides to attack me, I will take care of him. You saved Chloe for me—it is the least I can do to repay the favor."

Luminus and Chloe really did seem to get along. Now my stock with the

emperor was skyrocketing. I suppose this meant we could enjoy an even better relationship than before.

Daggrull's ambitions were one issue to tackle, but Luminus was willing to shoulder that burden without me having to ask, promising me she'd endeavor to keep the West peaceful. The Western Nations were, technically speaking, part of Luminus's domain—there were some skirmishes with Guy's forces in certain areas, but that was more a pastime for Guy, nothing serious. Luminus must've concluded that it wasn't worth obsessing over. Instead, Daggrull was the bigger problem, and she had been on the lookout for a while, wondering when hostilities with him might break out.

"If we've fought in the future," Luminus said, "there is a good chance he'll take advantage of any moves the Empire makes."

I wasn't so sure of that. "Yeah, but Daggrull's sons are living here in Tempest, don't forget. I doubt he'd resort to force *that* readily."

If Daggrull rolled into combat, there had to be a reason for it.

"Huh? Daggrull's sons? Is that true?" Luminus demanded.

"Sure is. They're trainin' hard under Shion at the moment," I replied.

"That they are," Shion briskly interjected. "They have much left to learn, but they *have* started to earn their keep as of late. I've occasionally rewarded their efforts with some of my home cooking, and they cried tears of joy over it. I found it quite charming, I'll add."

Tears of joy? I dunno about that. I mean, sure, if a girl you have a crush on cooks for you, that'd make anyone happy...but that cooking had to be *edible*, for one. But—hey—if you could deal with its appearance and texture, Shion's meals had grown surprisingly consumable. So maybe we were good there? If *they* weren't complaining, it was nothing I needed to comment on. Let's leave it at that.

Hearing that Daggrull's sons were in this nation made Luminus give me an astonished kinda look, but it was gone in an instant. She recovers fast.

"Then it is true, I suppose. Perhaps Daggrull was being coerced by another... but then, this is the future, so using the past tense is rather silly. He *might* be

coerced by someone.”

A war would take place in the future, but at the moment, things were pretty peaceful. Daggrull must’ve had some reason to harbor dreams of territorial expansion. He didn’t seem like *that* much of a villain when I met him at Walpurgis. Maybe I’d chat with Daggra and his brothers to see what I could find out. If there was some kind of problem, I’d be happy to talk about it—that’d beat fighting a war over it any day.

“Right. I’ll investigate that on my end,” I assured Luminus.

“I will hold you to that. I have no interest in fighting a futile war, after all.”

So we decided to examine the Daggrull issue and make a decision later. It’d suck to have him working in tandem with the Empire, so just in case, Luminus would keep a close eye on him, too. Louis and Gunther nodded their approval, so I felt the task was safe in their hands.

“That leaves Guy to discuss...”

“I’d like to talk about that, if I could.”

There was no point complaining to Guy about what he would do in the future, but I still had my concerns. It was best, I thought, to explain matters to him as well. How deep I should go with him, of course, was another thorny issue...

But Veldora suddenly jumped in. “Guy is an Arbitrator. He’s nothing to me right now, but long, long ago, I have a vague hunch that he might have annihilated me—or something to that effect. Or not at all, even. It hardly counts if nobody remembers it, right?”

I wasn’t sure where to begin with this little confession. What did he mean, Guy was an Arbitrator? And they fought at some point in the past—and Veldora got “annihilated”? That was news to me. Also, having it not count because you don’t remember it sounded like a dumb excuse even for a young child, but I didn’t want to dog-pile on him, so I kept quiet.

“Hoh,” remarked Luminus. “Guy has his wiser side, I see.”

“An Arbitrator?” Leon paused a moment. “Guy is certainly not allied with humankind, but he’s not hostile to them, either. If he killed Chronoa in the

future, it's easy to surmise that Chronoa was little more than her Will of Destruction at that point, and Guy saw her as a threat to the world's continued existence."

"So what's this Arbitrator stuff about?" It seemed like I was the only one out of the loop.

"An Arbitrator," Luminus explained, "is part of a separate system from Heroes and demon lords. Their mission is to prevent the destruction of the world. It is said they speak for Veldanava himself, the creator and Star-King Dragon."

"Indeed. The Star-King, my elder brother, created this world, and he set up this system so nobody would go around ripping it apart."

Aha. And so Veldora was annihilated after trying to do just that. Now it made sense—it proved that the True Dragon definitely *did* wake back up at that point in the future. I wasn't so sure Veldora lost his memory of it, but I was better off not bringing it up.

"So that's how it is? In that case, I don't think Guy's likely to target Chloe right now."

"Uh-huh. I mean, I remember Chronoa going crazy, and, um, I don't have any personal thing against the demon lord Guy, so..."

Hinata and Chloe seemed convinced as well, smiling as they chatted about this. As long as nobody went berserk, it seemed like we could avoid conflict with Guy.

"Well, in that case, should we let Leon discuss this with Guy?" I asked.

"Right," Leon replied. "My and Chloe's futures are riding on this, after all."

"Hang on, Leon. You're not involved in this." Chloe, with all her innocent, childlike looks, could be downright scary when chiding Leon like that. I felt kind of bad for him.

Leon was this really handsome, cool-looking dude, but I guess he got the villain treatment a lot of the time, as his entire relationship with Shizu attested to. But between his tongue-tied ways and knack for painting himself in a bad light, I felt like maybe he was just really misunderstood. To put it succinctly, he

was like Masayuki, except the exact opposite.

Chloe treated him like a friendly neighborhood boy, a big brother-like figure. Nothing romantic, though—apparently Leon had always been popular with the ladies, and perhaps thanks to that, Chloe never picked up on the love he had for her.

Thinking about it, I had to pity him. For once in my life, I decided to try showing him a little more kindness.

\*

So I'd call this summit a success. Both demon lords had pledged to support me. We just needed to stay alert for the Empire, and beyond that, we'd each figure out the next moves to make. But right when I was about to adjourn:

"P-please, just one moment! He has guests! They're in the middle of an important meeting!"

"Oh? I'm impressed that you spotted me barging in. But since I'm here and all, mind if I say my hellos?"

There was a clamor down the hall. That voice, that pompousness... It had to be Guy, the strongest of all demon lords. He had made it this far in without me noticing, and only a *very* small number of people could do that.

*Report. No signs of hostility.*

...Or did *it* notice all along? Now wasn't the time to debate about that, though. I hurriedly left my seat, but before I could even lift a finger, Diablo sneered and walked over to the door.

"Yo!"

"Go away."

He concluded the short exchange by slamming the door in Guy's face.

~~~~~  
..."

This was too much to handle. The rest of us froze on the spot.

"Oh, come now, Diablo! I'll have none of that!" Guy shouted angrily after opening the door once more.

"Tch! You are meddling in a vital summit. It has only been a day, and our preparations are not yet complete. We would like to take our time discussing matters with you, so please, do not come until you are invited."

Diablo was trying to be polite, but he was acting *damn* sure of himself in front of Guy.

...Did they know each other, maybe? I wasn't the only one who thought so, judging by Luminus's and Leon's surprised looks.

"Unbelievable," Luminus scoffed. "Not surrendering a single step to Guy—although I'd expect nothing less from Noir."

"What? Noir?!" Leon yelled. "Why is someone so lofty in the service of Rimuru?"

*Hmmm...?!* The words I'm picking up do *not* portend good things for my future! Diablo's someone "lofty"? His head's in the clouds, yeah, but... And what's this "Noir" stuff?

As I sat there confused, things grew even more chaotic.

"Sir Rimuru, are you all right?! I just heard from my sister that—"

"My lord, I felt the presence of the Red...!"

"Oh, is this a war? Because if it is, I'm ready to fight!"

First Benimaru rushed in, then Soei. Behind them came Carrera, and at almost the same time, Ultima came barreling in as well. It was nuts.

At this point, I may as well have allowed Guy inside instead of booting him. I had no intention of inviting him anyway! It looked like I'd have to discuss all this in detail with Diablo later. Now, though, I needed to restore order.

"Everyone, calm down! And you step back, too, Diablo."

That finally made everyone settle down a bit. Once all was quiet, I continued.

"I hadn't planned this, but, Guy, I actually have something to discuss with you, too. If you're here and all, I might as well have you join the summit. You okay with that?"

"Sure. Perfect, even. I need to talk to you, too."

I'd wanted Leon to handle him, but I guess we had a change of plans. With Guy's permission in hand, I then had to chase everybody else out of the room.

"Okay—there's nothing to worry about, all right? I'll call you guys if something comes up, so get back to work for me."

Everyone looked amply relieved. I heard some unwelcome grumbling, such as "Heh, the Red's done it again. I don't stand a chance against him...for now..." and "Pfft! I thought we could start bashing some heads," but overall, things were under control.

\*

The rest of the rabble were back at their posts. Shuna left to prepare some tea for those of us still in the reception hall. As she did, Leon spoke first.

"Now *what* is the meaning of this? Why is Jaune here, of all people?!"

Huh?

"I have a question as well," said Luminus. "I presume the other one was Violet, but were my eyes playing tricks on me? I heard she was rather gloomy and spiteful, so I can't be entirely certain..."

Huhhh? Jaune, Violet... What are these people talking about?

Oh, wait!

"Did you mean Carrera and Ultima? Diablo over there invited them, but they're actually a lot more talented than I thought—"

I was trying to explain things, but Leon and Luminus didn't let me finish.

"Carrera? And *Ultima*?! Did you give those two *names*!?"

"Simply unbelievable. So Diablo wasn't enough for you? You've brought even more Primals under your wing...?"

Leon was on his feet and shouting. Luminus looked completely out of sorts. Both of them fixed me with piercing glares.

"Yeah, isn't it crazy? That's partly why I'm here, so I can grill him about what he's up to."

Even Guy was spouting nonsense at me. And I mean, what was I supposed to

say?

As I floundered for a response, Shuna brought in some tea on a cart. We all fell silent, not wanting to get in her way. A pleasant aroma filled the chamber, helping us regain our calm.

My mind thus cleared, I tried considering what everyone was saying. The key word here was Primal, as stated by Luminus. And *that* meant—

*Understood. It is one standard for describing demons.*

Right, right, I remember having that explained to me. They were defined as the “first” demons, and all that...

...Wait, the *first* demons?!

“Diablo, you aren’t one of the first demons or something, are you?”

“Well,” he casually replied, “yes, I am a leader of one of the seven bands of demons, among the first born into this world.”

Oh man. I had no idea the demon I summoned when I transformed into a demon lord was something *this* huge. I knew he was superpowerful, but this was even crazier than I thought.

“...You...didn’t know that?” Leon asked me.

“Incredible,” Luminus scoffed. “I always thought you had a screw loose, but not to *this* extent...”

Leon’s and Luminus’s gazes were boring into me. But what could I say? If Diablo answered a summon as off the cuff as mine was, there was no way he could’ve been anyone *that* amazing.

...

I think I even stunned Raphael into silence. But Diablo’s true identity wasn’t the real shocker; Raphael seemed surprised that I didn’t know about it myself. I suppose Raphael thought I knew all about the Primal Demons, then.

...But hang on. I feel like Elmesia, the Heavenly Emperor of Thalion, mentioned something about Primals as well. So *that* was why she warned me so much about them! Because she picked up on who Diablo was! And I would

have, too, if I had paid a little more attention.

Hey, this happens, you know? You get an idea in your head, and you stick with it. I'm not gonna investigate every little factoid I know, and I'm not gonna bring it up with everybody I see. And as far as Raphael was concerned, there was no special need to tell me.

What a pitfall. Having a dictionary on hand wouldn't help much if you never used it. Raphael had been giving me a lot of helpful advice lately, but not even it could understand what I did and didn't know. No matter how brilliant my partner was, it meant nothing if I didn't utilize him correctly. I sure learned my lesson about *that* today. Again.

Ignoring my surprise, Diablo began regaling the audience with the story of how he met me. Apparently this extended all the way back to me encountering Shizu. She and Diablo knew each other, it turned out, and Diablo happened to be visiting this land when he picked up on the presence of Shizu in her final moments. The idea of Diablo being aware of me since back then was astounding, although I still had no idea what his motivations were.

"The lower demons in my family accused me of fleeing my post in order to serve Sir Rimuru, an accusation that wounds me deeply. But I took my time! I waited for just the right opportunity, and in the end, I successfully answered Sir Rimuru's call!"

Diablo flashed a contented smile.

So him coming to *that* summon wasn't some fluke after all. It was inevitable because he planned it that way. I could feel a headache coming on from the shock. What's more—in another wild revelation, Diablo revealed that he was so jealous of Beretta that he tried to "purge" him without alerting me. However—as he dared to put it—since I had created Beretta's body, he deemed it too much of a waste to damage it at all. "This body was handmade by Sir Rimuru," Beretta had scolded him, "and if you lay a finger on it, he'll be *quite* displeased."

Truly, this was exhausting me. What a ridiculously long story this was. *Someone please stop him*, I wanted to beg—but Diablo was talking a mile a minute, and nobody could get a word in edgewise. So I finally spoke up.

"Diablo... Diablo! That's enough, all right? We need to continue the summit."

"Satisfied now?" Guy added, backing me up. "Enough about you, Diablo. That bum Deeno's here, too, isn't he? Can you call him over for me?"

That was finally enough to shut Diablo up.

"I will bring Sir Deeno over at once," Shuna said, bowing and taking advantage of her chance at long last to leave. *Or escape*, I thought, my heart about ready to give out on me.

"But I was getting to the good part..."

Diablo looked eager to continue, but everyone ignored him. If we let him prattle on, there was no telling what he'd say next. Keeping him quiet right then would do wonders for my blood pressure.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, Guy had sat down in a chair. Leon's attendants had brought a seat over from the adjacent waiting area for him.

"Ah, how thoughtful of you," he said.

Arlos and Claude nodded their appreciation behind Leon. They must have known Guy from before—otherwise, I'm sure, they'd be too scared of offending him to move at all. I suppose I should've arranged something for Guy, but my brain was running on empty. Having this pair of knights around was a godsend. For all I knew, I could've pissed Guy off without even realizing it. (Besides, the secretary who *should've* been backing me up was too busy talking his head off, and Shion was frozen by my side in a classic "not my problem" power move.)

"Sorry to make you handle that," I said to the two knights.

"No need to worry about it!"

"We understand your situation, Lord Rimuru. You're busy trying to shoo people away from this chamber, aren't you? Allow us to handle this much for you."

Arlos and Claude were really nice. Diablo and Shion could learn a lot from them.

"Guys, can you try to be as considerate as those two over there, please?"

"Heh-heh-heh-heh... I had perhaps grown a little too impassioned."

Diablo seemed ready to pin the blame on Guy's unexpected appearance—but yeah, maybe this was just an unlucky break for him. Normally, he'd never overlook something like that.

"Duly noted, sir!"

Shion, on the other hand, was the ever-obedient student. Great at saying *Yes, teacher!* but not at much else. I could only pray the knowledge would stick.

So Guy sat down, acting as pompous as ever. As he did, Shuna came back in with Deeno...and Ramiris, too, for some reason, and before long the summit was back in session.

\*

Our first topic was the Primal Demons.

"So, Deeno, you got an excuse for us?" Guy asked.

"Excuse? For what?"

Deeno's reply came too naturally. It only riled Guy further.

"Don't give me that crap, you! Why didn't you stop him from naming the three of them?!"

Yeah! That was important, right? By *him*, I suppose Guy meant me—but look, if I'd known these three were such bad news, I would've never even thought about assigning them names, okay? It was kinda too late now, but I wished I'd had some warning, at least.

"Look, why in the name of all that's unholy do you think I sent you here in the first place?"

"Um...sightseeing?"

"No! This is a reconnaissance detail! Reconnaissance, you hear me?!"

Watching this exchange, I realized that even Guy had his own struggles. I'd had a hunch about this, but it turned out Deeno was a spy after all—although I wished Guy didn't have to say so right in front of him.

"And you! Don't act like you're not involved in this!"

Oh, and now Guy was taking it out on me? Great. It didn't seem fair to be

yelled at by the person spying on me, but I supposed I was the cause of this, so to speak. I wanted to plead my case, but a reflexive reaction wasn't a smart move. This was Guy, after all—inviting his ire upon me was never a smart idea.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Why get so worked up over such trifles, Guy? He's got quite a long history of naming people willy-nilly, you know!"

Veldora, for a change, actually stepped up to defend me. I gave him a subliminal *Attaboy...*

"Silence, you child! The adults are talking!"

"...R-right."

...but a few choice words from Luminus shut him up. He can dish it out, but he sure can't take it, huh? And now the whole room was aware of that. Still, at least his contribution pointed Guy's ire away from me momentarily. I seized the opportunity to launch an offensive of my own.

"Okay, okay, so Deeno came here to keep tabs on me, then? I'll refrain from complaining about that for now, but it's true that Deeno's at fault for not stopping me, and the person who trusted him enough to send him on that mission has some responsibility as a supervisor, doesn't he? Don't you think so, Guy?"

Spreading the responsibility, in so many words. I wasn't about to shoulder all the blame here, so I tried to hand some of it back over to Deeno and Guy. The former was clearly at fault, so all that remained was to rope the latter in, too.

"He's right, Guy. Besides, I told you, I can't watch over him! I can't believe you actually thought about making me do work!"

Deeno must've been pretty quick on the uptake, because it looked like he immediately picked up on my plan. And on the bandwagon he went.

"I swear, you people..."

Guy was frustrated. I took pains not to rile him further, feeling around for a landing point.

"Besides," Deeno continued, "I never even had any time to stop him. You know, when I saw Rimuru bringing the Primals over, I was so surprised that I

couldn't even speak. I mean, like, *three* of them! Diablo was always kind of a weirdo, so I could understand him, but can you even imagine *Testarossa* working for someone? Nobody could!"

"True enough."

Oops. Sounded like Deeno was trying to wriggle his way out of this. Guy was about to accept it, too. I didn't like how this was going.

"Listen, guys, Diablo brought them over because he said they'd be useful, and I believed him, all right? I never thought they were these superpowerful beings, and they were perfectly happy to be serving me. They're under Diablo's direct control, so he's the one responsible for them. And it'll be on me as well if something happens, but it's only natural to trust in your employees, isn't it?"

I tried to strike a more upbeat tone as I pushed the blame on Diablo. He was the one who started this; I thought he deserved that much. I turned my eyes toward him, all but begging him to take on Guy's anger for me. For reasons only he knew, he eagerly nodded.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Your trust in me is encouraging like nothing else. I must be more diligent than ever to live up to your expectations."

"..."

Guy took one look at Diablo's gleaming smile and fell silent. He leaned back in his seat, clearly fatigued.

"So this is Diablo's fault?" he pompously stated.

"Well, not his *fault*, exactly..."

"We're kinda victims here, too, y'know?"

I hemmed and hawed a bit, Deeno faltering as well. Only Diablo retained his sparkling pride, looking as ebullient as ever.

"Well, *this guy*"—Guy pointed at Diablo—"has been a nutcase for ages now, so I'm not going to whine about that at this point. And, Deeno, if you can't stop Rimuru...well, circumstances being what they were, I understand that."

*Whoa, whoa, this is getting way out of control...*

“But you, Rimuru!”

*Oh, here we go! Why am I taking the heat?!*

“What about me?”

I couldn’t lose my cool here. I had to be bold with Guy—be bold and act like I did nothing wrong. So to keep him from picking up on my indecision, I had Raphael take over primary control of my body. That’d keep me safe. No matter how much I was panicking on the inside, I’d remain calm and collected on the surface.

“Don’t give me that shit!”

Guy then proceeded to angrily lecture me. Thanks to me, the balance of the world had totally collapsed, *blah blah blah*, now nobody knew how the world situation would unfold, *blah blah blah...* It was some pretty heady stuff, and even giving Raphael bodily control didn’t accomplish much. I guess Guy was a lot more calculating than I thought.

“And what’s more, thanks to you, Mizeri’s mission was a big failure, too. I’m gonna hold you at fault for that, you hear me?”

I wasn’t sure how I was at fault for something I wasn’t aware of, but if Guy wanted to pin the blame on me, then so be it. I just nodded, said, “All right,” and let it go.

\*

The lecture was over, but Guy still wasn’t done talking.

Apparently Guy made a deliberate habit of triggering calamities at regular intervals, so the whole of humanity considered him an enemy. His goal was to stoke a unified fear against an all-powerful foe, keeping humankind from wasting its time with needless internal power struggles. When Granville was in power, Guy took no action, refraining from any major moves, but now that Granville attempted an all-out attack on Luminus, the balance of power was totally out of whack.

Thus, Guy had ordered Mizeri to reunite humankind with an event that’d terrorize everyone at once. Her idea was to kill off the Council and all its members, reminding the leaders of the Western Nations just how fearsome a

demon lord could be. That, she reasoned, would help unite all the leaders peacefully.

"So Mizeri attacked the Council, and *who* did she find there but Blanc—or 'Testarossa' now, I suppose? I'm so used to her *old* title that I can't help but keep using it. But regardless, Mizeri avoided a confrontation with Testarossa, and so her plan was foiled. That's all well and good. The *problem* is what comes after that. As long as we can't rule over those cunning humans with fear, they're doubtlessly gonna start squabbling among themselves. And with the Rozzos a thing of the past, history tells us that the power struggle's only gonna get more intense. What do you think will happen if the Eastern Empire makes a move while the Western Nations are carrying on with *that* nonsense? They'll lose big, is what. And it's *your* fault, Rimuru! So tell me what you're gonna *do* about it!"

Well. Didn't expect that. Guy was trying to prevent the Western Nations from tearing themselves apart? He never seemed to take much interest in the human race, but maybe he was trying to keep doomsday from happening, at least. Guess that was his job as Arbitrator and stuff. He wasn't at all a friend to humankind, and his means could get pretty violent, but in a way, I think I could understand his motives.

Now I had to question my plans for the Western Nations. I didn't even realize Testarossa and Mizeri had made contact with each other, but I couldn't go and reveal *that* at this point. All I really wanted to do was make humanity recognize us and build friendly relations with them, but...

As I pondered over how to answer him, Diablo stepped up in my place. Ignoring the scowl this elicited from Guy, he said, "Heh. What will he do, you ask? All Sir Rimuru desires is making his ideals reality."

I was anxious about what he might say, but it wasn't like I had any concrete ideas. I doubted idealistic arguments would work on Guy, so I counted on Diablo and his supreme confidence to save the day, but I guessed he disappointed me, huh? He went with the whole "lofty ideals" argument I'd already dismissed.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, it's very simple, Guy. I am merely saying there's no point in doing something as bland and uninteresting as terrorizing people. Certainly, they'll be more submissive to you, but it's not making the most thorough use of their abilities. Terror, you see, is an emotion that dissipates over time. No matter how much tragedy you engineer, it is doomed to fade into oblivion. Once it does, all that remains is bitterness."

"Hmm. Continue."

"Bitterness, over time, turns into hatred. It drives people to take revenge upon their abusers. Humanity—lacking in intelligence, as clever as they may be—fails to notice exactly how absolute the difference in power is between them and us. If they are agitated by monsters or the like, they'll quickly dirty their hands with some quite foolish behavior."

"Right. And that's why I purge them. Because I'm not willing to let them get their hands dirty."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh... And I tell you, it is a pointless errand. The inherent foolishness of man causes their memories to fade. One generation gives way to the next so quickly; there's nothing to be done about that. However..."

He paused for a moment, eyeing Guy with a serious look.

"Instead of letting the Rozzos corner the market, if you redistribute the wealth, you can have nations rebuild their relationships while retaining some amount of fairness. That, in turn, creates new economic principles."

"And then?"

"You leave these new principles, these new choices, and you delude them into thinking they've chosen their own future. That way, the foolish humans will believe they've created it for themselves. This system is something that, unlike human memory, never fades. It allows you to rule the human world semi-permanently. Sir Rimuru is the one managing that, and I see it as my personal job."

Wow. Diablo was talking sense. So basically, if they build it up themselves, they'll treat it better? Also, was that really what I had in mind? I felt like I might've said something along those lines, but I didn't think it was anything

quite so grandiose... That, and he was talking based on the foregone conclusion that it'd *work*, which was kinda scary.

"I see. So if you hold on to the economy and guarantee their safety for nothing in return, the weak will come to depend on you? A society where everything's resolved through bloodless wars. Yeah, maybe that'd be better than life under the Rozzos."

Guy nodded, seemingly reevaluating Diablo.

"But of course. A world where the masses are left satisfied, not the classes. The supply-and-demand chains that result will come to create new possibilities as well. And *that*, Guy, is what Sir Rimuru hopes for."

He wasn't wrong, I suppose. What I really looked forward to was seeing how culture would advance and evolve. I wanted to see more mass media for everyone to enjoy—movies, music, manga, novels. Creating that kind of art required a foundation that afforded you enough free time in life. I wanted to give people a chance to enjoy prosperity so they could discover these new, previously unknown talents within them. I'll freely admit that I didn't think too much beyond that.

"So once they learn how nice peace can be, they'll be afraid of losing it?" Guy asked Diablo.

"Precisely. In a word, it is the concept of *gratitude*. People appreciate Sir Rimuru for protecting the peace, and so they contribute to preserving that peace worldwide. I believe that is far more efficient than the terror-driven rule you picture."

Before I knew it, the two of them seemed to be fully understanding each other. Luminus and Leon, listening to Diablo's blueprint for the future—as well as their attendants, even—they all looked at me, bemused wonder on their faces. Under that kind of pressure, there was absolutely no way I could tell anyone I wasn't thinking anything like that at all.

"But if we're going to do that, it'll take a long-term perspective and a lot of intricate calculations, won't it? You have to manage it, or I can easily see there being too many humans around to deal with. They'll get all carried away. You want me to go through all that trouble?"

Come on, Guy. It's not like caring for a pet. You're not gonna wake up one day and find that your hamster had a dozen babies or something.

"Ha! And you think Sir Rimuru is incapable of seeing into the future that far? Perhaps it would be too difficult to manage for you, but for Sir Rimuru, it's something he could handle in his spare time. I think it's safe to say there is no need for concern."

Whoa. Why was Diablo assuming *I'd* manage this? I mean, I was pretty sure he and I talked about how running the world from behind the scenes was a nice, demon lord-like way to go about matters...but if you said that in front of Guy and the other demon lords, they would meddle with me, wouldn't they?

I was unnerved, really, but apparently I shouldn't have been. In fact:

"You think, huh? Well, okay. I'll leave all that to you. I *really* doubt it's gonna go as well as you describe, but it's no skin off my nose if you fail. 'Cause if you do fail, I'll just step up and start culling those fools. So let's see you take responsibility for this, all right?"

Surprisingly enough, Guy was smiling at me. And if that was what it'd come to, I'd just have to accept it. If I said *All right* a moment ago, I couldn't really say *No way* now, without warning.

"I think Diablo was exaggerating things a little, but he's not wrong, generally speaking. Sure, it's a bit idealistic, but I feel like it'd be nice if things worked out like that. And regardless of what you have to say about it, I'm gonna try to engineer world peace my own way."

That was my promise. And so without really understanding what was going on, I was officially appointed by the Octagram to manage the Western Nations.

It would've been great if the summit mercifully ended right there, but we *still* weren't done with everything.

"Rimuru," rumbled Leon, "let me give you a word of warning. Carrera, formerly known as Jaune, is the kind of short-tempered demon who'd freely lob nuclear magic around if she's seized by the impulse. You'd best keep her on a short leash, or else the capital you took great pains to build will become a pile of ash."

"That's right," chimed in Luminus. "And let me just add this. As mentioned earlier, the Violet I know is a malicious, moody individual, the living embodiment of brutality. Unlike the monster races, she doesn't seek to eradicate the human race—but she is fickle, prone to quickly change her mind on matters. Perhaps she's pretending to be a nice young lady in front of you, but I'd be very hesitant to let my guard down."

Their advice didn't put my mind at ease much. And although they didn't spell it out, it sounded like Testarossa was even more trouble than Carrera and Ultima.

This was starting to look like bad news. Well, "starting to" isn't the right way to put it, maybe. More like it *was* bad news, and I'd finally just noticed. I now knew Testarossa and the others were Primal Demons, and I had just been told by my demon lord peers that they were *my* problem. If they ever did anything, it'd be my fault...and while they were technically serving under Diablo, blaming him would get me nowhere.

I'd even told Elmesia I'd take care of them, so I couldn't just rescind my offer. I wanted to go back in time and punch my dull-minded self, but that's what I get for being so thoughtless, I suppose. It'd be a lot harder to manage *these* guys than all of human society, and the thought made me let out a surreptitious, depressed sigh.

\*

Then Ramiris, Deeno, and Veldora got to their feet, as if waiting for Guy to wrap up.

"Y'know, we feel kinda in the way here, so we'll let you all take care of the rest, okay?"

"Yeah. I've got some important work to do. Vester's waiting for me and stuff, so I'll catch you later, Guy!"

"Indeed. And in that case, I will go back to my Dungeon guardian duties. Ah, a dragon's work is never done! Kwaah-ha-ha-ha!"

They worked as a well-practiced, synchronized team, clearly trying their best to get the hell out of Dodge. Deeno, in particular, was so eager to not get yelled

at any longer that he brought up his totally nonexistent work ethic.

“Huh? Work? You? That joke’s not even funny.”

Guy didn’t overlook that, either, making the obvious comment. But Ramiris was ready with a retort.

“No, no, he’s tellin’ the truth! Deeno’s my assistant now! I’m serious!”

Guy’s eyebrows arched in surprise. He wasn’t about to believe anything Deeno said, but if Ramiris backed him up, he’d have no choice.

“Deeno is...*working*? What foul magic did you cast upon him, Rimuru?!”

His amazement was now pointed my way. It was a tough question to answer.

“I don’t know! But in our nation, the rule is that you gotta sing for your supper, and I’m just having him follow that. There’s no spells involved.”

If I had a spell like *that*, I’d have a lot less trouble. It must’ve come out in my tone of voice, because Guy didn’t push the topic any further.

So Ramiris and her two cohorts scurried out of the chamber. They had just finished the tea and snacks Shuna set out for them, so their timing was impeccable. I’d expect nothing less from them.

“Fine, then,” Guy muttered. “I’ve given my complaints to Deeno. Hopefully, he’ll try to bring me some *useful* information for a change.”

Again, I really wished he wouldn’t muse like that when I was in the same damn room. Being so blatantly alerted about spies in my midst kinda made things hard to deal with, not that I could tell Guy to knock it off. Might as well look on the bright side, though. It sure beat probing each other out under the table.

So I changed the topic.

“Great. So did you come all the way here just to ask about Testarossa and the other Primal Demons?”

If that was all, Guy would’ve been heading home by now. But he wasn’t, so there must’ve been something else. I really didn’t want yet more problems to deal with, but we wouldn’t be getting anywhere unless I asked.

"That was on my mind, yes, but I have another question." Guy reclined in his seat, looking at the rest of us before settling upon Leon. "I just had an encounter with a group that called themselves the Moderate Jesters."

"Oh?"

"That's the group *you* had dealings with, isn't it?" Guy asked Leon.

"It is," Leon replied with a nod.

Hang on. He just casually confirmed Guy's suspicions, but that was pretty damn important!

"Wait, so did you see Yuuki, too?" I asked Guy.

"Mm-hmm."

Not long ago, I ordered Soei to examine the Free Guild headquarters and its regional branches. I was pretty sure our encounter yesterday wasn't planned by Yuuki, so I figured he'd pop back to his own headquarters. I doubted he'd make much of a public presence, so I had Soei's forces stake out likely Guild sites, keeping an eye out for disguises or standins. For the time being, I hadn't heard anything—but I never thought Yuuki would run into Guy instead.

"So are you connected to Yuuki, then?" I pressed.

"Huh? Don't be silly," Guy replied. "They were trying to flee to the East, so I spanked 'em a little for it."

I suspected Guy and Yuuki might be in cahoots, but I guess not. That was a relief, but it still didn't indicate what Guy was after.

"You didn't kill him?" Leon asked. I was curious about that myself—but moreover, was he saying that Yuuki abandoned his positions in the West and tried to flee eastward? He never struck me as the type to shy away from making big moves, but this was an incredibly bold decision, even for him. Too bad he was unlucky enough to draw Guy's ire. If he "spanked" him, I assumed murder wasn't on the menu, but he sure must've put him through the wringer. Not that I felt bad for Yuuki. He deserved it.

"No, I didn't *kill* him. At first, I thought I'd capture him and make you owe me a favor, but things changed."

Guy proceeded to tell me how his encounter with Yuuki turned out. Now we had a clearer, albeit still vague, idea of what he was up to when nobody was looking. He was the main employer and boss of the Moderate Jesters, proving Raphael correct.

So we went over everything, good or bad, Yuuki had been up to:

One, he developed the Society of Adventurers into the Free Guild.

Two, he built connections to the Rozzos, de facto rulers of the Council, and handled their dirty work—including being an intermediary to Leon.

Three, he backed Clayman as a demon lord, even controlling him behind the curtain.

Four, he crushed the Echidna Club, the shady group that presided over the Eastern Empire underground, and created the secret Cerberus society to replace it.

In public society, he created the Free Guild; outside of it, he was an organized crime leader. The Echidna Club was news to me, but it sounded like a pretty gigantic presence in the underworld—and that info came from Leon, so there was no doubting it. (The Orthrus slave market that Masayuki broke up, by the way, was an affiliate of Cerberus, so I’m sure Yuuki had a hand in that, too.)

The pattern seemed to indicate that Yuuki had a knack for crushing existing organizations and taking them over for himself. Sounded easy enough, but it was incredibly difficult to put into practice—and he had done it all in under ten years. “Talented” wasn’t the half of it. Calling him a genius was no exaggeration at all.

Still, I didn’t like how overly self-confident he was. No matter how talented you were, failing to accurately judge your opponent’s strength was a serious mistake. One look at Guy *should* have taught you how much trouble he was. Yuuki managed to escape this time, though—if I had to say one positive thing about him, it was his incredible good luck.

Learning he was alive left me with mixed feelings. We shared a homeland, after all, and I didn’t actually want him to die or anything. But at the same time, I couldn’t just let everything he did slide. He pretended to be this nice, affable

guy, but meanwhile, he was using the Rozzo family and even Leon as his pawns. That, and he sent the Moderate Jesters to drag Hinata and me into battle... Even worse, this was all for the sake of world conquest—a dream too childish for me to laugh at.

So why did Guy let Yuuki go? I decided to ask him point-blank. If he answered me, then hey, win-win.

“All right. So if you let him escape, then what could possibly be your plan?”

“Oh, it’s all just a game,” he deadpanned.

I wasn’t sure what *game* meant in this context, but he ignored my suspicions.

As he put it, the Eastern Empire was bound to make a move soon, and Yuuki had offered to go in and sabotage things if Guy spared his life.

“Um... So it sounds like you don’t want the Western Nations to fall. But why?” I’d been wondering about that. But Guy’s reply was even more surprising.

“Because it’s my job to manage them so they don’t fall. I mean, I don’t want *too* many humans around there, but regardless. My final mission, you know, is to put all of humanity under the rule of the demon lords.”

That, I surmised, was the game Guy alluded to. And once his rule was complete, so was his victory.

“Well, I mean, why’d you have Lady Mizeri try to wreck the Council, then?”

If she killed all the councillors just when the East was on the attack, the Western Nations would be at a deadly disadvantage. None of the countries could work with one another. The battle could’ve been over before it began.

Guy chuckled at the question. “Just ‘Mizeri’ is fine,” he casually replied. “I gave Mizeri permission to unite the West into a single entity.”

What was that supposed to mean...?

*Understood. He presumably wanted to spread terror across the West, making it easier for you to rule over it.*

Um, so is it like this, then? A demon lord massacres the Council, everyone’s panic-stricken, then I lend a hand and they all eagerly agree to my protection? If

a few people had to die for it, then oh well?

*Understood. Presumably so.*

I see. It was pretty extreme—a bit like starting a fire so you could be the hero who put it out—and I felt Guy and Mizeri had different motives, but they did it all for *me*?

Or not? Maybe he just wanted to take advantage of me, so I could manage the Western Nations for him. What he didn't know was that I had already made some deep inroads in the West. I didn't think quite this far ahead, but with Testarossa's support, I pretty much had the Council in my pocket.

But Guy wasn't out to destroy humanity. Quite the opposite. He wanted to appropriately manage those fools so they didn't kill themselves off. And if I took up that job, Guy couldn't ask for anything better. It was exactly what he wanted, really.

One thing I definitely understood about Guy now: He was *way* too sketchy with his work. I had to admit—I could probably handle this better than him.

"Okay. So you don't have any issue with me basically having total control of the West?" I said.

"Not at all. As long as some fool doesn't get cocky and kick up a fuss, I have no complaints."

Great, then. This was turning into a *much* shorter process than I expected, but if that was how the chips fell, then I might as well take over Western Nations management.

"In that case, I'll be glad to accept. And since I am, I'd appreciate it if you could quit messing around in northern Englesia."

From what others had told me, one of Guy's underlings enjoyed causing havoc up north on regular occasions. Razul was the guardian up there, and Shion had just done a fine job killing him, unfortunately. Given the state of emergency, Elmesia of Thalion had sent a team of Magus knights over to keep the peace. It wouldn't be right of me to thank her for that, exactly, but it'd be incredibly selfish to tap her armies again for the same thing. If I was gonna rule the Western Nations, it was up to me to defend them, and that meant a lot of

money I'd have to waste on a defense budget. I *really* wanted to avoid that. The world's not exactly crawling with talent like Razul.

"No need to worry about that. We can leave such trivial matters to Testarossa as well."

Diablo smirked at me, banishing all my concerns. But before I could ask if that was really okay:

"Right, yeah. The guys up there could use a breather anyway, I'm sure. Let 'em all do what they like."

Even Guy agreed with Diablo. It made me think about just how inscrutable the thoughts of demons were to normies like me.

So as Diablo suggested, I let Testarossa handle all the demon activity in Englesia. I had a pledge from Guy, and I figured that would stave off any conflict before it started.

I was thus now the ruler of the West, but we still had a few loose ends to tie up.

"So, Rimuru, can I leave you responsible for the Eastern Empire?"

Luminus's question reminded me of that *other* issue.

"Well, if you're saying that the Empire's making a move, do you mean militarily speaking?"

I wanted to ask, just in case. Guy gave me a nod, like this was the dumbest question in the world.

"Lately," Hinata explained to me, "the Empire's been conducting a rash of military exercises. It was brought up in the Council, too."

If she was aware of it, she must've already come up with some countermeasures. I didn't think the Empire was going to stage an army invasion —the three routes they had to choose from were all forbiddingly difficult to conquer, so it didn't seem like a realistic choice. There was too little merit in the Empire aiming for the West, unless they didn't care about the casualties.

Staging an invasion, at the end of it, is meant to be a profitable enterprise. You don't have food, or resources, or a place to live, so you strike at other

nations that do—but if you solve your own problems, there's no longer any need to risk bloodshed. Of course, it's never *that* easy to solve problems. There's no reason for a wealthy nation to bust their hump over a poor one, so if they're asked to, there's the seed of a conflict right there. That's why wealthy nations keep a standing army to defend themselves—it's important to make would-be invaders think they won't have an easy victory.

Nobody's going to dirty their hands with war if the profit isn't worth shedding blood over. But why else would people want to go into war?

*Understood. Because of a firm belief they will win no matter what.*

That's all I can think of.

I controlled the Council, so I couldn't imagine one of its members betraying me. Maybe, then, the East developed some amazing new military tech or a battle strategy like none before...or some other ace in the hole.

“Hinata?”

“I know. You asked me about the structure of the Dwarven Kingdom earlier? Well, it's not impossible to march an army through it.”

She wasted no time picking up on my intentions. The Dwarven Kingdom was neutral, and I doubted Gazel would give them permission to pass, but that was the safest route an army could take to invade the West. In fact...

“You know, I dismissed the notion at first, but is there a chance they'd attack Dwargon first?”

“Hee-hee! How shameless. You asked me to investigate that question *because* you thought so, didn't you?”

Oh, was Hinata praising me? I'd only thought of that just now, but ah well. Let's roll with it.

“You knew, huh? Well, if the possibility's there, let's tackle it, I say.”

I resolved to contact Gazel and work out a plan. It'd be much more than an annoyance if it happened—a real disaster, in fact—but it wasn't something we could wish away. With Tempest now holding the Council's military power, it was our duty to bear the full brunt of combat.

"If you weren't around, y'know, it would've been Granville and Luminus facing off against the Empire."

Guy sounded like it was none of his business now. But the size of the Empire's force was a question mark, and in that scenario, it'd be the Rozzos' combined armies, Hinata's Crusaders, and the Lubelius standing force fending it off. No matter who won, it didn't matter to Guy. So why did he take Yuuki's offer, then? I could only surmise that he had his own motivations. I suppose that strange word—*game*—was the key to understanding that, but it's not like he'd give me a straight answer.

"I'll provide support, too, but don't expect me to take orders from you, all right?" said Hinata.

I could understand that. Hinata had no reason to oversee the front lines herself.

"I'm still not exactly sure if this'll turn into war, but we'll figure out something. Hinata, you guys should prepare in case the Empire completely bamboozles us with their invasion."

"Roger that. And we'll take care of any of their agents disguised as merchants."

Her smile was a little frightening as she accepted. But this was fine. Now I didn't have to ask for anything.

"Rimuru," a troubled-sounding Luminus said, "if you are defeated, it will come down to us to fight. I advise you to do whatever it takes for that not to happen."

I could believe it. Between accounting for casualties and repairing their destroyed cathedral, Luminus was in no shape to focus on a war. I should have been happy I got Hinata's support, at least.

"My main concern is whether I can get Yuuki's cooperation..."

Our feud went down to the root. He had the Kingdom of Farmus do his bidding, which led to all sorts of horrors for Shion and her force. He was controlling Clayman, and if you turn back the clock enough, he was even involved with the uprising led by Geld in his orc lord days. If you asked someone to forget it all and let bygones be bygones, well, that wasn't how people

worked.

“Are you worried about us, Sir Rimuru?”

Shion could be sharp like that sometimes—I wouldn’t even say anything, and she could see exactly what conflicted me.

“Well, kind of. I’m not about to start trusting him out of the blue given everything that’s happened so far.”

In fact, I couldn’t trust him at all. And if a war suddenly broke out, there was nothing you could count on less than an ally you couldn’t trust.

“Now that Yuuki’s gone, I’ve got no idea *how* he’ll move,” Guy carelessly added. “Not that I care, really. If you can handle all that for me, then perfect.”

Hearing that made me decide, finally, that counting Yuuki as part of my force was hard to picture.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Then I will ask Soei to examine his movements—and *only* examine them,” said Diablo.

“If you could, please.”

That’s enough about Yuuki for now. We’d have to see how things went. At the very least, I wasn’t gonna get all buddy-buddy without an apology. We were running a country here, so depending on what he did, I could imagine us patching things up—but I wasn’t broad-minded enough to forgive him in exchange for nothing.

“Are you good with this, Shion?”

“Of course! I’ll crush him if he opposes you, and if he reconciles with you, I’ll forgive him after I punch him out!”

*Just don’t kill him when you do,* I said to myself. Although if she did, I’d chalk that up as an accident. Yuuki didn’t *want* to kill me or Shion, so I could guarantee it wasn’t on purpose.

So we shunted the question of Yuuki to the future.

\*

Guy had one more thing on his mind—the main thing, in fact. It was about the

Hero Chloe.

"I know that Granville's mission was to unlock the thing Luminus here was trying so hard to hide in her domain. I was watching to make sure that thing didn't go out of control, but Diablo was all 'Just leave it to Rimuru,' so..."

So he decided to travel here to see how things were turning out.

When did Diablo say that anyway? Then I remembered—Diablo *did* run off for a bit during battle, didn't he? He must've been doing a little unauthorized negotiating. I can't say I liked that, but it turned out to be a masterstroke. If Guy had gotten involved in that fight, there's no telling what could've happened.

"We were talking about that a moment ago, actually, but now that you're here, why don't I summarize things for you?"

I decided to take control of the summit and go over everything one more time. I didn't think Leon and Luminus would say anything I didn't want them to, but still, just in case. The really important stuff—Chloe's time travel, the countless loops she's made—that was all best left hidden. Besides, as long as I didn't tell Guy, he had no way of knowing.

"...So we defeated the berserk Chronoa, and that settled things for good."

My story thus wound up pinning most of the blame on Chronoa, but I only did it to protect Chloe. If I started talking about how Chloe *was* Chronoa, it'd just make things more complicated, so I wanted to keep that a secret from Guy.

"All right. Quite a tough battle, it sounds like. So can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Anything."

"That girl over there's clearly a Hero. Mind giving me an explanation?"

Oof. I tried to hide that, but Guy was just too smart to fool.

"Well, in that battle, a hidden force within this girl woke up—" I attempted a believable, if wholly absurd, story.

"You liar."

So much for that. It certainly made for a classic fantasy, discovering your powers in the heat of battle, but the excuse had no chance of working.

"Um, to tell the truth..."

"Chloe here," Leon said as I hesitated, "is the exact person I spent years searching for with my targeted summoning. She happened to be there for some reason, and thanks to that, we were all saved."

I had no idea where Leon was going with this, but if I wanted to slog through it, I had no choice but to follow his lead.

"Indeed," Luminus said before I could speak up. "I was quite surprised as well, but this Chloe turned out to be the most suitable sealing vessel."

Now she was adding her own take to the story. So it's up to me to tie it all together, then?

"Sealing vessel?" a quizzical Guy asked, looking right at me.

*That's what I wanna ask,* I thought—but by now, there was no chance we could be honest with him. I had to keep going.

"Yeah. The way Leon described it, she's got this unique ability to steal any target's power and seal it within herself. I could hardly believe it, but we've got the results right before our eyes, so I kinda have to."

How was *that*, huh?! And I even passed it to Leon—it was his turn to take over. But Luminus was quicker.

"You are absolutely correct. Now, I am afraid to say, I have lost my most prized of hidden weapons...but I suppose I can accept that over an uncontrollable death machine on the rampage."

She seemed embittered. *Truly* embittered. It was an A-list performance; I almost wanted to applaud her. Now Leon just had to wrap it up.

"...I can see why. Guy, there are many powerful forces in the world, yourself included. I wanted to protect Chloe against these advancing threats, but I never thought she'd use her force right after I met her. I am just as unlucky here."

Leon sighed. His depression hardly seemed contrived at all. If Luminus won the Best Actress award, he'd be sharing the stage as Best Actor.

Regardless, we now had a coherent story. Chloe sealed Chronoa away, and thus she had obtained the powers of a Hero.

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

"Not at all," I retorted.

"You've always been too doubtful of others," Leon agreed.

"Indeed," said Luminus. "Stop fretting over trivialities."

We all swarmed upon Guy's doubt in unison. Such instant teamwork was the result, I suppose, of how much we all cherished Chloe.

"But you see she's obtained Hero powers, don't you? Are you just going to leave her be?" Guy asked.

Leon rose from his seat.

"Don't worry," Guy added with a laugh, "I'm not going to touch her."

"Fine, then. If you were ever to threaten her, you'll have to address me first."

Leon sat back down. Things were tense in the chamber now, but Guy wasn't being the least bit hostile. I, too, was worried Leon might try something unadvised, but he was surprisingly calm. That reassured me well enough, but the next moment, I was chilled to the bone.

A sword glinted.

In Guy's hand was a longsword, produced from parts unknown, and it was now heading straight for the back of Chloe's neck. The speed of his technique was nothing short of supernatural. My perception speed, enhanced a million times over, told me I'd still never make it in time—and the same was true for Leon and Luminus. Our faces twisted in horror as we tried to turn away from the tragedy about to unfold.

But—the next moment, a clear tone echoed across the chamber.

...?!

The little Chloe had now grown and was wielding a sword nobody saw her unsheathe to take the force of Guy's blow. Her very clothing had transformed to that of the Hero; she had mastered the use of Holy Spirit Armor as if it came naturally to her.

"Hello to you, demon lord Guy. This is the first time I've seen you in the flesh;

you're quite powerful indeed."

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha! You ain't too shabby yourself. Your name's Chloe, then? There's only a very few people who can use *that* power, myself included."

Guy and Chloe congenially greeted each other, but I found myself unable to remain calm. I simply had no idea what just happened. Even with my super-enhanced perception, I missed it. Clearly this wasn't some chintzy old hyper-speed move—the air around them wasn't even vibrating.

It was magic...or something else. And at a time like this, I had the perfect partner to help out. Raphael, your commentary, please!

*Report. Unknown. Analysis and assessment of the subject Chloe Aubert's actions failed.*

Really?



It was rare for Raphael to say “I dunno” like that. Whether through prediction or calculation, it’d always provide me with *some* kind of information. If it had nothing to offer, then what just happened really *was* beyond the realm of understanding.

In other words, nothing I could handle.

I looked around, surprised, trying to gauge everyone’s reactions. Leon and Luminus seemed just as freaked out as me—not angry about Guy’s behavior so much as trying their hardest to grasp what had just unfolded. Everyone else in the room? Forget it. They didn’t even see the swords move; this was way beyond their comprehension. Diablo, at least, was visibly surprised—maybe something about this encounter was familiar to him.

Resolving to ask him later, I decided to stop Guy and Chloe. The latter was already readying her own attack, all but declaring the next move for herself. They seemed so friendly with each other a moment ago. Why was all this happening...?

They clashed swords several more times. They were single strikes, not part of a combo—it was like watching a photographic sequence of a sword fight, one stance after the next. I think. And really, “I think” was about the best I could do.

“Stop! Stoppp!!”

So I threw myself between them. It was a wager, based on my guess of where the next strike was, and apparently it paid off.

“Whoa, don’t just butt in. I could’ve ripped you apart if we got that wrong.”

“Yeah, Rimuru. Guy wasn’t serious—he was just testing me. But I’m glad you’re concerned for me!”

Chloe then pulled me into a hug and kissed me on the cheek. Again, it was like a jump cut—one frame, then the next. I had no chance of dodging it—let me just say, it was like an act of God. An irresistible force.

Then, the moment she gave that kiss, Chloe shrank down—or really, returned to regular old kid Chloe. “Ugh!” she said, bright red and quivering. “Why’d you have to hug and k-kiss Rimuru like that?”

"Was that Chronoa just now?" I asked.

"Yeah. She switched with me."

As she explained it, Chloe withstood the first attack, but Chronoa took over after that. They looked exactly the same, so it was a little hard to tell.

"Rimuru, I appreciate you stepping in to help Chloe, but I can't allow you to get any more...*familiar* with her."

Leon waited for Chloe to calm down and then picked her up.

"Oh, come on, Leon! You worry too much about me!"

He put her back in her seat and fixed Guy with an icy glare. "Guy, I *thought* you weren't going to touch her."

"Yeah, sorry. Just wanted to test her out a bit. I wasn't gonna kill her, of course."

"Regardless. You may not *want* to kill someone, but your power's beyond any measure."

Leon seemed pretty bent out of shape, uninterested in letting Guy have his way. In another moment, the verbal tirade began. It took Chloe herself intervening to end it—explaining that Guy didn't intend to hurt her, and that she wanted to test him out as well. It looked like *she* got a little carried away, too; it wasn't strictly Guy's fault.

If I had to guess, I'd say Chloe—or Chronoa—wanted to gauge the strength of Guy, the man who likely caused her death in the future. But what happened just now wasn't the future she experienced. She had a new power this time—the ultimate skill Yog-Sothoth, Lord of Time, if I recall—and I was sure she wanted to see if it'd work on Guy.

*...!! A new possibility has arisen. If the powers of the unique skill Time Travel, when merged with the ultimate skill Yog-Sothoth, allow the subject Chloe Aubert to control time itself...then Analyze and Assess will always fail, since it cannot evaluate phenomena separate from its own time line.*

Oh, is that it...? So Chloe's new ability basically lets her stop time?

Raphael was currently doing assessment work on Time Travel, but reportedly it'd take a while to finish up. It sounded like Chloe just inserted that unique skill straight into Yog-Sothoth.

I'm sure it *is* hard to understand data you can't even measure—but regardless, Chloe had made it her own. Astounding as it was, stopping the flow of time felt like *such* a cheat. No wonder my sped-up senses couldn't track her. If we're all letting time flow around us, there's no way we can observe something frozen in that dimension.

But hang on. Assuming that theory is correct, if someone can't access a world frozen in time, there's no way for them to interact with someone who *is* in that world, right?

*Understood. This interpretation seems correct.*

Oh man. Part of me wanted to hope that, and it seemed like the only logical answer. I mean, even Chronoa was killed by Guy once—but if she could stop time, she was untouchable. It made perfect sense.

Conversely, did that mean Chloe could fend off Guy? She was just a cute little girl, and really, she was stronger than *me*, even. When it dawned on me, I broke into a cold sweat that nobody else noticed.

Either way, Leon backed down, and peace prevailed once more.

"You value Ramiris a great deal...and I value Chloe a great deal. I'd advise you to make a note of that." Leon sat down, making it clear he wouldn't allow that a second time.

"As would I," Luminus added. "Guy, I will freely recognize you as the strongest of all, but losing our help would only harm you in the long run, no? If you *do* intend to antagonize us, that is a different story, but you should know that we will *both* treat any attack on Chloe as a hostile act."

Luminus must've been pretty pissed herself, rebuking Guy right alongside Leon. In situations like these, it was usually a bad idea to specify what was valuable to you—but with Guy, the opposite was true. If Guy *really* wanted to be hostile, there was nothing you could do. That was why they both overtly told him to lay off Chloe.

"All right, all right! I'm not here to start trouble, okay? Just stay out of my way, and I'm not gonna touch anything you hold dear, y'know?"

Guy, to his credit, acted sensibly about it, promising he'd keep Chloe safe.

And the fact that this precious little girl was far stronger than all of us was something I decided to keep to myself.

\*

The summit came to a close in the evening. Shuna prepared dinner for us, so we moved over to the banquet hall. I couldn't help but notice that nobody seemed in a hurry to leave until we'd finished the meal.

The main dish was a stew of cubed pork (or some kinda monster's meat that resembled pork), accompanied by fried eggplant, tofu with thick *ankake* sauce, and miso soup. This all came with steamed, fluffy, jet-black rice—the blackspell rice we stumbled upon a while back. It wasn't a multicourse meal or anything, but considering this whole summit wasn't even planned for, I didn't want to hear any complaints.

"Oh? *This* isn't tempura."

By the sound of Luminus's grumbling, she must've liked tempura a lot more than I'd realized.

"No need to worry, Luminus. This should be even tastier. Never underestimate Rimuru's lust for good food."

Hinata had my back, although I couldn't tell why. I wasn't even sure if I should be happy about it. Honestly, getting complimented for my love of cuisine didn't mean much if that was the only thing about me she was willing to compliment. But whatever.

So our little dinner event began, and fortunately, all the guests seemed to enjoy themselves.

"Ah... I see. Yeah, your cuisine around here ain't bad." Guy sounded genuinely impressed.

"These flavors mystify me...but at *this* level, I'd say it passes muster."

Eating everything and not complaining about it was, I supposed, Leon's way of

giving a meal high praise.

"Mmm... You were right after all, Hinata. Another rare and exotic spread, but quite attractive nonetheless."

"Oooh, this *really* takes me back. Being able to taste this one more time... It makes me glad to be alive."

Luminus seemed satisfied...and Hinata was hyping me up way too much. But I supposed this was her first Japanese-style pork stew in, what, two thousand years?

"Would you have preferred white rice?" I asked her.

"I appreciate the thought...but I'm used to this kind of thing by now."

Oh? Well, good. Two millennia had given her a lot of time to sample all sorts of stuff, I'm sure, so the "wrong" color wasn't about to make her wrinkle her nose. Besides, unlike Chloe, Hinata apparently hadn't been able to actually taste anything she ate during those two millennia. All she could see was Chloe's visual feed, so the mere act of eating was a real thrill. Considering—even imagining—what she went through, I could see why this was such a divine experience.

So the dinner banquet proceeded along to generally good reviews. Once it was over, the demon lords rapidly prepared to head home. They were more than welcome to spend the night, but now that their business was done, they didn't seem interested in sticking around.

"Chloe, if you ever get sick of this place, don't be afraid to contact me. I'll come pick you up at once."

Leon still hadn't given up, by the sounds of things. We had actually argued a bit about who would take in Chloe.

"But my friends are here...and I like Rimuru's place."

We wound up respecting Chloe's wishes, but it was safe to assume Leon wasn't gonna let it rest. He didn't even try to hide his attachment to her. I had my reservations about his approach, but there was no doubting his fervent desire to keep her safe and protected.

Chloe could feel it, too.

"Leon, I'm really glad to see you worried so much about me. But you don't need to be all *that* worried, okay? I'm not a kid anymore!"

She gave Leon a hug. Leon's face betrayed a gentle smile as he patted Chloe's head. They were raised virtually as siblings way back when, and Leon definitely cherished her.

Then she separated from him and shifted into her adult form.

"Here, see? With Chronoa's power, I can go back to my grown-up self. So quit worrying, all right?"

She smiled. I assume she wanted to put Leon's mind at ease, but that smile packed an incredible punch. It was endearing—fleeting, in a way—but it revealed all the strength in her heart; there was just that kind of charm to it.

"All right," he said with a chuckle. "You've become such a wonderful woman... but I'm always going to cherish you. You can count on me anytime."

Leon always was a heartthrob like that. He had the composure, you could say, of a grown man—and it suited him well. *No way I could even begin to imitate that*, I thought as I watched—but then Leon turned around and flashed me a steely glare. The difference was intense.

"She says she's a grown-up now," he told me. "Does that mean you've gone and—?"

"No! Of course not! I don't even technically *have* a gender!"

Talk about a huge misunderstanding. I take back what I said about his maturity and composure because he certainly didn't treat me with any of that. I worked tirelessly to defend myself, and Chloe yelled at him once she caught wind of it, so I figured Leon was sufficiently convinced...but even now, it was only that way on the surface. If you want more evidence, I present this little tidbit he whispered to me as he left:

"I think you know this, but don't you *dare* do anything to put Chloe in harm's way, you understand me?"

This struck me as overprotective, but then, Leon had expended every method

possible to search for Chloe, who'd been summoned from the same world as him. It made sense that he worried about her. He went on his way without further comment, so I was happy. I promised him that Chloe and I would come visit, and thanks to her, I think Tempest would be building formal ties with his domain of El Dorado pretty soon. He kind of irritated me sometimes—like a brother-in-law does, I suppose—but I could deal with it.

After Leon went on his way, it was Luminus's turn to dote on Chloe.

"I suppose you've settled down where you've settled down, Chloe...but to me, you are a valued and trusted friend. If you have any difficulty, I will gladly discuss it with you, so do not hesitate to bring it up. Take care!"

And *this* is the sister-in-law, I'm assuming? Not that I said that out loud, of course. No need to go out of my way to anger people.

With a final farewell, Luminus and her entourage sped off. Hinata was gone, too, so that just left Guy by himself. I turned toward him, wondering if he was gonna leave, and there I saw Diablo picking a fight with him.

"Now, shall I continue my story from before—?" Diablo began.

"Nah, I've heard more than enough of it."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh... No need to be shy."

"Can you stop trying to seduce *me* with that garbage, too?!"

*What the hell is Diablo doing?!*

"*Tch!* Well, so be it, then. Allow me to change the subject. I would love to discuss Testarossa's and my other underlings' work ethic and some amusing anecdotes related to Rimuru. I know you were interested in that—"

I was astounded at just how much he wanted to hear his own voice. Guy seemed to agree with me.

"No, no, I'm sure you're all busy right now, so I'll stop by again when things calm down a little."

Guy wasted no time turning him down and fleeing. I guess even Guy got flustered sometimes—it was kind of odd to see. I couldn't help but feel he was a lot more approachable than I thought. He still kept you on your toes, but maybe

I didn't have so much to worry about with him anymore. He had accepted Chloe as a Hero, and all the other big issues were out of the way.

That just left Yuuki's next moves as he fled to the East—and what's about to happen over there. Whether I'll trust him again, I dunno...but *war*, huh? I let out a sigh. It's just one thing after another these days. And in my dejection, I couldn't help but wish for peace as soon as I could grab it.

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It was only an oral agreement, but gaining the cooperation of two more demon lords was enormous. If war really was to erupt, having allied nations on your side was a comfort in itself. I could expect support from them, and if things got really bad, I could even discuss evacuating my citizens to their nations.

No war at all would be best, of course, although that depended on the other side's actions. What will be, will be. But whining wouldn't help with anything, so I decided it was time to take action. First, I needed some firm ground to stand on—something that ensured a battle against the Empire wouldn't cause any problems. I secretly resolved to prepare for anything and everything possibly headed our way.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
2

## ACCOMPLISH- MENTS AND PREPARATIONS

## CHAPTER 2

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND PREPARATIONS

Several months had passed since the summit and Guy's sudden visit.

Time had flown by so fast—it had already been a year since I became a demon lord. The Walpurgis meeting; the duel against Hinata; the Founder's Festival; and then the fight against Maribel and the Rozzo family. So much had happened that the year seemed to pass in the blink of an eye.

Even after the second annual Tempest Resurrection Festival—a much quieter affair than the first one, held with only my closest friends—the Empire still showed no signs of movement. According to Soei and Moss, however, supplies were being constantly transported to the main cities near their military borders. At this rate, even I could see the writing on the wall. War was just about to kick off.

Given our assumption that conflict was inevitable, we had grown far stricter with our entry checks for people visiting Tempest. We couldn't put out the welcome mat for everyone and their dog like before. Now we only let in adventurers or merchants with the proper identification, as well as those with legitimate referrals or the like. This was out of concern for spies, but we had another reason as well—a sort of classification system.

We were visited by far more than just humans, and each had their own qualitative differences. Those of unidentifiable origin often tended to be pretty uncivilized, and if we let a lot of those folks in, we wouldn't be able to handle them all. We could make it clear that hostile behavior around town was forbidden, but at the end of the day, we couldn't *really* stop some fool from storming in and going out of control. There was a barrier over town, yes, but it was tough to block every single kind of magic. That was the difference between a town of humans and a town of monsters.

So after discussing matters with Gazel, we decided to follow the lead of the Dwarven Kingdom. When we granted someone entry, they'd need to first learn the basic Tempestian rules and regulations. An intake, basically.

If someone wanted to relocate to Tempest, they'd need more formal schooling. We'd ferry them to a site built for that very purpose and teach them there; they'd receive an entry permit only upon learning an employable trade or skill. Shion's troops were a good fit for this job—if any would-be residents got violent, they could put 'em back in their place well enough. It'd help us catch imperial spies, too, so I thought this system was gonna be a permanent part of how things worked around here.

During the visitors' intake, we'd gauge each visitor and ask them why they want to enter Tempest. Preventing swarms of penniless people from rushing in was another way to stave off trouble around town.

We had a lot of regular lodging around the coliseum, but they were used by the destitute. The more well-off merchants and nobles were shown to neighborhoods with fancier quarters. For the real upper crust, meanwhile, we had our five-star facilities, the best the city of Rimuru had to offer; this was where we pointed visitors looking to recuperate at our health spas. They say that memories are priceless, but you ain't gonna get away with that in *our* nation. As much as I wanted people to enjoy their travels, you had to pay what you had to pay.

Our price ranges ran the gamut. Your run-of-the-mill lodging started at thirty silver coins a night; the wealthier merchants and lower-level nobles could afford places that began at one gold coin. From there, the sky was the limit, really; we had rooms available that cost ten gold or more a night—wait, why am I prattling on like some travel agent?

My point, though, is that we could provide services for a wide swath of social classes. I wanted tons of people to see us as a vacation destination, so we were also working hard on PR, giving out high-end lodging to our most active merchants or people who made it past Floor 10 of the Dungeon. The Dungeon-runner clientele really loved that—everyone knew how great the food was at those places, so it really built up enthusiasm. Even one meal there cost ten silver coins and up. Considering the very cheapest accommodations ran around

three silver, that must've felt superexpensive, but sometimes you want to splurge a bit, and sometimes you come across easy money in the Dungeon. Providing people a way to spend that cash was our job as proprietors.

Getting past Floor 10, by the way, generally meant you were an adventurer ranked C-plus or higher, capable of beating a B-rank black spider when part of a group. Doing that solo would rank you at least a B, so I figured it'd be fine to let them have some extra perks. Socially speaking, it's equivalent to being knighted in one of the smaller kingdoms—a B rank from the Guild meant you could find work as a knight in well-nigh any country.

Recognizing people for their abilities like that naturally helps them mind their manners a little more. Besides, a B-rank adventurer probably has a decent amount of money to their name already, labyrinth junkie or not. Elen's party was pretty destitute, but that's the exception to the rule. Plus, if they *do* start trouble in town, they wouldn't have anywhere to go. The upper-class district was surrounded by a moat and heavily defended; as we explained to visitors, if you're kicked out once, you're never getting back in again. Nobody's gonna attempt crime once they're aware of that, so along those lines, I thought we were doing a good job projecting a clean image.

Meanwhile, the merchants—being merchants, after all—were clamoring to get in, seeking Tempest-branded weapons and crafts to sell. Some of them were doing a very brisk business, and a lot of them were pretty loaded. More and more of them were using our fancier lodging without having to be plied with free nights.

To people like these, we sold the battle gear crafted by Kurobe's apprentices and the handiwork made by Dold's—all high-quality, of course, and all well reviewed. The merchants would also buy a lot of the more unusual equipment picked up from the Dungeon's treasure chests, something I wasn't thrilled about but tolerated for the time being. I made sure anything *really* dangerous from there didn't leak out to the general buying public.

All this stuff would then get sold across the continent, helping to boost our nation's image. Perhaps thanks to that, we had started to see a larger general audience of Dungeon guests as of late. Word of mouth really *is* a powerful thing.

You might wonder why we focused on *this* stuff when the danger of war was so close, but that was that, and this was this. Even I knew that I was being pretty self-indulgent...but as much as I was on alert for the danger to come, I didn't fear it. No point giving up on living a normal life. You just gotta keep building up what you can.

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So the capital was growing at a decent rate, as was our international transportation network.

Following Benimaru's negotiations, Momiji and the tengu tribe had pledged their support. We now had a mountain tunnel completed, and the paving work was done as well, save for a few spots. We had also handed over construction on the highway between Tempest and Thalion to the laborers Archduke Erald brought along with him, so we'd have a direct route to there before much longer.

Work had begun on a railroad track to the Kingdom of Farminus, and it was proceeding along at a feverish pace. The track was already complete to Englesia, wrapped up on time, and the same was true for the Dwarven Kingdom—they even finished the lodging town located on a stop along the way. This was built on a spot past the Forest of Jura, right where it intersects with the Great Ameld River; it was a perfect rest stop, and it saw use as a base of operations during highway construction. The track was built alongside the river, so it was a fine place to serve as a midway point. We had enlisted the monsters living nearby to build the town, and there was no reason to let it go to waste post-construction, so we outfitted the buildings some more and made it into a full lodging stop. (Going forward, I want this town to become a major city and terminal hub, so I'm sure it'll grow in importance as the years go by.)

The highway to Eurazania had now been fully widened. It was still unpaved in spots but fully navigable from start to finish. The merchants had been bugging me to get the paving done, because the route was jarringly uncomfortable on a high-speed wagon—but even so, it was incomparably safer and more convenient than what existed before. Lights kept the whole highway illuminated for night travelers, and the automatic magical generators at regular intervals formed a barrier that kept hostile monsters at bay.

Thus, in less than a year, we had a full transportation network pretty much completed.

Practical testing had begun for magitrains traveling to the Dwarven Kingdom and Englesia, letting us tabulate data and work out issues. The track tests were all done, so now we were beta testing the trains on the field. They maintained an average speed of around thirty miles an hour and could carry an unprecedented amount of cargo at once; it'd pretty much rewrite the history of logistics in this world, I figured.

Now we could transport food without it spoiling en route. That was bound to enrich cuisine across the board while reducing the number of people going hungry in times of famine. I was once again reminded how logistics like these were a must-have in order to expand our country's influence.

Along with this data collection, we were also considering the magitrains' operation cycles in detail, a trial-and-error process as we worked out our first public schedule. The track between Tempest and Dwargon extended some 620 miles; at thirty miles an hour, it took twenty-one hours—less than a day—to go from one end to the other. By comparison, Englesia was around 180 miles away, so you could reach it in six hours.

These figures, of course, reflected a pretty hefty safety cushion. In theory, you could run these guys four times as fast and load them with over a thousand tons of goods, based on our calculations...but these magitrains were without precedent. If we ran them at full power and something came up, we wouldn't be able to deal with it.

For now, we'd see how things would go. All transportation, of course, has its glitches, and we needed to factor rest time in as well. Magitrains could run for only so long at a time, so we weren't doing overnight runs for the time being—besides, we couldn't assign day and night shifts to mechanics and operators unless we could handle replacement parts and other maintenance overnight.

We currently had twenty locomotives in operation. Each one could pull two freight cars and three passenger cars, making them six-car trains. Our passenger cars each held eighty seats but could hold a maximum of 150 people—although, I figured we shouldn't allow that, since it'd force people to stand for hours on

end. Thus, if we aimed for over two hundred passengers per trip, that'd put us at 80 percent capacity.

That left the question of just how much to charge per person... But wait a minute, why did I have to micromanage down to *that* level?! I'd just leave that to my old pal Mollie. I'm sure he'd work it out. It was just a matter of time before we'd go into full operation, and once we had more of a track record, I thought we could boost our capacity a bit, adding to the convenience. Maybe we could aim for ten-car trains running sixty miles an hour—I thought that was doable. Definitely not a dream—something we'd really see happen before too long.

...So really, we'd accomplished an incredible amount in a year. Announcing all these successes was bound to surprise and excite people the world over, I thought. It'd make the future brighter for us all, and it'd also show everyone how hard I was working and how useful our nation was. Lives would be more fulfilling. We'd enjoy better food and take in more entertainment from all around the world. In effect, I'd be promised a life full of fun, something I never could've thought about when I was first reincarnated as a slime.

If it wasn't for the whole Eastern Empire thing, I could devote myself to my hobbies without a care in the world, but...

Suddenly, I had an idea: Why not team up with Veldora (plus whoever else wanted to join us), declare war on the Empire, and immediately assault them? I knew about the army of angels that'd attack us if our civilization grew too developed, but I didn't even have any idea where they were. Attacking *them* first was gonna be difficult, but not the Empire. If they were preparing to strike us and not even trying to hide it, I couldn't help but think—who could complain if we just did 'em in?

Part of me was just being impatient, I knew, but with this sort of thing, it was always easier to attack than defend. If the Empire was aiming to annex the Western Nations, there was no reason why they *had* to attack the Forest of Jura along the way. They could always decide to just ignore us. Everybody knew Veldora was revived now, and if you did even a little research, you'd realize that opposing us meant making an enemy of the Storm Dragon. It was up to the Empire to decide, and situations like these put us under a lot of stress.

So was it even possible for them to stage a direct invasion of the West?

There was no sea route. Not even a fleet of dreadnought-class warships would keep you safe against the giant sea monsters lurking there, and fighting on their turf was too risky to be tenable. There was no guarantee you'd have a safe voyage in the first place, and knights were at a terrible disadvantage in sea battle.

How many ships would you need to transport the massive number of soldiers involved? And even if you managed to land them over in Farminus, it wasn't like Yohm and his forces were clowning around. They were fully prepared to ambush them and defend their lands. Unless they established a beachhead on the first attack, the Empire couldn't send any reinforcements. They'd have the royal Farminus force in front, sea monsters in the back—it'd kill their morale, and we'd score an easy tactical victory.

Could the Empire ignore Farminus, then, and advance through northern Englesia? That, we concluded, would also be difficult. North Englesia was a playground for demons. Guy didn't seem too interested in stopping them entirely, and Testarossa's underlings were currently defending the area. You had a bunch of belligerents waging battle over there at regular intervals, so if the Empire staged an invasion, we predicted they'd be sitting ducks, essentially.

Between this, that, and the other thing, a naval invasion seemed reliably out of the picture. What about on land? There, the Empire had two options: go through the internals of the Dwarven Kingdom or traverse the Dragon's Nest within the Canaat Mountains.

The latter option was off the table from the start—too risky. Staging a large-scale march across peaks higher than Mount Everest was suicidal, no matter how much you prepared for it. You couldn't train an entire infantry force to be expert mountain climbers, and even if you could, you had hordes of dragons—A-rank monsters—waiting for you beyond. Common sense dictated that not even the most epically stupid leader would pick that route.

How viable was the Dwarven Kingdom route, however? I had Hinata check into that, based on Raphael's suggestion, and she reported that a large force could theoretically navigate through it. Gazel wouldn't allow it, though, so if

they actually made an attempt, the Empire would have to attack Dwargon before it ever reached the Western Nations, and that was an incredibly reckless thing to do.

The Dwarven Kingdom, officially neutral in international affairs, retained a well-trained standing army for its defense. They were outfitted in cutting-edge armaments; as the adage went, there was no such thing as a weak dwarf in a fight. Besides, the whole of Dwargon was designed like a natural fortress; all they had to do was guard the entrances, and they could keep any large force from storming in.

Out of the three main entry points—dubbed East, West, and Central—the Empire would hit East or Central. The West exit connected to Farminus, so there was no need to keep an eye on that. The East portal, nestled on the border with the Empire, was the most dangerous one, but Gazel was no fool. He had concentrated his armies here, having them look into the Empire's moves. If something went down, I'd head to the scene as well, but overall I thought we could leave Dwargon in Gazel's hands.

That, all in all, was the current situation for Tempest.



In conclusion, the only real choice the Empire had was to pass through the Forest of Jura. And before my briefing with Benimaru (now part of the daily routine), my mind was in a spin over it.

If they selected a route through the forest we protected, the Empire's biggest bottleneck would be the presence of Veldora. They could never beat him head-on, so we guessed that they'd prepare a decoy force to try to lead him astray. I needed to remember that as I thought about our nation's defensive preparations.

Within the Forest of Jura, there were three routes suitable for military activity. One of them, however, was in a region near the Dwarven Kingdom. If the Empire threw caution to the wind and invaded there, they'd be boxed in by dwarven and Tempestian forces on all sides. The Empire must've known how dangerous this route would be, so I didn't feel we needed to be too alert for activity there.

Thus it was likely that they'd take one of the remaining two routes. But was it really that simple? It was never a good idea to split up your forces against a large foe, so perhaps we could station Veldora on one route and our full army on the other. That'd make us prepared for a potential decoy force—but I was no trained military officer, and even *I* could come up with that tactic. I doubted a professional would take such a simple approach.

But maybe the Empire was looking down on us. Maybe they'd try taking an overwhelming force and mow down whatever they ran into, whether it was Veldora or an army of monsters. Or maybe they'd try something sneakier and more unorthodox, like make the main force the decoy and send out teams of guerrilla-style fighters who could group back together once they made it out of the forest. If so, well, it was impossible to monitor every single path in the woods. If we deployed recon forces, they could wind up casualties depending on the size of the enemy they ran into. What if they had teams of paladin-class fighters on the prowl out there, like Hinata and her soldiers?

If we wanted to consider all those possibilities, there just wasn't enough personnel to cover all the plausible invasion routes. It'd be risky to make a move only when we knew the Empire's aims, so I wanted to avoid that. If we fell behind, there was a chance we'd never recover. That's what I was on the lookout for—but the problem was that we had no idea what moves the Empire was making.

In war, surprising your opponent gave you an advantage. Make a move your enemy didn't account for, and that alone often led to victory. We'd have to consider every possibility...but now I was going around in circles. This wouldn't work. All this thinking was just frustrating me. Maybe we really *should* just go and attack them after all, huh? Wouldn't that be the right answer—declare war, then go crazy on them the next instant?

We had no guarantees the Empire would move the way we predicted, so there was no point pondering this any further. I really thought the most rational approach was to attack without waiting for them to move. It'd give us the initiative, and we wouldn't have to worry about all this other stuff... Not that I'd do it, but...

Thinking about it like this wouldn't produce an answer. It was best to play this

kinda thing by ear. Yeah. I like the sound of that—it makes me seem so *capable*. Let's go with that.

And so coming to pretty much the same conclusion I did about every other problem in my life, I reached out for one of the cream puffs Shuna brought for me. Whenever I'm doing serious thinking, I start craving something sweet. Even if I overindulged, there was no way I'd ever get bored of it. If I did, well, I'd just play it by ear then.

"What, just for you? That's not fair."

I was satisfying my thirst with some of Shion's tea and enjoying the cream puff when Benimaru finally showed up. We were in my office, a bit later than usual for our now-daily briefing. I asked him to prepare for the Empire battle we were picturing, and it kept him really busy, but I wasn't narrow-minded enough to carp on him about being a little late.

What? Why don't I give him a hand? I got no idea what you're talking about. This is no space for amateurs.

"Get some tea for Benimaru, too, Shion."

"Right away!"

Benimaru, having experienced trauma at the hands of Shion's cooking, always kept a wary eye on her. Tea was all right, at least, but even then he never let down his guard. Classic Benimaru.

"Thank you very much," he said to me. "All that work makes you crave something sweet, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, kind of. We have access to a lot more sugar now than before. Hopefully, things can stay peaceful around here."

"You're right. But if it comes down to a conflict, well, we can simply wipe the floor with them."

Confident as always. I was glad to see that, but hopefully he wouldn't forget to at least *try* to avoid conflict.

"Here you go!" Shion said, offering Benimaru some tea. She refilled my cup as well, the aroma already putting me at ease.

"So how is Diablo faring?" Benimaru asked me.

"Oh, he's mediating again today."

"Again?"

"Yep. Again."

Yes, Diablo was back on mediator duty, because Ultima and Carrera just couldn't stop causing trouble on a daily basis. It's not that they didn't get along; they were just driven to compete with each other on Every. Single. Little. Thing.

Yesterday it was about a criminal transport; before then, it was over how to handle a suspect in custody. Sometimes they'd argue over food on the menu; sometimes they'd squabble over who would purchase a new outfit first. It'd be one thing if they kept it to verbal sparring, but when *those* two went at it, it turned into a street war that would make even the yakuza balk. Once it reached that point, only Diablo could stop them—if he sent his underling Venom in, he'd just get his ass kicked. No innocent bystanders had been hurt yet, but they had become notorious enough that people bet on the outcomes of their fights... which was great and all, but I couldn't let this stand.

So I'd send Diablo out to handle them, but perhaps it was time to consider a more permanent solution. Otherwise, I feared Diablo was gonna blow his top before long.

A little while back, Diablo took Ultima and Carrera into the Dungeon. This was nothing cute, like a date; as he passionately explained to me, it'd be a chance to give them a thorough combat education. He used that space (and the immortality it provided) to beat the crap out of them, but apparently not even that taught them a lesson. In fact, fighting Diablo seemed to fill them with joy. Why did demons have to be so damn belligerent? I was really starting to wonder how much more I could handle.



"I have returned, sir."

As Benimaru and I chatted for a while, Diablo returned, looking visibly drained.

"Hey. Thanks for handling that."

"No, no, it was hardly anything difficult, but now I've lost the time I meant to spend with you, Sir Rimuru—"

"Right, if you're not tired out, let's begin."

"Very well."

Well, if he was still capable of talking nonsense, I figured he was fine. Diablo looked like he wanted to say something, but I was sure it was the same old crap as usual. *No need to worry about it*, I thought as I began our briefing with Benimaru.



As I mentioned earlier, we were seeing increased immigration into the country. One issue this creates is how to get all these new people working.

Our employment rate was very important, as it was for any nation. Having all our citizens working diligently in one position or another was vital for improving our productivity. If your employment stats were good, that also bumped up personal consumption and, in turn, the economy. If they were bad, that could lead to harder times and a rise in crime.

Managing this figure was the job of a nation's leadership, but it was an incredibly tough one. Immigrants came to Tempest with a wide range of abilities, but we had only so much demand for unskilled labor that anyone could do. We were a rapidly developing nation at one point, experiencing a huge boom in construction, and that helped us keep things going for a while—but that era was coming to an end, and we had to think about what was next.

Skilled people wouldn't be a problem. Artisans with technical talents and people who could keep a roof over their head with their skills were easy to accommodate. The issue was the people without the proper know-how or ways to make money. You could give a farmer land; you could bring an artisan to a

studio. The Dungeon was ready-made for adventurers, and performers could be hired at a theater. But how should we handle anyone who lacked those talents?

The answer I came up with was to establish educational facilities. During intake, we'd ask applicants about their skills and give them opportunities to learn based on their responses. These facilities were where they'd learn, and it'd be managed by Benimaru's forces.

"Immigration is on the rise, and we're attracting a lot of volunteers for the army. I can't say how qualified they are, but they ought to be able to handle security within our borders."

That was the approach we had been testing out, but apparently the army was dealing with even *more* volunteers these days. Enlistment guaranteed you'd be fed, taught a trade for free, and even get referrals to civilian jobs—those were the rumors going around. Thanks to that, they were seeing not only new transplants, but adventurers and mercenaries as well.

Now, given that we took on national-defense duties for the Western Nations, we *did* need to address expanding our military. With that in mind, I wouldn't call this a problem for now. We had little issues here and there, but nothing that couldn't be handled internally. The problem was that it was starting to look more and more like war with the Eastern Empire. We couldn't put raw recruits on the line for that, so it was time to reorganize our forces. I had asked Benimaru to provide me with a new organizational chart.

"This is the new structure we've contemplated," he explained as he took out a sheet of paper and spread it on my desk. "Some of the assignments are rather bold, I would say, but I think they can work."

Benimaru would remain commander, with me maintaining supreme command (including the right to appoint officers). These used to be basically the same thing, but I split them up and assigned one to Benimaru. My thought was that you can't let a military amateur like me attempt an army command, so I wanted Benimaru to have first say in all military affairs. This meant that Benimaru's orders outranked mine within the army—but not when it came to strategic maneuvers. I could appoint people to upper command, and I could declare an end to an ongoing war. Benimaru could name whoever he wanted to

positions lower than general, but I was allowed to establish army corps and appoint generals. Thus it was up to me to check over Benimaru's org chart and decide whether to consent to it.

"Hmm... Well, if you think it'll work, I don't intend to complain about anything..."

Even if I didn't intend to complain, I still had stuff I wanted to say. Given my appointive power, I'd have to answer to my assignments if something went bad. But we had already heavily debated over this organizational structure, so all that was behind us anyway. And in the end, the only appointment I really insisted upon was Gobta as leader of our new First Army Corps.

"When you first suggested naming Gobta as a general, I honestly didn't know what to think... But now, I agree this really suits him," said Benimaru.

As his reaction indicated, there were differing opinions on promoting Gobta to general. Certainly, I could understand if the idea of giving that fool Gobta actual responsibility made people anxious. He'd be making decisions that could affect his army's lives, so Benimaru and the other staff officers were naturally going to be hesitant. He slept through a lot of meetings, and it wasn't like I thought it'd go problem-free...but I also knew that he had undergone special training in secret—and that he wanted to keep this nation safe as much as anyone.

"Right?! When push comes to shove, that guy really steps up."

And when it doesn't, *he* doesn't. But his men trusted in him, and in his own way, he cared a lot about others. Most of all, *I* trusted him.

"He's one of the Big Four as well, after all. I'm sure you're not incorrect in your judgment, Sir Rimuru!"

"Precisely," chimed in Diablo. "Also, just in case, I will deploy Testarossa as an observer. If he falls out of line, *she'll* fix him up."

Shion and Diablo, his fellow Big Four members, were just as enthusiastic about Gobta...and I supposed Benimaru accepted him, too.

"Well," he said with a grin, "as chief of the Big Four, I can't say no to him. And Diablo's right—if something comes up, we can just offer him some support,

right? Let's give him the job."

"Ah, he'll be fine. He may not look it, but he's a really good guy."

And so Gobta was now an army general.



I eyed the org chart carefully, checking out the other corps generals.

Three corps had been established in all, underneath Benimaru's command. We had just discussed the First Army Corps, led by Gobta with Hakuro as a military adviser. The corps was staffed as follows:

- 100 Goblin Riders

Each one of them had grown to an A-minus threat, wielding lieutenant-level powers.

- 12,000 of the Green Numbers

The original 4,000 would receive promotions, while the 8,000 new recruits would sign on as privates. I was told they'd operate in groups of three.

We had gained a lot of soldiers in the past year, mostly monsters native to the Forest of Jura. That led to few difficulties, reportedly. The newer foot soldiers would be ranked no better than D or C, but the veterans had been raised up to a B, and I could expect them to be a pretty formidable force.

Next we had the Second Army Corps, led by Geld. This force was currently deployed across the continent on intelligence and engineer duties; in times of war, we planned to call them back and have them serve as our main army. They consisted of:

- 2,000 of the Yellow Numbers

This is the corps of high orcs who had served Geld since the bad old days. Each one was pretty powerful, ranked a B-plus, and they could form an iron defense that operated in lockstep with Geld himself. I'd have them serve as platoon leaders bringing together the younger troops.

- 35,000 of the Orange Numbers

The newer high orcs were brought on as volunteers to this force. As a team, they managed a C rank, but only the veterans—some 15,000 soldiers—would get involved in actual combat. We planned to have the remainder provide rear support and engineering work.

That left the Third Army Corps, our elite flying commando unit, finally ready to see some action. Their general was Gabil, founder of the unit, and they were composed like this:

- 100 members of Team Hiryu

These guys needed no introduction—they were the best Tempest had to offer. Every member was an A-minus threat by themselves, combining flight skills with effective commanding abilities. Some of them even made the grade for a solid A rank, capable of tapping the Dragon Body skill in a pinch.

- 3,000 of the Blue Numbers

This was the group of lizardman volunteers who joined the force out of sheer love for Gabil. As the original members of the group, they only ranked a C-plus individually, but that didn't let you see the whole picture. The Blue Numbers' most unique trait was their fighting skill while flying on wyverns, securing air superiority and wielding the most devastatingly concussive force of any battle. However, we currently had just three hundred wyverns ready in our stables, so not all of them had a mount yet.

For the most part, their duties will involve backup support and wyvern management; it'll be a while before they really get to shine. But don't count them out just yet. Wyverns are a subspecies of Lesser Dragons, monsters worth a B-plus ranking. Gabil has found a way to capture and raise them, and he says expanding their flock is his next goal. Once every Blue Number gains their own, *that's* when the squadron will really prove their worth.

Those were the three corps answering directly to Benimaru.

"So Geld's leading the Second Corps, and Gabil, the Third? Doesn't sound like a problem to me."

"Yes, I considered a number of possibilities, but these seemed like the safest bets."

He didn't need to remind me. *These* were generals I could rely on. I didn't even see any issue with Gabil. Sure, he got way too full of himself, but he was well versed in combat, always performing excellently in our drills, and even Benimaru considered him a rival. I didn't think he was a particularly good strategist, but his tactical mind on the field was sharp. He also cared deeply for his troops, unafraid to pull them back if needed. A fine candidate for the job.

"And this," Benimaru said as he pulled out another sheet of paper, "is the same as I showed you before." It listed three more military forces.

One was Team Kurenai, Benimaru's elite guard of three hundred troops. The A-rank Gobwa was their leader, and every one of them was ranked A-minus or higher. Now they also managed the army's general staff headquarters.

Seeing her in combat training, I was struck that someone like Gobwa could hold her own against an upper-level magic-born like Gelmud—or maybe even fare better than that. Looking at the rest of the unit, I saw at least a few who scored an easy A in my eyes, some who could take on a paladin and win. There was no guessing how deep their fighting skills went.

For the most part, a monster's strength was evaluated based on their magical power—their magicule count. If a monster was innately strong, the whole level-assignment system couldn't really apply, but in addition to their natural physical capabilities, our troops had received military training, granting them strengths better geared for battle.

I don't think it's out of line to assume they're better than what the standard judgment criteria would suggest. I could tell because, even with exceptional cases like Hakuro, it is plain to see across the board. The fact is, this unit's full of real warriors, well-honed troopers who managed to survive Hakuro's hellish training.

Next was Team Kurayami, Soei's group of a hundred or so intelligence officers. This unit was a mystery in a lot of ways—it was under Soei's complete control, and few people knew it even existed. As far as I was aware, however, they were pretty damn good fighters. Soka was a definite A ranker, along with

the four squadron leaders serving under her, but that wasn't even the cream of the crop. There were a few special-A people on the team, Glenda Attley among them.

What's more, a few folks who went through Tempest's justice system managed to work out plea bargains with Testarossa to serve under Soei in this squad. This included Girard, who headed the Sons of the Veldt mercenary team, along with the elementalist Ayn under him. Both of them were well past the A rank and now serving as excellent secret agents.

I once teased Team Kurayami by calling them a rogue band of special-forces problem children, but now it really *was* starting to look that way. Soei warned me not to expect much from them in battle, but I didn't believe him—they seemed pretty good at assassinations, for one, and if you have *that* many dudes ranked above an A on one team, how could they *not* be total badasses? Honestly, I'm not completely sure what direction Soei was taking with these guys. You occasionally heard some ominous rumors about the unit, and I couldn't blame anyone for spreading them.

Last but not least was Shion's Team Reborn, a hundred members in all. The one unique trait about this unit was that they just didn't die. Taking advantage of their astonishing regeneration skills, they had undergone incredibly severe training, making every member B-plus or above. Considering they only managed C level before, that was the most growth out of anyone on our force. They had all proven themselves in combat against the Crusaders, too, so for all I know, maybe some of them broke the barrier and scored an A rank. Team Hiryu was likely the strongest of them all for now, but as far as I was concerned, if any unit had the potential to snatch that title, it was Shion's.

What's more, Benimaru had assigned Reborn to be my personal elite force, a kind of imperial guard. I wasn't such a fan of that, but using them for missions that took advantage of tenacity—decoy runs, for example, to buy time for the rest of the force—was what they excelled at the most. I guess if things really got screwy, I could use Team Reborn as bait and run for the hills—that's how Shion proudly explained it to me.

It should also be mentioned that although they were my personal guard, they didn't accept orders from me. They were there to protect me, and they were

forbidden from abandoning that mission, no matter what I told them. Even if I asked them to leave, they wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice themselves for my sake. It was *such* a menace. (That being said, they were happy to run little errands for me, but I better not say that to Shion. Gotta keep up appearances sometimes.)

By the way, Shion also headed another force, a secret one not listed on these charts. I say "secret," but it was the kind of open secret that everyone was aware of. This was her personal force, a kind of guard team for her, but in effect, it was quite literally her fan club. I didn't know how big it was; probably not more than a thousand at most, I thought. Officially, it wasn't a "force" per se, so they weren't under Tempest control. We also knew nothing about their abilities. Were they gonna be okay, even? I didn't want anyone to die for this—but Shion was training them on the sly, so I really had no idea what was up with them.

Still, Daggrull's sons were apparently squadron leaders in this so-called force, and it also included some adventurers with battle experience. Maybe they'd come in handy later on, but I was more anxious than expectant. This wasn't the kind of force you wanted on the front lines, and it was obvious why Benimaru didn't put them on our official rolls.

I handed the sheet back to Benimaru and said, "Looks good to me. Seems we've got more firepower now, but I don't see any need to change up these forces. Neither of us needs to interfere with them, I'd say."

"Indeed. After all, I raised Team Kurenai under my own personal care, and I imagine Soei and Shion feel the same way about their own forces. I will refrain from adding them to the official hierarchy."

Shion nodded her approval, and I had no objection, so I told him, "All right, make it so." If you developed a team yourself, after all, you'd like to keep it near you. And really, we didn't need to list Gabil's Team Hiryu either; that was his suggestion, and we accepted it. (Gobta didn't raise the Goblin Riders, exactly, but he was their colleague, their comrade in arms, and someone whose strength was without question. I wanted to keep that in consideration, even if we wound up switching commanders later.)

Now Benimaru took out a third sheet.

"So here's what we need to discuss. These are all the forces affiliated with people besides me."

Finally. The first two sheets simply outlined preexisting forces and their current numbers; the only real eye-opener was Gobta leading the First Corps, and I was the one who suggested that, so it wasn't a surprise.

Now what have we here? I looked down the sheet, a bit excited.



What I saw were two diagrams marked as the left and right wings. The right wing contained numbers for our predefined corps—roughly twelve thousand for the First Corps under Gobta, thirty-seven thousand for the Second under Geld, and three thousand for the Third under Gabil, for a total of around fifty-two thousand. This was Tempest's standing force, and a scarily large force it was. We still had room to cultivate them, too. Our nation's population had just passed a million, and it was going up like a bullet. If you think about it, this was some pretty amazing growth, and it's what allowed us to maintain an army this size.

That, and treating the Second Corps like a construction team was what allowed us to maintain this level of force. It would've been tougher, I thought, if they were incapable of producing anything outside of combat. I really had to hand it to Geld and his soldiers—without them, we'd be down to a force of fifteen thousand, and that wasn't nearly enough to tackle the Eastern Empire. That was an issue Benimaru and I spent a little while stewing over.

"Once war begins, we can call back Geld and his corps then," said Benimaru. "That much will work as planned...but it is still not enough. The Western Nations each retain their own militaries, I know, but having them deployed presents its own problems."

"Yeah. We've taken over the Council and all, so we'd be losing out if we didn't use them, but I think we'd have a real backlash on our hands."

"And should a problem arise within the Western Nations, we'd have no deterrent left. That could lead to a bad situation."

"Hmm. Everything's fine here in Tempest, but if the Western Nations' citizens

start to question our governing, that'll make future work harder."

"Indeed."

We had gone through conversations like that several times. Benimaru's answer, I supposed, was the forces listed in the left wing of this sheet. It said:

—Western Deployment—150,000

—Magic-Born United—30,000

—Volunteer Army—20,000

"Huh. Pretty big numbers. What kinda forces are these on the left?"

"These are forces under our command, more or less. The Western Deployment is the forces serving the Council, like I discussed. These are treated as different from each nation's standing army. They're directly employed by the money sent by the Council—or really us, for the most part."

Fair enough. If the Council had given us military rights, that gave us command of the forces that directly served it. I knew that, but...

"But were there really *this* many?"

This Council force existed well enough on paper, but they were chiefly knights and soldiers brought in by councillors from their home nations. They numbered around a thousand, and their main assignment was security at the arena in Englesia's capital and the like. As a rule, each Western Nations member retained their own national military, charged with keeping the peace in their country. The Council itself almost never sent out military forces of its own, so there was no real need to maintain an army. (That's part of why they so readily handed military control to us.)

Really, though, I didn't ask for those rights because I wanted to boss them around in times of crisis. All I wanted to do was construct magitrain railroads connecting these nations, and asking for approval every time I sent Tempestian engineers out on the field was a pain in the ass. If there really *was* trouble, we'd send out our own army—and with that decision, we had the soldiers contracted with the Council sent back to their home nations for the time being.

In addition, we decided to establish a peacekeeping force, under the

condition that we funded it. This was recruited locally, since we figured people would be more comfortable with a force of humans, instead of monsters and demi-humans.

"Yes, we disbanded the army once, and then it grew even bigger. According to Testarossa's report, rumors spread around that joining the force ensured you free meals and lodging, so once we started recruiting, people showed up in droves."

"Yeah, but isn't this a peacekeeping force? We don't need one hundred and fifty thousand people for that."

Each nation had the right to police itself. If we started rounding up criminals, we'd be overstepping our authority. A peacekeeping force's work is mainly disaster prevention—really, just helping engineers and providing rear support. I didn't think we'd even need *ten* thousand people, much less a hundred fifty thousand.

"Well, the way Testarossa put it, that was the demand we received from all the nations," Benimaru began before explaining it all in detail.

Once Testarossa assumed control of the Council, she started advancing a pretty bold set of reforms. I had approved them all, but they had even bigger repercussions than I imagined. All these reforms were to be spearheaded by the individual nations; we'd simply provide the needed advice and technology. Foreign aid, essentially—"official development assistance," to use government jargon.

The way it worked was that the Council would provide public funding, and we'd provide nationally backed labor to help with whatever the nations needed. We'd hire on local people, provide technical assistance, and manage regional demands. That gave Tempestians work and a salary, and it afforded our partners the vital support they needed—a win-win kind of relationship.

But there's no such thing as a free lunch. There was another side to this support system. For example, the way we covered our construction costs was to take back that amount in local water rights. If we built train tracks in an area, we'd apply a tax to train usage fees, collecting a profit on a permanent basis. Just like with the highways, we'd handle all maintenance in exchange for

customs waivers and other rights.

*Truly, the work of a demon lord—act all kind and charitable, then do some pretty vicious stuff behind the curtain. But we were helping improve people's lives, and our partners didn't lose on the deal, really. They were just paying us in profits on matters they couldn't foresee doing yet.*

The larger nations, of course, would likely prefer to handle things themselves. Maybe they couldn't yet, but once they saw what we were doing, they could always copy us, steal our tech, and run it themselves. I took that as a given.

However:

"...And so even the large nations are pushing us with demands for railway infrastructure as soon as possible," said Benimaru.

"And since we don't have engineers in Tempest to handle that, you deployed the people we brought on as rear support instead."

"That's right. But apparently not even they were enough, so we've been fielding local people and having them join us..."

...And thanks to that, we now had a ridiculously large group of soldiers.

I had granted Testarossa full rights to act on my behalf as a diplomatic officer. I also told her that she could settle smaller affairs without having to report them to me, so not even Benimaru knew about this until fairly recently. Thanks to that, we had employed a massive number of people.

"But isn't that what the large nations want?" I asked. "If we train a bunch of technicians for them, that'll make it easier to operate things themselves."

That'd be more efficient than industrial espionage—and maybe it's harsh for me to say, but I didn't mind that approach. It was something that'd occur to any leader. The experienced personnel this cultivated would become pillars of their native country. We'd lose some of our interests in the region, which was sad, but if the ensuing tech development led to more competition, that was pretty exciting, too.

"It doesn't seem to be that way. They wouldn't want to let go of those technicians then, would they?"

No, maybe not.

"...Wait. Are you saying that you took the support troops Testarossa gathered and put them *all* in this Western Deployment?!"

"That's right." Benimaru grinned, watching my surprise.

It'd be a waste to train these technicians and just let them fade away. Better to establish a real, full-on peacekeeping force that could train for disaster rescue, provide bodyguards for dignitaries, run civic defense drills, and so on. That was the rather bold decision Benimaru made.

"Testarossa was about to let them go—she was done with them, essentially, but that seemed like such a waste to me."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

"That, and I thought I could find work for them, so I went on my own to name them the Western Deployment."

I see. That made sense. Of course, I wasn't going to expect miracles from this force after only a year, but if they kept up their training, I could picture them as disaster-rescue experts or the like. They'd be good for handling accidents, and as Benimaru said, we could use them in a variety of situations.

"All right. That was a pretty good decision, Benimaru."

"Oh, no need for praise," he replied, although he looked a bit bashful about it.

But the Western Deployment, huh? One hundred and fifty thousand is a big number, but if we were going to deploy them across the West, it almost wasn't enough. And if it let us retain our interests in those lands, they'd certainly be earning their keep for us. It all came as a surprise, but it was certainly news to rejoice about.

So next up...

"Okay, I get the Western Deployment, but what's this Magic-Born United?"

They numbered thirty thousand in total—were they conscripting monsters from the Forest of Jura or something?

"That's a force primarily composed of the magic-born who served under

Clayman, actually. Geld had them working as prisoners of war, and we borrowed the ones particularly suited for combat. In exchange, we're filling the holes with the high orcs who were working on now-completed construction projects."

From the way Benimaru put it, he was making sure none of this shuffling affected the progress of Geld's construction work. If so, then—well, sure, having experienced fighters would make for a better force than amateurs. But:

"Those guys wouldn't be too cooperative, though, would they?"

Clayman's force was mostly B-rank magic-born, though some were in the realm of A and beyond. Powerful as they were, they were actually kinda weak as a group—just a horde of monsters ruled by terror, not at all a challenge for well-trained career soldiers. Even if you gathered them all up, I didn't think there'd be nearly enough time to train them.

"Thanks to Geld, you won't find any selfish, violent ones in the force. Even if there were, well, I shut them up."

Uh-huh. I'm sure it'd be easy for Benimaru to overpower any of them.

"Well, fine, but aren't they used to regular work by now? I'm not sure forcing them into battle is such a hot idea..."

"It's all right," Benimaru assured me. "This is something they suggested. They wanted to show you, Sir Rimuru, that they could be of use to you."

"Huh?"

That was a surprise, coming from him. As selfish as all those magic-born were, now they were volunteering for duty?

"It comes down to good food, good company, a boss who says they need them, and decent work. That's what they valued, and they want to stake their powers on protecting it. They were quite enthusiastic."

"They were...?"

It was an unexpected stroke of luck, but one I really appreciated. Conscribed forces, after all, were useless in actual battle. If they were defending their homeland, maybe there'd be no other option, but otherwise, it'd be much

smarter for them to unconditionally surrender.

Nobody wanted to be a slave to another country. If you were going to be colonized and taxed to oblivion, you'd feign obedience but constantly seek out a chance to rise up and take revenge. But unless the invaders truly were cruel and abusive, you could decide to put up with a few disadvantages in the meantime. An invader could never ignore the feelings of the people living there; those people needed to take responsibility for the future they decided on, and a ruler had to answer to them.

That's why I thought conscription was among the worst things you could do to people. It's why you never tried to force patriotism down their throats.

Tempest operated under my protection, and I had no intention of listening to outsiders pushing their own arrogant demands. As long as I wasn't willing to easily give up our rights, there were always going to be differences of opinion. If the other side wouldn't bend, that'd naturally lead to war, and I didn't want opposition to that. If someone didn't feel like protecting their own country, I honestly didn't mind if they just went off somewhere.

One thing I wanted to make very clear was who I felt it was important to protect. Naturally, I'd prioritize my companions who'd stuck by me through thick and thin from the moment I established this nation. Anyone who came along later, talking about their own rights, I had no intention of going quite that far for. If I had no citizens to protect, I'd probably bug out as well—and then I'd build a new nation somewhere else, with companions I saw eye to eye with. After all, I had no great affinity for this land.

But at the same time, if these people loved Tempest, this land we all belonged to, I was ready to live up to every bit of that. No matter who attacked us, I'd smash them with every ounce of my might. Hell, even if it was Guy doing the attacking, I was ready to use any trick in the book to kill him. I mean, he was a freak of nature, and I *hoped* it wouldn't come to that, but still.

"They certainly seemed enthusiastic enough to me, and I'd say they were being honest with their feelings. In addition, we also had volunteers among people across the Forest of Jura who heard rumors of an impending war. That's what the Magic-Born United is composed of."

Benimaru chuckled a bit as he added, “I did reject a lot of the weaker-looking ones, though.”

Well, excellent. It gave them a chance to really work hard for me; I was glad for it.

The Volunteer Army, meanwhile, was a force composed of human beings living in Tempest or its neighboring areas. If we lost this war (no matter how it happened), the entire Forest of Jura would fall into ruin. Better to cooperate with us from the beginning, then, and that’s exactly what this band did.

This army was chiefly composed of adventurers and mercenaries, many of them immigrant volunteers we had accepted into the country. We also had a lot of the idiots we saw constantly staking their lives in the Dungeon, only to be eaten alive by my friends’ and my avatars each time. They numbered twenty thousand in total, and while I didn’t expect too much from them, that was still a pretty decent force.

“That’s the composition of the left wing. So the main difference between the left and right here is the degree of loyalty to you, Sir Rimuru.”

“Me?”

“The forces on the right consist of nothing but those ready to stake their lives for your nation or you. On the left, meanwhile, are a bunch of people with different motivations. Some may have had lofty intentions, but we hardly had the time to interview each one of them, so I went with this organizational structure.”

“I see...”

Shion and Diablo were nodding behind me. I could already hear them saying some pretty disturbing things—“They’re disposable pawns, then”; “Let us give them a trial and pick only the true elites among them”; that kinda thing—but surely it was just my imagination.

“So the next issue is who to name leader of each force.”

Now Benimaru was tackling the real task at hand.

\*

Let's start with the Western Deployment. They were the biggest force, but their members were still scattered all across the land.

"In terms of sheer numbers," Benimaru began, "we've got a quarter million under our command, but I believe it best to keep the one hundred and fifty thousand in the Western Deployment where they are, instead of moving them around."

"Yeah. They still technically belong to the Council. Maybe we're free to move them, but I doubt we'll have to call them all the way over here."

If we could get them all in one place, I'd be able to magically transport them in one fell swoop, of course. But managing a crowd of one hundred and fifty thousand is a huge responsibility; without a chain of command in place, they'd never act like a sensible army. Best to get a solid security structure in place, just so imperial agents can't start diverting their attention around the world.

"I agree with you, Sir Rimuru. I have the power to manage them, I believe, but let's keep the Western Deployment where they are. There's no single leader for them, but I'm thinking that Testarossa, our diplomatic officer, can handle those duties as well."

"I like that idea...but if war breaks out, I might wind up calling Testarossa back here. If I do, I'm worried about how she'll stay in contact with them."

How would she keep in touch with a force dispersed across such a wide range? We had successfully built a communications network connecting each nation and their main cities, using magical calls, communication crystals, and magisteel wiring. But the infrastructure didn't extend out to the individual town-and-village level yet—in fact, that'd be a job for our corps of engineers. Each squadron in the Deployment had at least one magic practitioner, so magical calls would be possible at least, but...

"That will not be a problem," said Diablo. "Moss is capable of managing hundreds of squadrons at once."

"Yes, that's what Soei told me as well," added Benimaru. "Moss was working with him in intelligence gathering, but it sounds like he can also handle inter-squadron contacts on the side."

He *can*? What an incredibly useful demon!

"Well, want to name him unit leader, then?" I offered.

"I...would feel bad for him if we did."

"Indeed. Given Testa's temperament, it would be a tragic situation for him. It hardly matters to me, of course, but I cannot help but feel a twinge of sympathy."

"...All right. Let's make Testarossa the provisional leader for now."

Not only Benimaru, but even Diablo voiced pity for Moss. I could read between the lines well enough, so I withdrew my nomination.

For now, the Western Deployment would focus on its primary peacekeeping mission. Barring extraordinary circumstances, deploying them elsewhere would only be done as a last resort. Testarossa would lead them, but this was meant to be temporary—I made it clear that we'd replace her once someone suitable came along.

Next, the Magic-Born United. Why don't I appoint Benimaru for that?

"Personally, I would suggest Sir Rigur," he said.

Oh, Rigur? True, Rigur had experience leading a security force, and his over-A power was nothing to sniff at. But he was also an assistant to Rigurd, and I wasn't sure he had time to lead a full army.

If at all possible, I wanted to settle this war with our standing forces alone—but right then, we had no idea how much military strength the Eastern Empire had ready. We had our spies en route but hadn't gained any intel within imperial borders yet. Still, based on the snippets we learned about their training exercises, current estimates stated that at least three hundred thousand troops were going to be deployed. There was even a chance they'd send out over a million, a truly massive force.

If it came to that, we couldn't afford to keep the Magic-Born United on ice. Along those lines, I had no issue with Rigur's command, but I was still anxious. Managing a ragtag army with essentially no rehearsal was a dangerous job for anyone.

"...Hmm. I really do want to leave this to you, Benimaru. And in the future, we can call this mixed force the Red Numbers. I'd like you to select some captains from Team Kurenai to make this force into a coherent unit. We'll make them into the Fourth Army Corps, and I want you to be their direct commander."

I'd call them red because they'd *stop* anyone in their way. Get it? My first dad joke in a while!

...

Right. I'll just keep that one to myself. Don't want to kill the mood.

Despite all these ridiculous thoughts, I managed to retain my composure as the briefing hummed along.

"Very well. In that case, I accept the appointment."

It looked like Benimaru thought I might ask that of him. He seemed ready to agree, not letting it faze him at all. He has the unique skill Born Leader, letting him cover for any lack of refinement among his forces, so he was the perfect person to lead a motley bunch like this.

So in addition to being my supreme commander, Benimaru was just appointed leader of the brand-new Red Numbers. That left the Volunteer Army.

"Now, what do you intend to do with the Volunteer Army?"

Benimaru winced. "Ah, there's the problem."

These volunteers included a large number of humans. Employing a monster as commander, Benimaru worried, could lead to unnecessary dissatisfaction among their ranks.

"Good point. If word starts getting around that humans can't advance in the land of monsters, that's gonna hurt our image."

"Anyone with such insipid thoughts is a weakling. A loser," Shion cut in. "They would never make anything of themselves anyway. You have no need at all to worry about them!"

"Shion, I... Okay, maybe I don't, but if someone doesn't know much about us, that's gonna sound an awful lot like the truth to them."

"True. Humans can be a fickle bunch to deal with."

Shion may not appreciate it too much, but a brand image is a precious thing to maintain. It'd be ridiculous if we let this issue make us out to look discriminatory, so I thought it required serious debate.

"But is there really anyone suitable for the role?" Diablo asked. There wasn't, really. That's why Benimaru was so troubled.

"I hear you there," I replied. "These are volunteers, besides. We didn't even plan for them."

"But we can't let them go idle," said Benimaru.

No, we couldn't. I appreciated the humans' ardor to serve us, and I didn't want to let that go to waste. But if we wanted to make good use of them, we needed a talented commander. This Volunteer Army was even more ragtag than the Magic-Born United—the Red Numbers—and if you asked me who could make them into a united force, Benimaru was about all I could think of.

So now what...?

"How about Girard, in Soei's force?" Benimaru suggested.

"No way," I said. "We picked him up as part of a secret arrangement with Englesia. I'm sure he won't want his face seen in public."

I didn't hear what kind of deal Testarossa struck with him, but having Girard bump around where everyone could see him had to be a bad idea. He'd been branded a traitor to all humankind. If we didn't treat him as dead—at least in public—it'd set a bad example for everyone else. I didn't have any duty to cover for him, but there was no need for him to take center stage for us, either.

"Strengthwise, I'd have no complaints, but it's not very realistic, no..."

Benimaru didn't seem too serious about pushing for him. I suppose he just lobbed the idea out for its own sake before he moved on to the next one. Restricting it to human beings *was* a pain, though. We went through several names, but none of them seemed to really fit.

Suddenly, Shion spoke up.

"Perhaps we could enlist the Crusaders for a little help?"

Benimaru and I looked at each other, then back at Shion.

“I— I’d hardly think so.”

“No, that wouldn’t be a—”

“Then how about Sir Masayuki?” she countered before I could tell her it wasn’t a good idea.

Masayuki. Hearing the name struck me like lightning.

“That’s *it!*” I shouted.

“Amazing, Shion!!” Benimaru hollered in tandem.

That was the exact moment we decided to appoint Masayuki to be our Volunteer Army’s leader.

\*

This was decided, of course, without consulting the guy himself, but it was one decision that pretty much anyone would agree with. The only one less than convinced was Masayuki.

“Why *me...?*”

He brought a hand to his head when I gave him the news. But I didn’t have much to say to him. As sad as it was, this was war. What people wanted didn’t factor into it. I know I was thinking the opposite a moment ago, but I couldn’t worry about Masayuki’s feelings here. After all, things ought to be fine if I leave the Volunteer Army in his hands. In times like these, he was a valuable ally to have.



"You know, I think I've gotten better at using my Chosen One unique skill, too. I'm not getting showered in praise after everything I do, like before. But now I'm not able to use it when I *want* to, so please don't expect too much of me, all right?"

He was really being a sore loser about it, trying to weasel out any way he could, but I knew that wasn't the truth. After all, Masayuki was as popular as ever, and he still wielded massive influence around the world.

"But don't you want to show off to Kenya and the gang?"

"I, um..."

If he accepted the job, I was willing to let him teach whatever weird stuff he wanted to the kids and bask in their adulation.

"Hey, it'll be all right! You can do it!"

"But..."

"No buts! I helped you out when you had to face off against Bovix, remember?"

Masayuki's party had already made it past Floor 50, where Bovix had served as guardian. During that expedition, I used my avatar to put my thumb on the scale a bit, softening up the guy enough so they could defeat him and take all the credit.

"That *did* save my hide, yes..."

"So do we have a deal?"

"All right."

Between coaxing him and soothing his ego, I finally got a yes.

"You *have* been a big help to me, Rimuru. I really did wanna pay you back sometime, so..."

He still didn't sound too enthusiastic, but he took the job of Volunteer Army general anyway. We received no complaints from those volunteers, either—in fact, the reaction was more like "All *right!!*" and "Victory is ours!!" and so on. To them, it was like going in with twenty points already on the board. No

matter how much of a hangdog expression he gave me, there was no turning back.

"I knew this would happen..."

Masayuki said he had more control over the Chosen One skill these days, but what did he mean by that? Maybe my hunch was right, and he was lying...or maybe some of Masayuki's *real* luck was operating on him, skill or not? That'd be even more of a surprise, actually. Leon was the opposite—everything he did tended to make him look as bad as possible. This was apparently the case even back in his Hero days; I guess it can be hard to fight your true nature.

"Now, now... I'm sorry all this got decided without you, but think about it! You're gonna be a banner who'll inspire the entire army!"

I tried to commiserate with him as much as I could—but regardless, Masayuki the Hero was now leading our twenty thousand (mostly) human volunteers.



So the corrected organizational chart had fifty-two thousand troops on the right wing and fifty thousand on the left. Benimaru was at the very top, the generals of each army corps below him.

We thus had over a hundred thousand soldiers to work with, but I was still iffy on whether we could take the imperial force with that. No need to panic, though. All our preparations were continuing on apace. We had one hundred and fifty thousand troops in the Western Deployment to back us up. Each of the Western Nations was prepping support units from their respective knight corps. As a final, *final* defensive line, we'd get the Western Nations' army set up as well. The total would be over two hundred and fifty thousand, I was told, and if push came to shove, I'd be relying on them.

This was the figure we cobbled together from all the mercenaries and support troops, but it was hard to tell if it was a lot or a little. Testarossa had cajoled and threatened the Council into cooperating with us, not that they had much choice—if we lost, after all, it'd be their turn next. We wouldn't be tapping into any of these forces unless things looked pretty grim for ourselves.

Regardless, we had the terrain advantage, as well as Veldora and additional

support from demon lords like Luminus and Leon. Even Milim agreed to pitch in; the Beast Master's Warrior Alliance serving Carillon would be ready to deploy at a moment's notice.

Plus, as my personal trump card, I had the Black Corps under Diablo at the ready. Benimaru had full command over the entire military, so honestly speaking, the hierarchy didn't give me direct control over any force. In practice, though, the Black Corps took orders from nobody but Diablo and the three demonesses under him. They were a fully independent army, totally out of Benimaru's control.

That was the sum of our forces. And we hadn't factored in what moves Yuuki would make.

"A war, huh?" I muttered to myself in my room. Did the Empire *really* want to conquer the Western Nations? Guy had used the term *game* to describe his motives. It sounded like there were some connections there—some kind of restless ulterior motive pointed at the Empire. But even so:

"No matter who comes along, if they lay their hands on our little paradise, I'll crush them."

Those were my true feelings. I had no intention of making the same mistake twice. I'm a demon lord, and I can't afford to put the wrong things first.



Meanwhile, as Rimuru and his companions were preparing for war, the Eastern Empire was doing much the same thing...except they spent far more years preparing. Slowly, carefully, step by step, their preparations for a grand offensive took shape. Before long, the Empire would wake from its long, long slumber...and only a small amount of time remained until the storm began.

## INTERLUDE

### A LOOK INSIDE THE EMPIRE

The Eastern Empire, officially the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire, was one of the oldest nations in the world. Its history extended back centuries; as the story goes, it had already laid the foundations for an empire as early as two thousand years ago.

Its roots can be traced back to the small Kingdom of Nasca, a realm that had spent many years absorbing and merging with the Magical Kingdom of Namrius, followed by the Eastern Federation of Ulmeria, to create the current Empire. In the background of this conquest was the massive, overwhelming military Nasca cultivated—and now, under the name of the United Emperor Ludora Nam-ul-Nasca, the Empire had enjoyed a reign of power for the past two millennia, never allowing its annexed nations to rebel. Every member nation was the full and complete vassal of the Empire, subject to its absolute rule.

This was how the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire—generally referred to as the Eastern Empire—operated.

It was said that the aim of the Empire's leader was absolute dominance, and that was reflected in its unbroken imperial bloodline—the current emperor had been granted the name Ludora as well. No matter how things worked in practice, the emperor always preferred absolute power, according to conventional wisdom.

The military, too, adopted this “might makes right” approach, taking a unique stance and guaranteeing promotion for anyone who could prove their power. And even now, as the rumors among the Empire's subjects went, the only reason the Empire had not plowed through the Forest of Jura yet was because they were still not prepared for it.

Approximately 350 years ago, the Empire attempted, and failed, to subdue

Veldora the Storm Dragon, costing it an entire city. Those who managed to rile that fickle dragon were not given the time to regret it as they perished with that city. It was among the largest in the land at the time, boasting a population of a hundred thousand—a fortress city nestled against the Forest of Jura's east side. The Empire had taken a century to build it up as a beachhead for the invasion of the forest; it was a military base, ready to expand the Empire's territory once they made it through Jura.

Driven with ambition, the military leaders of the time came up with a plan, one that would take them beyond the forest. It was the fervent desire of the Empire, cultivated over a hundred years, and despite its prosperity, there was only one reason why it had dreams of territorial expansion—because the emperor willed it. There was no other motive, and none of the citizens voiced disagreement.

The plan proceeded smoothly, the Empire's armies building themselves up in order to prove their might. Then, in the name of the emperor, the order was given to begin the invasion. But thanks to a foolish idea that occurred to one squadron leader, the entire operation was crushed. *If we're going through the Forest of Jura anyway, reasoned this leader, we might as well tame its master. No giant lizard is going to be a threat to us.* It was an incredibly ill-advised decision, and it led them all to their destruction.

What he and his troops did, exactly, has never been accurately reported. Anyone who could've recorded the incident, or stored those records, was turned into ash. And so the dream of the Empire, the ambition of its emperor, was burned to cinders.

That brought us to the present day. The Empire spent a long time laying low, tending to the wounds Veldora gave them, but the emperor never gave the okay to continue the invasion. Trespassing into the Forest of Jura was never permitted; the power they spent 350 years building up patiently waited for its chance to roar.

Now let's turn our attention to the Empire's political structure.

In the Empire, there exists a political administration and a military branch—the two wings supporting the emperor's rule. The emperor personally serves as

both the sovereign of the political administration and the commander in chief of the military—a massive amount of power for one individual to wield.

This administration contained a House of Lords, a legislature populated by the nobility who enjoyed a great deal of power—on the surface. In reality, though, the nobles were given no decision-making rights. They were granted prestige and vested interests, but they played little more than a bureaucratic role, rubber-stamping the will of the emperor.

This House of Lords was a hereditary system, its members becoming lords without any vote required. No matter how lofty their personal ambitions were, it was impossible for them to gain the power to make them a reality. All imperial territory was the property of the emperor, who lent it out to the nobility and let them manage it, but no more.

The nobility was supported by teams of highly educated government officials. These were the bureaucrats who proposed plans and policies, with the full backing of the emperor behind them, and they subsequently all made pledges of loyalty to their leader.

The same was true of the military. Since the emperor himself (and not the state) had authority over them, it was a de facto personal force owned by him alone. Even regional cities annexed by the Empire lived by this rule; all private property was seized, then lent back by the emperor. The defense forces protecting these lands were similarly on loan from this emperor, provided solely out of his personal compassion.

This policy successfully quelled any rebellion out in the Empire's far reaches. It was made possible by the overwhelming difference in national power. The Empire was willing to accept surrender, but this came at the forfeiture of all other rights. Anyone who objected to this could expect a violent purge—they would be thoroughly eradicated, ensuring no one would harbor similar ideas again.

That was how order was maintained across the Empire. The carrot and the stick—terror against overwhelming military might, and guaranteed safety upon becoming an imperial subject. These two tactics were thoroughly managed in equal measure, preserving peace in the Empire for generations.

Normally, it would be impossible for a single person to rule over a nation this vast. In fact, look over the past two thousand years of history, and you won't find a single occasion where the emperor's rule was ever put into question. Power always remained at the top after every transition. No matter how you thought about it, it was strange. If you chalked it up to the great work of the emperor, it essentially meant he was a god, a being beyond the human realm.

We now turn to the Empire's military force, broadly divided into three main divisions:

The Armored Division: A force of mechanized soldiers, managed by teams of technicians. This was a modern armored force possessing tanks and more, symbolizing the technological might of the Empire.

The Magical Beast Division: A collection of beasts taken from around the world, inside and outside Empire territory. Controlling and wielding their powers made this division a symbol of the Empire's power.

The Composite Division: A collection of off-spec mechanized soldiers and crazed magical beasts incapable of group activity. They are too focused on themselves to function as a group, but their powers are a wild card, and together they could become a serious threat. They symbolized the heart of the Empire, still beating young.

If the Western Nations relied primarily on swords and sorcery, the Empire's focus on magic and science made it the pioneers of a new era.

The presence of otherworlders played a mighty role in the Empire's expanded military. One imperial subject took a particular interest in these visitors, and the cosmic knowledge they held. He was named Gadora, a great sorcerer who served in the imperial palace for many years, and despite his wizened appearance, he was an energetic man. He had a thirst for knowledge, not just magical, either, and he relished chatting with people from other worlds.

Through them, he learned that this other world also consisted of multiple countries—and unlike this one, the inhabitants found ways to overcome

differences in opinion and language to live together. There was no magic in that world, causing it to grow and evolve in quite a different direction from this one.

Gadora had lived for a long time. Whenever he approached the end of his natural life span, he used the self-invented Mysterious Arts: Reincarnation to resurrect himself over and over again. It allowed him to observe otherworlders over many years, granting him huge stores of knowledge and even a command of several languages from the other world. Whenever a new otherworlder came along, he'd always have them brought to him, and he'd put them under his protection. The Empire had been collecting more than just magical beasts from around the world, and Gadora advocated for otherworlders in the imperial court, receiving permission to do with them what he wanted.

Otherworlders with special skills or knowledge were welcomed in the Empire, and their population was far beyond that of any other nation in the world. That explained why the Empire's culture and characteristics were so heavily influenced by them. Many of these people had unique skills as well, and the Empire conducted much research on them. In this aspect as well, their military technology had developed to the point that it was surpassed by no one.

In the Empire, the profession of knight was obsolete. The concept of fighting cavalry had gone away; instead, the military adopted new tactics that took advantage of their modernized weaponry. Soldiers whose very bodies had been mechanized were known as mechaknights, treated as the star players in imperial battle.

These characteristics played out most vividly in the Empire's Armored Division, but otherworld knowledge also played a role in the Magical Beast Division. The otherworlders had brought with them knowledge of DNA—deoxyribonucleic acid, a macromolecular organic substance that contained the genetic information for living beings. This knowledge made it possible to analyze the powers of magical beasts on a scale like none before—and that further branched out into other research. Finally, the Composite Division was home to a large number of powerful otherworlders, each wielding their own unique skills, and one derided their battle strength at their own peril.

It was the masterful manipulation of factors like unique skills and otherworld technology that let the Empire create such an insurmountable military. It was

no exaggeration to say that Gadora's passion for the subject had expanded the force's strength all by itself.

In addition to the three main divisions Gadora helped cultivate, there was a paramilitary force charged with guarding the emperor himself: the Imperial Guardians, a small company of only a hundred, and one of the few forces left that called their members knights. The uninformed observer would assume this custom to be a relic carried over from antiquity, but that was not the case. After all, the Imperial Knights who staffed this troop were the best of the best, handpicked from those who stood above the pack in each division. Some were otherworlders, even, proving that the Empire didn't discriminate based on bloodline or birthplace. To the very end, the motto of the Empire was "might makes right," and there was no better evidence of that than what was illustrated here. These knights gained their position purely through power alone, not the blood or influence gained over generations.

As a symbol of their superiority, all members of the Imperial Guardians were granted Legend-class weapons and armor. The very best equipment, handled by the very best fighters, created a tremendous synergy effect, giving this team of a hundred more pure fighting power than an entire division. They were also guaranteed the best treatment in the Empire—every one of them was a high-level military officer, and in special missions, they were afforded at the least the authority of an army colonel. They were the pride of the military and the greatest force in the whole Empire.

So the Empire had, in essence, four military divisions. Each of them could only be led by those with a convincing talent for the position—they needed to be recognized as "the strongest" by anyone who saw them. How did they prove this? By rank-based duels within the divisions.

The system allowed lower-ranking members to challenge their superiors, under the arbitration of a third party, and these rankings were thus in a constant state of flux. The duels had to satisfy a few conditions, of course, before they were accepted. They were forbidden during military maneuvers, and witnesses were required for them to be certified. Also, if you challenged someone and lost, you had to wait a year before mounting another challenge. The same was true if you killed your opponent, but the higher-ranked defender

was allowed to kill a challenger without penalty, so this contest wasn't something you embarked on lightly.

In a way, this was the ultimate embodiment of the Empire's "might makes right" credo—subjugating your opponent with overwhelming force. The fact that the Imperial Guardians saw no end of would-be new members challenging their way in showed that this imperial ideal was etched into the very hearts of its subjects.

Ranks within the military were therefore strictly defined, but Gadora didn't count in this hierarchy. He held a unique position in the realm, treated as a kind of non-imperial stranger by the Empire.

Appointments to the Imperial Guardians were deliberated over by a panel that Gadora wasn't a part of, and the commander of each division was picked from the Guardian roster. Whenever one stepped down, a replacement would be picked from this group of a hundred. Anyone who wanted to move up among the Guardians had an equal chance, so those with real ability wouldn't get buried under the masses. They were free to hone their powers, silently waiting for a chance to emerge into the spotlight.

Appointed to the very top of the Guardians was the Marshal, while the three people under them were the three Generals of the Guardians. You automatically became Marshal if you hit the number one spot in the pecking order, while Generals of the Guardians were named by a committee consisting of the emperor, the current Marshal, and Gadora. It took more than brute strength to run a military force, after all. Still, any General who became a division commander was always going to be the strongest member of their division, since (by definition) everyone serving in one was going to be weaker than an Imperial Knight.

To outside observers, the Marshal and their Generals stood at the peak of the Empire—and if the Imperial Guardians received Legend-class gear, this quartet naturally had to own something even better. These were the Empire's greatest hidden treasures, the most potent of gear, used to suppress other nations in ancient times—God-class gear, in other words.

Possessing multiple examples of semi-mythological gear quite literally meant

you were supporting the very dignity of the Empire. This was the ultimate in weaponry and armor, items an average person wouldn't even be allowed to touch. It was said one needed to have certain capabilities to so much as pick them up—only when the gear accepted you, it was said, would it unleash its true force.

The greatest of power, supported by the ultimate in gear. Truly they were invincible, the foundational rock the Empire was built upon.

And then—something changed in the Empire.

For the first time in decades, a commander actually lost a ranking challenge—and with that, the colossal responsibility of keeping the disorganized Composite Division a coherent force. He was felled by a man who had made a truly historical rise through the ranks, having enlisted for the first time not even a year ago—mowing down one experienced fighter after the other without a single loss.

Now the young man stood at one of the Empire's loftiest peaks. His name was Yuuki Kagurazaka, and with his rise, the pace of human events would rocket into high gear.

**ROUGH SKETCH**



Gadora

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
3

## THE IMPERIAL GUESTS

## CHAPTER 3

### THE IMPERIAL GUESTS

Three people stood there in the lavishly decorated room, all looking nervous and standing straight-backed as they awaited the chamber's owner—Yuuki, the man who came to the Empire and immediately shot up to the rank of commander.

To them, the story of Yuuki was not any sort of surprise. After all, Yuuki was their boss, the leader of the Cerberus secret society.

"Hey," he said when he finally came in, "sorry to keep you waiting! You could've sat down, you know." With him was Kagali, standing politely toward the rear like a secretary.

"Not at all, Sir Yuuki," one man among the visitors said. "We remain your faithful servants. You hardly need to be considerate of us."

This man was Damrada the Money, one of Cerberus's three boss-level officials. He was a hard man to grasp, all greasy and shady-looking. The other two were Misha the Lover—a beautiful woman with a strange air about her, at times looking like both a young girl and a mature woman—and Vega the Power, whose supple, well-balanced, carnivore-like body dominated anyone who laid eyes upon her. This was the trio at the top of Cerberus's operations.

They all saluted Yuuki before sitting down.

"First, let us congratulate you on reaching the rank of commander."



"Yes. As someone who survived an encounter with the demon lord Guy, I was sure you could do it, Sir Yuuki."

"*Pfft!* Let *me* at that force, and taking over a division would be child's play."

Damrada and Misha expressed their good wishes to Yuuki. Vega, at the end, didn't seem so impressed. But Yuuki didn't let it bother him.

*You're right, I think,* he pondered with an internal sneer. *You really could be part of the hundred...but after that, you'd never hold out. No way anyone could ask you to command anything. You wouldn't stand a chance.*

"Well, I have to thank you, Damrada," he said, changing the subject, "for intervening on my behalf with Lord Gadora."

"Oh, don't be silly! It was all in anticipation for this moment, Sir Yuuki. All I did was introduce Lord Gadora to an otherworlder you secured for us, so there's hardly any need to thank me that much."

"Ha-ha-ha! You're always so stiff, Damrada. Why don't you just accept my gratitude for a change?"

"I am afraid I cannot, sir. I don't want you to expect more from me than I can provide."

"Ha-ha! That's a funny joke." Yuuki looked at Damrada and grinned. That brought the point across well enough. After many years, they each trusted in the other's abilities.

After a shared laugh, Yuuki moved to the main topic. "Now, Kagali, brief us on what the demon lord Rimuru is doing."

"Yes, Sir Yuuki. The demon lord Rimuru is currently—"

With his order, Kagali began her briefing. Her information mainly came from members of the Free Guild who remained in the West. The majority of Yuuki's agents there had fled, but several had used that as a cover to become underground spies.

Kagali went over everything in her clear voice. Rimuru had total control over the Western Nations and was using it to form an army of fearsome size, preparing for an imperial invasion. She covered all of that and more, alongside

some unbelievable phenomena occurring in the capital city of Rimuru.

"Oh... So they've designated the lodging town along the Great Ameld River as a military base?" said Yuuki. "Yeah, if they're going to put defensive lines in their own nation, they'd have to do that, huh?"

"Indeed," Kagali replied. "There are already nearly twenty thousand troops stationed at that base. They are using something called magitrains for material transport, so they likely stored up enough food resources to survive a siege."

"That's Tempest for you. The Empire's not gonna have an easy win there."

"I agree. They're importing food supplies from Farminus, so they've got enough to feed a population of several million. The nation as a whole is far more powerful than it was a year ago, and I'd say they could fight off the Empire all by themselves. Plus, the Council of the West is now entirely controlled by the demon lord Rimuru. If they can collate the West's forces into a cohesive whole, that would be substantial, too."

"You think so? I'm sure Rimuru tries to be thorough with everything, but he's pretty naive, as far as I'm concerned. He probably figures that pitting numbers against numbers will just lead to more casualties, so I bet he wants to chase off the Empire with just his elites."

"That's ridiculous..."

"I doubt someone like a demon lord would attempt something so foolish..." Damrada added.

He and Kagali discounted the idea, but that didn't change Yuuki's mind.

*No, seriously, he really is that naive. But between that and how freakishly strong he is, I feel like he could actually do something...*

Despite his thoughts, he asked Kagali to keep going.

"Thank you. Continuing with the briefing... The capital of Rimuru has a force of over fifty thousand on standby, and reinforcements are streaming in from the former Eurazania. Their total fighting power will likely surpass one hundred thousand in the end."

"That's pretty amazing, but it still gives the Empire a big advantage."

"Certainly, the numbers don't compare. The Empire has over a million, and their foot soldiers have been undergoing some kind of weird modifications, too. I think even the lowest infantry would rank at least a C. And consider all their bizarre armaments as well—honestly, I don't think they stand a chance."

Those were Kagali's honest feelings. Yes, a hundred thousand pairs of boots on the ground was impressive, especially given their expert training and high morale. Normally, Tempest would be worthy of high praise. But compared with the Empire's full outfit, it simply paled by comparison. Even the defenses Kagali built for her castle back when she was the demon lord Kazalim wouldn't hold out against the violent charge of the Empire's numbers. A mere one hundred thousand, faced with that maelstrom, meant nothing.

But Yuuki had different ideas. "I'll keep your advice in mind. Keep going."

"Right. Now, moving on to their nation's technology..."

Kagali continued reporting the facts.

Tempest had suddenly begun offering a variety of curious goods for sale—tools to make life more convenient, for example, and fancy high-end weaponry; they served different purposes, but all were very effective gadgets. A lot of buyers wanted to sign exclusive contracts with the developers of these goods, but try as they might, none of the merchants had figured out where they're coming from. Their origins remained a mystery.

"...The magitrains I mentioned are another example, but as with the Empire, we're seeing a wave of technological innovation. Unfortunately, they are doing a thorough job with preventing information leaks. The Free Guild members weren't able to trace these goods back to their creators."

They were probably being developed internally. That much was clear, but nobody had any idea where. It frustrated Kagali as well, but they couldn't send her out to deal with the demon lord Rimuru herself. If she arose suspicion again, it'd be all over, so Yuuki couldn't push his inner circle like that.

Then Kagali suddenly recalled something.

"If you think about it, they must be developing new kinds of weapons, too. Considering that, perhaps we should be concerned about more than the size of

their armies."

Yuuki gave this a grin. "I thought you'd notice that. You're right, though. I was surprised to see the Empire developing tanks, but Rimuru's not far behind with his trains, either. It's not like the Empire has an exclusive license for scientific weaponry, so it'd be stupid to look to that for an advantage."

No, the Empire wasn't the only side of this fight with otherworlder tech. Rimuru retained all his otherworlder memories, so there's no telling what kind of weapon he might decide to fund.

If the Empire were fighting any normal nation, that opponent would have been shaken to the core by all its mysterious firepower. Even if that opponent had otherworlders, the knowledge they'd learn from them would only add to the despair. The difference in fighting ability would become clear as day, and they'd understand that there was no chance of winning. But what if the other side had the technical skill to develop the same kinds of things? They'd immediately work out countermeasures, and any advantage would be evened out in the blink of an eye. In fact, if one side trusted in their tech *too* much, they'd have the tables turned and lose terrain on their foe so quickly that it'd make their heads spin.

Yuuki had seen all this, and by his estimate, he thought Rimuru's chances of victory weren't at all minor.

"Ridiculous!" interjected Vega. "Just crush them, then! If you're *that* worried about that stuff, just tear it all down! Problem solved!"

Whether it was a weapon or an army, the eminently confident Vega thought, all you had to do was trample over everything in your way. His observation demonstrated a critical lack of comprehension across this whole conversation. It made Yuuki rub a hand against his head.

*This guy... He's strong but so stupid. Too stupid, even...*

If he had even a bit more brains in his head, he could be useful for so much more.

Yuuki sighed. "Well, if it comes to that," he said, "you can be sure I'll ask you for it. But we can't misread the enemy here."

That bit of ambivalence ought to have shut Vega up. Besides, he thought, in this world, quality counted for a lot more than quantity. No matter how big an army you assembled, you'd never beat the demon lord Guy—an example that proved you could never deride the power of an individual.

To reach your strategic goal, it was important to master the information war and fully gauge your opponent's abilities. The easiest way to do that was by throwing someone decently strong against your foe and seeing what happens. In addition, abandoning an unwinnable battle was a proper practice to employ. And no matter how powerful an individual foe might have been, attacking with multiple forces at once could let you overcome them. In other words, looking at a side's overall war power was meaningless. What mattered was tactical skill—how well they could effectively operate the forces at hand.

Along those lines, Tempest was a troublesome enemy. Rimuru was far from the only threat—that nation had a ridiculous number of powerful magic-born. Even the Big Four—Benimaru, Diablo, Shion, and Gobta—were like four tactical units of their own. Defeating any one of them was a highly difficult mission.

*I doubt it's just a matter of tech. They got a lot of tough people on their side, so sheer numbers aren't gonna matter with them. Guess it shows how right I was to capitulate to Guy earlier, huh?*

As far as Yuuki knew, there were several people stronger than Gobta, which meant at least a few others were as powerful as the Big Four.

"My real concern is the magic-born comparable to Saints or demon lords," muttered Damrada, apparently in agreement.

"You're right. Because it's not just the Big Four with them," said Yuuki. "There's magic-born like Geld and Gabil as well. It's hard to understand why all these demon lord-class people keep coming over there."

The more Yuuki thought about it, the stranger it seemed. Multiple people, each with strength on the level of Clayman, in the service of Rimuru, a lone demon lord. If you were aware of that, you'd almost wish it were a joke.

"Lucky for us that the demon lord Rimuru isn't our enemy right now."

Everyone except for Vega quietly nodded at Yuuki's statement. Now they had

a sort of agreement with Guy that placed them under his affiliation. Anyone who messed with Yuuki and his team would be inviting the wrath of Guy upon them. With Yuuki uninterested in challenging Rimuru, they were at an armistice, more or less—and Yuuki was selfish enough to try using this situation as best as he could. Even if they faced off sometime, it'd only be after he regained his losses in the West.

With that resolved in his mind, he returned to the main topic.

“Does that complete your report?” he asked Kagali.

“We weren’t able to obtain detailed military information, so that’s all the accurate intel we have. But there is one curious topic I’d like to bring up.”

“What’s that?”

“In the capital of Rimuru, there’s been ongoing disaster training taking place, but the local government recently added evacuation drills to the schedule.”

This training involved pretty sensible matters—running into sturdy buildings, putting out fires, that sort of thing. But the evacuation drill this time had citizens practicing fleeing into town from outside the four main gates. It didn’t make much sense.

“Fleeing *into* town?”

“Yes. Our investigators weren’t sure what it was about, so they decided to split up and take a closer look.”

“One on the outside, one on the inside?”

“Exactly. Then, they said, they saw something—a strange sight that looked like a dream—”

“A strange sight?”

“Yes, Misha. There was an announcement, and exactly ten minutes after that, the entire town vanished without a trace. All that remained was one single gate.”

According to the investigator left outside, there were some security personnel left by the gate, guiding any stragglers into a nearby cave. Once the coast was clear, the investigator braced himself and went through the gate—only to find

himself in a mazelike chamber of stone walls. He quickly fled back out the gate in a panic, proving that it had two-way access.

"That might be their Dungeon, I think..." said Yuuki.

"Do you know what it is, Sir Yuuki?" Damrada asked.

"Yeah. I think Kagali knows, too, but there's a tourist attraction in town called the Dungeon, right?"

"Correct. A structure with wandering monsters for adventurers to challenge themselves against."

"It's probably that. I heard a rumor that there's a whole city inside that Dungeon, so..."

"A city *inside* it?"

Damrada didn't seem ready to believe that, but Yuuki and Kagali were serious. It was hard to explain to someone who didn't already know, but that was the reality.

"Yeah. It's a little crazy to think of normally, but... You know, it takes someone like Rimuru to make it possible. The Dungeon goes down a hundred floors, after all, and it's guarded by Veldora at the bottom."

"...Is that really true?" Damrada questioned.

"Of course. I heard it from Veldora himself."

That shut up Damrada pretty quickly. Kagali felt a little bad for him.

"But if you think about it," she said, "it makes sense. Do you think this Dungeon city might contain vital infrastructure for Tempest—for example, their technological development site?"

"Ah, I see," replied Yuuki. "I can believe it... In fact, it makes good sense."

There was no limit to what Rimuru would try. Yuuki didn't even let it faze him any longer. If anything, it excited him. And while this was only a guess, he doubted he was wrong. If it was Rimuru, he concluded, it had to be true.

"What does this say about the war, then?"

"That I really don't know. I always thought you couldn't take those guys with a

normal approach, but handling a city defense like *that*? I'm sure it's gonna shock the Empire."

Yuuki had assumed that Rimuru wouldn't fight the final battle on his own turf—he'd never let his citizens become casualties. But what if he had a surefire method to ensure every single civilian was out of harm's way? If he did, the enemy would have to rewrite their entire strategy.

"Yeah, so maybe they're taking a wait-and-see approach with the lodging town—see if they wind up fighting there or not. Maybe they'll fight the *real* war around their capital. If the Empire forces miss the gate and pass right on by, there could be a surprise attack from the rear, kinda thing."

"And then the Western Nations' army can pin them down from the front."

"They could send an advance team to examine and analyze the Empire's fighting power. Then, while the Western Nations and the Empire are fighting a war of attrition, they can take their time crafting a response."

"What a terrifying approach to think of. He really *is* a demon lord."

Once they understood Yuuki's thoughts, Kagali, Damrada, and Misha all showed visible surprise. They knew conventional warfare wouldn't be enough to stop the demon lord Rimuru, but they hadn't thought *this* far. Just imagining having to fight him gave them all headaches. It'd just be too hard—and now, the fight between Rimuru and the Empire was starting to sound like a lot of fun to watch.

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"So, Sir Yuuki, what's your next move?"

Misha was waiting for the right time to ask. She and her cohorts knew Yuuki took on the demon lord Guy and lost. They remained loyal to him anyway, but they still weren't sure what exactly was on his mind.

The Cerberus trio was fine with the Empire giving Rimuru and his friends a hard time, but no matter what, they wanted to avoid playing a role in that. Yuuki promised Guy that he wouldn't seriously support the Empire—but if he was a commander now, there was every concern he'd get caught in his own trap. For Cerberus, having an imperial commander on their side was extremely

attractive, but it also came with the danger of getting involved in military affairs. That was an eat-or-be-eaten world; one wrong move and they'd face annihilation.

Those were the motives behind Misha's question, and Yuuki was fully aware of them.

"You don't have to worry. If Rimuru holds out for me, that suits all of us just fine. I mean, if we want to make our ideals a reality, the Empire gets in the way of that, don't they? I want to send them to their ruin someday, and not just because Guy told me to... And now that I'm a commander, I get to control the timing. Just think of it like that."

Now that Yuuki was one of the Empire's three top commanders, he knew all about their internal operations. Getting an inside view of their military strategy even let him read into the common ground he shared with them. Naturally then, when they went on the move, he'd be able to predict the size of their forces—as well as when defenses in imperial territory would be the lightest. If the Western Nations put up a tough fight, the Empire would have to deploy that much more firepower against them. Then, no matter how stout their defenses, Yuuki was sure he'd find an opening.

"And we'll *hit* them where they're open!" Yuuki said, smacking the table for effect. Kagali smiled, still standing up straight, while Damrada and the others grew excited in their seats.

"Are you suggesting a coup...?" Damrada asked.

"Ah, I love it," Misha gushed. "Now *that's* the Sir Yuuki I know."

"Heh-heh! Sounds like a lot of fun. Empire, demon lord, I'll crush 'em all!"

Vega was a little *too* excited, maybe, but Yuuki decided not to worry about it as he got back to the point.

"Well, that's my final goal anyway. Part of my promise with Guy was to stir up trouble with the Empire, too, and I gotta live up to my end of it. I'm gonna mess around with the West, too, but I don't think anyone's gonna complain about *that*, so..."

He smiled warmly. Guy hadn't warned him against that, so Yuuki was free to

do what he liked.

"Are you talking about having the Empire fight the Western Nations, then taking the Empire's head in the meantime...?" Damrada inquired.

"Vicious as always, huh?" said Misha.

"Oh, not really," Yuuki answered. "I think it's a plan pretty much anyone could come up with."

They would, maybe, but few would actually go through with it. Or maybe they'd try but not be powerful and talented enough to make it happen. Yuuki was the exception.

"Lord Gadora gave me a lot of information, too. That old man loves anything novel, and he's got a flexible mind, but for some reason, he just *hates* the Western Nations. Like, to an obsessive level. It's a lot of the reason why he's developed all these weapons and contributed them to the Empire."

"Ah yes, that's a famous story," said Damrada. "Even I was aware of that."

"Right? 'Cause if he's looking for things that could crush the Empire's ambitions, you'd *think* he'd see the demon lord Rimuru as that. I'm sure it'll dawn on him once he starts messing with the guy."

"...And then what will happen?"

"Well, Lord Gadora has a ton of influence with the imperial military, but in terms of actual power, he's got almost none. That's because he's more interested in revenge than anything. So if I can lead him the right way, I think I can pit him against Rimuru himself."

At the same time, thought Yuuki, he'd like to have Gadora poke around for information about the Dungeon.

"This is your way to hassle Rimuru and weaken the Empire at the same time?"

"You got it!"

Yuuki briskly nodded at Damrada. He wasn't going to touch Rimuru, but if someone else wanted to challenge him, they were perfectly welcome—hence all his conniving plans.

He took this opportunity to discuss his thoughts in more detail.

“The way I see it, there are three people we need to watch out for in the Empire. One of them is Lord Gadora himself.”

Gadora was a master sorcerer, a magic-born who had lived for many, many years. People saw him as a mystery figure who knew everything that went on behind the scenes in the imperial capital, and he was also a hero in his own right, one of the few survivors of the previous invasion attempt against Veldora.

“Who are the other two?” a curious Kagali asked behind Yuuki. He gave her a frustrated scowl in response.

“Well, I don’t know much about them yet, exactly. That’s why I know they’re so much trouble.”

Even with his extensive intelligence network, Yuuki hadn’t found these two. Just hearing that indicated how slippery they were.

“Are they among the Imperial Guardians’ upper ranks?” Misha asked, perhaps suspecting something.

Yuuki gave this a vague consent. There were rumors around military circles that certain Imperial Knights—referred to as the Single Digits—were even stronger than the three division commanders. In Yuuki’s opinion, this was more than just a rumor. He could feel it. Here he was, a full-fledged commander, but his own numerical ranking was still in the double digits. He could try challenging someone higher up to a ranking duel, but he’d have to figure out who to challenge first. Becoming a Single Digit required winning a battle staged in front of the emperor, and even that fact was revealed only to those very close to earning a shot.

“I’m thinking that I can beat any Single Digit in the group, but I don’t wanna reveal my best moves in front of the enemy, so I haven’t sent a request to the emperor yet.”

Yuuki became a commander despite that, thanks to some lucky connections with Lord Gadora.

“Thing is, though, even if you try taking someone on, maybe the *real* boss will be someone else the whole time, huh? You can’t be sure about anything. So

what I guess I'm saying is: There's at least *nine* people you gotta watch out for, sort of."

Vega had a good point. It surprised Yuuki as he nodded at him.

"Yeah, you're right. There's a chance my *real* nemesis is hidden among those nine. But I can't watch out for someone I've never seen before, you know? So right now, I'm looking closely at someone who's a more public figure than that."

"Who?" Damrada asked.

"His name's Tatsuya Kondo. He runs the Imperial Information Bureau."

"Ah yes. He *is* hard to grasp, isn't he?"

"We know his name and face but nothing else about him," said Misha. "It's bizarre."

Tatsuya Kondo, as the name suggested, was an otherworlder. Any more personal information than that was a complete unknown. Rumors pegged him as a "mysterious figure stalking the halls of information." His rank was first lieutenant, but none of the unit commanders had the right to give him orders. The Imperial Information Bureau, in other words, was higher up the hierarchy than the military itself.

"Yeah, it's freaky, isn't it? My guess is that he's one of the Single Digits, too," said Yuuki.

"...I see."

"Put it that way, and it makes sense."

Damrada and Kagali deeply nodded. Misha pondered this as well but had no objections.

"So who do you think the other one is?" Vega asked, already sounding disinterested and hoping to hurry Yuuki along.

"Ha-ha-ha! Patience, okay? The first thing is to meet up with this Tatsuya Kondo. I'll see if I can request a meeting with him. So as for the second person, she's also kinda a mystery."

"What do you mean by *that*?"

"Calm down, Vega."

"Ah... Sorry."

The tone of Yuuki's voice as he gave Vega a light warning was warm, almost gentle, but it made Vega break into a nervous sweat. It showed, in that moment, just how wide the chasm was between those two.

"The second person is someone who sits next to the emperor. I don't know who it is, but she strikes this incredible *presence*. I can feel her even with the imperial set of blinds between us."

"...?"

Nobody knew who it was—or really, nobody except Yuuki even realized someone like that existed. That made the potential danger crystal clear.

"...So there's someone like that, always with the emperor?" Damrada asked, speaking for his companions. "I haven't heard anything about it..."

"I didn't think so. She felt so present in the room, but nobody notices her at all. That *has* to be bad news."

The room fell silent for a moment.

"And you're sure she was there? I haven't even heard rumors of such a figure."

"Well, look at it another way—if we heard that from anyone except Sir Yuuki, we never would've believed it, right?"

"..."

Yuuki smiled at his doubtful underlings. "Eh, it's no big deal. Just remember—if I attempt to stage a coup in the Empire, those three are probably gonna get in our way. I'll eliminate Lord Gadora first, so...Damrada, can you look into Tatsuya Kondo for me?"

"Absolutely."

"And, Misha, keep up with your current mission."

"Understood. I will continue engaging the commander of the Armored Division."

"What about me?" Vega asked.

"You're going to go undercover in the Magical Beast Division. With your muscle, you'll get in the Imperial Guardians in a flash. But whatever you do, don't kill the division commander, all right?"

"Sure. I'll try not to."

Vega flashed a ferocious smile, glad to finally be on duty. *Is he really gonna be all right?* fretted Yuuki, but he decided to trust him anyway. If the leader *did* get killed, that'd delay the Empire's entire military operation, which was a concern... But Yuuki opted not to worry about it unless it happened.

The three heads of Cerberus left the chamber, leaving Yuuki alone with Kagali.

"Sir Yuuki... Do you think they'll all pull it off?"

"Who knows? I thought I was being pretty careful, and then I caught a tiger named Guy by the tail. I'm not in any position to say this, but I sure hope they can."

Damrada was off investigating Tatsuya Kondo. Misha was attempting to inveigle herself with the Magical Beast Division commander. And Vega was about to embark on a standout career in the Composite Division. These were dangerous missions, and they were doing them all for Yuuki's sake. As their leader, he'd have to trust in their success.

"But we've finally made it to this point, haven't we? The battle's about to begin."

"It sure is. It'll be fun to see who wins."

"As if you can just sit back and watch. Even if you pull off that coup, the hard part comes *after* that."

"Yeah. I have Laplace and the gang working on that for me. I got everything covered."

The two shared a smile.

Their mission wasn't to have the Empire win. The longer they could drag out this upcoming war, the weaker the Empire would become. That's what they wanted, and the fate of Yuuki and Kagali's plans rode on whether the ensuing

coup attempt succeeded or failed.

"First, we make the emperor our puppet and establish a new Empire. Then..."

"...Why don't we forge a peace treaty with the Western Nations?"

"And then..."

"...We'll have the emperor assassinated!"

If the demon lord Rimuru proved too hard to kill, there was no need to force that. Guy had defeated Yuuki fair and square, and with that, Yuuki gave up on conquering the world in the short-to-midterm time frame. Until he had the kind of absolute power he needed, he now realized, trying to get his way with violence was the height of folly. For now, he thought, adding more winning cards to his hand needed to be his focus.

And if the war kept raging, and more blood could be shed...

"...Then I'll awaken to a true demon lord once more."

"That's what I'm hoping to hear from ya, Kagali. And by then, I oughtta be able to fully use all the new powers I got."

Yuuki had awoken to an ultimate skill. Already, he could feel his life span extending. And now he knew the truth: There were those greater than him—people like the demon lord Guy, ruling over the world with absolute force. Conquering that world without addressing them would be a fantasy.

For now, best to slip under Guy's radar and build up force. He'd stir up the Empire, keep the war going, and weaken both the East and the West. Once pessimism set in, and everyone was weary of war, if he could take that moment to assassinate the emperor...the world would face an even more appalling age of chaos. They could ride that chaos, he and Kagali, and awaken yet more within themselves...and that, in essence, was the plan.

"Well, keep being careful, though."

"Of course, Sir Yuuki. Keep being careful."

Once more, they looked at each other and smiled.

...Even two intelligent schemers like them didn't see the Dungeon as a very

important factor. They just saw it as a neat way for Tempest to hide their top-secret facilities—even a town, for that matter—and they figured bringing it to Lord Gadora’s attention would be a good way to drive Rimuru nuts. They may be visiting it themselves someday, so they figured it’d be a good idea to have it checked out for clues on how to crack it—but neither of them spent much time thinking about it.

Thanks to that, when their dungeon runners came back with a rather unexpected report, Yuuki paid it no mind.



Upon learning what Yuuki showed him, Lord Gadora wrenched up his face, deep in thought.

*Hmmm. Right when it's time to put our Empire on the move and defeat the god Luminus, too...*

With Veldora resurrected, they had to embark on a major rewrite of their plans. That couldn’t be avoided. The last time they staged a campaign this large, the Storm Dragon crushed the whole thing.

Now, in order to ensure their plan was impenetrable, some wanted to wait until the Storm Dragon fully disappeared from existence. Some wanted to tame him with the power of the new weapons they successfully developed. Others wished to point their armies around the Forest of Jura to avoid riling the Storm Dragon.

Opinions were split evenly among the three factions, delaying the Empire’s movements—and thanks to that, they went and let the Storm Dragon revive itself. This greatly angered the war hawks in the “tame the Storm Dragon” faction, but the more mainstream minds in the other two groups didn’t give them room to speak. If those “new weapons” didn’t work, after all, their hopes were dashed a second time.

In Gadora’s mind, the Storm Dragon didn’t really matter. His mission, the reason he kept living, was to eradicate Luminism from the West and take revenge against the Seven Days Clergy who killed his best friend.

A newspaper he ordered from the West contained an article outlining the

Seven Days Clergy's evil deeds, under the headline THE HEROES' DECLINE. He also knew, at the same time, about reports that the Seven Days Clergy were slain. But Gadora refused to accept this at face value. At the very least, he was sure Gren, the Sunday Priest, was alive and lurking in the muck somewhere.

Over the past few months, information from the West had grown garbled and entangled, and it was hard to investigate much of it. Thanks to that, he had no way to confirm it—but there were rumors that the Rozzos had been toppled as well.

*Ah, but it's all rumors. I'm sure Gren was what ultimately became of that one Hero. He may have been old, but he was no adversary to sniff at.*

What's more, while the Council seemed to be on sure footing, Gadora had confirmed some serious goings-on behind the scenes. Nothing he heard, however, indicated that the Western Holy Church had weakened at all. That was proof positive, in Gadora's eyes, that Gren was alive.

*It'd be so easy to ignore the Storm Dragon and just invade the West, but noooo...*

Gadora's thoughts were along those lines, but even he knew how difficult that would be.

*So the Storm Dragon is teaming up with a demon lord? It would be sheer stupidity to position an army against a monster like that, living outside any sort of reasoned magic. I helped construct the theories behind our new weapon, and it should be possible to stop him in his tracks, at least—but destroy him? That's another story. And forget about ever taming him...*

As a survivor of the Empire's last campaign, he had personal insight into the threat Veldora posed. The experience taught him that the war hawks were being far too rash.

*Those fools completely fail to understand how hard it is to rule over a spiritual life-form with a spirit of your own!*

It wasn't impossible. They had conducted experiments on demons along those lines, and some of the results had been encouraging. Gadora knew that well enough—he came up with the theory for the work, so of course he would.

But based on their verified results, he concluded that Veldora was strictly off-limits.

He had submitted a report to the emperor along those lines, but sadly, he was shut down. “*If someone wants to try it,*” he was told, “*let them.*”

Regardless, the problem now was Rimuru, a demon lord who built a nation and unified the Forest of Jura at an astonishing pace. If he had teamed up with the Storm Dragon, attacking the forest would have been nothing but foolish. If the entirety of the Empire’s military were deployed for the effort, that would be one thing—but to make the most effective use of such a force, they’d need to lure the enemy into more advantageous terrain, and that was an impossibility.

What, then, if they must fight the enemy on their own turf?

“The Dungeon, eh? And they might be developing otherworld weapons as well? We must investigate this. If we could defeat Veldora and Rimuru while losing less than, say, a third of our force, I’d call it a fine job. Otherwise, we have no chance of winning against the Western Nations, at the end of it.”

The words were mostly directed at Gadora himself. But he was making a mistake. He thought that Luminism, and the Western Nations supporting it, would be where they’d make their stand—not Tempest. And whether he picked up on this error in judgment would be key to deciding his fate, going forward.



Following Yuuki’s orders, three people were put on assignment—selected for their spots in the Composite Division and having an acquaintance with Lord Gadora. They would all be meeting today, and Yuuki had invited Gadora to his personal chamber for the occasion.

The first was Shinji Tanimura, formerly a college student in Japan who spent most of his days holed up in a university research lab. He still retained his beloved white lab coat, which had become his trademark here. The second was Marc Lauren, a muscular, brown-haired man in his midtwenties; he was the oldest of the trio, a buff bodybuilder type who’d go around in a tank top and jeans even in winter. The third was Zhen Liuxing, young and taciturn; it was hard to gauge his thoughts, but he always did what he was told. His long,

braided black hair ran down his back, and he preferred comfortable, traditional Chinese-style clothing—under which, it was said, he hid a litany of assassin's weapons.

Shinji had evolved to become the leader of this group, Marc and Zhen taking orders from him, and now they stood up straight before Yuuki and Gadora.

"It is an honor to see you after so long!" said the dark-haired Shinji, speaking for his group.

"Yes, long it certainly has been," said Gadora. "And, Marc and Zhen—I trust you two are doing well?"

"Yeah, really well. Glad you're still okay, too, old man."

"...I am not feeling *that* well, my lord."

Gadora cheerfully smiled at Marc and Zhen. "Good! The same as always, then. I understand you're working hard in your squadrons as well. It's quite a relief to hear."

Shinji and his friends were otherworlders placed under Yuuki's guidance. He provided care for people like them from all over the world; they were sent to the Empire to live, whether they had skills suited for battle or not. There, they'd be received by the Cerberus secret society, and then Lord Gadora the sorcerer would see to them. His mission was to gain what otherworld information he could, and if the otherworlders had a talent for combat and were interested in pursuing it, Gadora would also train them.



This was what chiefly constituted the Composite Division—well-trained otherworlders with a litany of skills. Of course, simply being from another world didn't guarantee you a top officer rank in the Empire. They became excellent soldiers because they knew how to correctly harness their powers—the unique skills they manifested for themselves. And Shinji had used his own unique skill to establish a firm, secure role in the military.

"Yeah, these three are frontline talents in my Composite Division. I think they'll be perfect for this new investigation."

"If you believe so, Sir Yuuki, then I have no complaints. Please, all of you, have a seat."

The trio meekly took the austere sorcerer's advice. Gadora looked at them, smiling a bit. Seeing these full-fledged soldiers still act so nervous around him was an amusing sight. But he couldn't sit there grinning about it forever.

"Now, Sir Yuuki, you're going to let me borrow this trio for our investigation?"

"Yeah. I wanted to go there myself, but I can't really show my face around Tempest at the moment, you know? And I'd be anxious about sending just the three of them over, so I was hoping you could oversee them for me, my lord."

"Mmm. I had a look at the report you sent. If what's written in there is true, I think we do need to examine this in more detail before launching our full campaign."

Gadora eyed Yuuki, sizing him up and awaiting his reaction. Yuuki, aware of this, nodded back.

"It's all true, every word of it. I'll be briefing all three of you on this in a moment, but this is gonna be kind of a unique mission. Basically, there's this labyrinth I want you to investigate for us."

"Whoa, hang on! You called us all here for some kinda obstacle-course thing? Is *that* how little you trust us? Even if Lord Gadora's enlisting us, I really don't think this is something we need to do before a full-scale military invasion!"

Marc, the most short-fused of the group, was the first to flare up. This was common enough to see. Yuuki encouraged them to ask questions on matters

until they had an answer they were satisfied with.

"Calm down, Marc. This *is* important."

"But...!"

"Wait a sec, Marc. I'm sure Yuuki's got a good reason for this, so let's just hear him out, okay?" Shinji said before facing Yuuki. "Would you mind filling us in, then?"

"Of course...and trust me, once you hear it all, you won't be complaining."

So Yuuki carefully went over the trio's assignment.

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Gadora had already given his approval beforehand, so he silently listened, making sure there weren't any discrepancies. Shinji and his friends were shocked.

Across the force, Yuuki had his protégés in place, well trained and blessed with unique skills, and they had laid low in their respective posts up to now. The idea was that, when the time came, they'd bare their fangs and take over their respective squadrons. Yuuki hadn't filled them in on the details, but everyone thought that the moment was near. Shinji and his friends were part of this, and now that Yuuki had full control of the Composite Division, they figured it was just a matter of time before the order came.

*World conquest.*

When Yuuki first told them about this childish-sounding dream, nobody thought he could actually do it. But as they polished their skills and learned how this new world worked, they all began to think it wasn't so impossible after all. Shinji and his team practically adored him at this point. Everyone was eagerly awaiting the moment—and then this "Dungeon" assignment arrived out of nowhere. The trio couldn't be blamed for their confusion.

But as Yuuki explained matters, they began to reconsider. Out of all the preparation and investigation they had done for this upcoming war, only the

Dungeon remained unexplored, and it was likely that some kind of important secret was being hidden in this maze. If word had it that an entire town was hidden deep in its chambers, they weren't going to take that sitting down.

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"I see now... So the Empire can't ignore this Dungeon in their operations, huh?"

"And there's a town inside? I'm never gonna believe that until I see it."

"...And we're going to go in there?"

Shinji's team had to accept it.

"So that's the long and short of things. You see what I mean now, though? If the Empire's campaign takes it into the Forest of Jura, we're planning to stage our military coup once the front lines are stretched out far enough. When we do, we're hoping to attract as much of the army as we can. The demon lord Rimuru and the Storm Dragon aren't enough to make the Empire deploy the total brunt of their forces. I want a stronger reason for them to do that."

Maybe the labyrinth could be that reason. Or not. If it didn't live up to the hype, Yuuki explained, they'd fabricate something else—and with the time that'd buy them, Yuuki and his personal team would seize the imperial capital.

This came as a surprise to Shinji's trio. They had seen a coup attempt coming, but this was the first time they were let in on the details. Plus, Gadora himself was in the room. Wouldn't talking about it right in front of him cause a leak?

"Y-Yuuki?!"

Shinji tried to stop him, but Yuuki just smiled and waved it off. "No, no, don't worry. Lord Gadora knows all about my plans."

"Huh?"

"Heh-heh-heh! And why wouldn't I? I have a personal obligation to the emperor, but his Empire? That means nothing to me. My mission is to destroy

Luminism. I had no idea the demon lord Luminus led that religion herself; it took me completely by surprise. I have zero interest in Luminism's followers, but I will never rest until I personally take down those who killed my friend. I'd like to begin by taking care of the demon lord Rimuru; they say he's close friends with Luminus. That is why I'm planning to join you in this labyrinth conquest."

Beyond that, Gadora said with a crazed grin, he didn't much care what happened.

He had, of course, heard the stories about Rimuru. One year earlier, the Kingdom of Farmus was toppled after it attracted the ire of Veldora. A fit of rage drained the Storm Dragon's energy and allowed Rimuru to recruit him for his own purposes. Gadora didn't know whether this was a master-servant relationship or more of a cooperative arrangement, but the Storm Dragon had shown no signs of activity since, his massive aura no longer detectable. To Gadora, the rumors seemed plausible to some extent.

There were also moves being made among the other demon lords. Several had dropped out of the Ten Great Demon Lords, the remainder regrouping into the so-called Octagram. They had notified human society of this, and Gadora was positive the demon lord Rimuru played a major role. After all, Rimuru joined their ranks just as Clayman, one of the former Ten Great Demon Lords, disappeared. It proved that, in the end, Rimuru was simply more powerful than him. Clayman was a crafty demon lord, one you underestimated at your own peril, but Rimuru as a demon lord was an even greater threat.

What's more, Rimuru had opened up diplomatic relations with humanity, strengthening his influence within the Council of the West. Gadora couldn't say what the Western Nations thought about this, but he knew that riling Rimuru would be a very dangerous act.

But something else was also on his mind. Farmus, he knew, sent an army of some twenty thousand soldiers to attack Tempest—and only three of them survived. One had since been killed, so that left no one but the former king and Razen, his ex-apprentice.

*I will need to question Razen about this*, Gadora thought, making a mental

note. But there still remains far too much that's unclear with this demon lord Rimuru...

Gadora wasn't about to let his guard down. Farmus's forces were wiped out by the Storm Dragon, the reports said, but there was no physical evidence backing this up. That, in itself, was unnerving. In normal wars, a warring faction would generally be considered to fail its objective if it lost thirty percent of its personnel. That'd be the point a commander would issue a surrender, but there was no record Farmus ever attempted one.

One could interpret this as the Storm Dragon refusing to take prisoners, but Gadora saw that as unlikely. He was a survivor from their past campaign, after all, and he knew Veldora's personality well. As a fighter, he was, in a word, imprecise. He wasn't the type to pursue fleeing foot soldiers; he'd cause huge amounts of damage, but it'd all happen in one big wave with no follow-up. Considering this fighting style, a force of twenty thousand being 99.9999 percent annihilated was a bit too much to swallow.

So did Rimuru do something? Based on what Gadora knew about his personality, that seemed unlikely, too. In his mind, this was one demon lord who spared the lives of those who gave in to him. This, on the other hand, was a massacre.

*I suppose Veldora really did do them all in, then, before they had a chance to surrender.*

It was honestly a terrifying thought. The exact reason why a full frontal conflict had to be avoided—and he had a plan for that. Rimuru was another worry for him, but he was about to investigate him, and they could work out a response after that. That was enough to reassure Gadora for now. He had no personal vendetta against Rimuru, but if he was working in tandem with Luminus, he was an enemy.

He had to be defeated...though Gadora had no intention of reckless attempts on his life. Gadora had spent many years honing his plan, and now he'd move the Empire toward invading the Western Nations. They were one step away from all that—he couldn't afford to rush this part and send everything crashing down. He was careful, very careful, with every move he made.

Gadora and Yuuki shared the same interests, and after conversing about them, they agreed to work in tandem, sharing information with each other and becoming comrades in arms.

But Shinji was still shocked at how casually Yuuki revealed such secrets. He wanted everyone to take a step back, and it was obvious why.

*W-wait... If this goes bad, we could all be rubbed out...*

Shinji, being no fool, didn't think his group was being trusted *that* much—but he didn't think they were seen as disposable pawns, either. They were being tested, he believed, and Marc and Zhen felt the same way.

“All right! We'll investigate as best as we can.”

“This'll be fun, old man! And I promise we won't drag you down in there.”

“...I'll do my best.”

This was clearly an important mission. They had to produce results—in fact, as Shinji now realized, producing results was how they'd guarantee their survival.

“Right. Then let me ask you all: Do you know how many demon lords there are?”

“Sure. Eight, right?”

“...Huh? Weren't there ten? Or did it go up to eleven?”

“The lineup changed a year ago, Marc...”

Gadora sighed. “Shinji,” he said, raising his voice, “you need to make sure that fool receives the right information. Any soldier who can't gather intelligence is going to wind up on the chopping block first!”

He took a moment to catch his breath.

“There are eight demon lords in an arrangement known as the Octagram. They style themselves as akin to eight stars in the sky, and with at least some of them, it's not far from reality. I bring this up because your target here is Rimuru, the so-called Newbie of this Octagram. You must never let your guard down around him. Furthermore, there is another demon among this group known as

the Labyrinth Master. What do you make of that?"

The trio nervously gulped. Even Yuuki looked at Gadora, surprised.

"Are they involved," Shinji carefully asked, "with the labyrinth we're exploring?"

Gadora nodded gravely, then handed them a book. It spoke of a labyrinth, a safe haven for spirits, located in the Republic of Ur-Gracia to the west. The stories told of a vast maze under the ground or in the sky, but this was correct and incorrect in equal measure. What this book revealed was that this haven was home to more than spirits—it also housed a queen who had transformed her body from a spiritual form to that of a fairy.

"That fairy queen is Ramiris the Labyrinth Master—one of the oldest demon lords."

The facts hit Gadora's audience like a ton of bricks. But he wasn't done yet.

"The door to this labyrinth of hers was located in Urgr Nature Park, but now it has vanished. I investigated this myself, so there is no doubting it. Based on what I was told, it disappeared at around the same time Rimuru declared himself a demon lord. Soon after, his nation revealed their own Dungeon..."

"Well," chimed in Yuuki, "that pretty much settles it, huh? I was wondering how they built a labyrinth like that, but now I'm positive the demon lord Ramiris created it. She and Rimuru must be allies."

Yuuki was sure of it, and he gave a bracing smile. No one on Shinji's side had the words to deny it—and that brought them all down. Now it felt like this mission just became far more difficult.

"I'll be counting on you," said Gadora.

"Make sure to stay on your guard, okay?" Yuuki reminded the trio.

Then, after another warning about the terrifying craftiness of the demon lord Rimuru, the three of them left.



The day after this meeting, Yuuki's secretary, Kagali, guided Shinji and his friends to the outskirts of Tempest.

Ten days after that, Gadora set off by himself to another destination. After seeing Yuuki admonish the three of them, he figured he'd let them handle the mission solo to start with. He didn't think Yuuki really saw them as disposable—it was just a little tough talk to put them in the right mindset.

*Sir Yuuki's not exactly an honest man, either. He thinks he's so talented, and he expects the same from everyone else.*

That much was clear to Gadora—and it was true for himself personally as well.

Gadora had no intention of sending his apprentices out to be killed. If they got in trouble, he could reach out to them. But he never actually voiced this. Instead, he just silently menaced those around him, making people think he was a scary old man.

But Gadora was blissfully unaware of all this as he headed for the former Kingdom of Farmus. He had recalled an old apprentice of his, and he decided to call on him to gather information about Rimuru. Flying over to the old Farmus capital of Maris, he promptly headed for the palace.

Razen, working in his office, practically shot out of his chair when he found out. Long before Gadora even reached the palace, he picked up on the nearby presence of his great master, a man he thought died long ago.

"...I can't believe he's alive," he muttered—and as he did, he realized this was going to be trouble. Even if he didn't know Gadora's intentions, Razen knew Gadora had come here to see him, and it clearly wasn't just to rekindle an old friendship. And there was another problem: The Farminus palace guards didn't know Gadora. If something wasn't done, he'd doubtlessly start a scuffle at the palace gates and kill anyone who defied him. And should Razen himself ever get on Gadora's bad side...

*No, no, no... If that ever happened, I could never hold back Sir Gadora myself.*

Quickly reaching that conclusion, Razen sprang into action, making a magical call to one of his new apprentices.

*"You can hear me, can't you?"*

*"Tch... Don't call me out of nowhere like this."*

*"You must've noticed what's going on, too."*

*"Yeah. Grigori hasn't yet, but I felt this foreign presence out of nowhere. It's gonna reach the palace gate, you know."*

*"Well, if you know all that, join me at the gate now."*

*"...All right. I owe you one, after all."*

Razen had recently taken on two new apprentices—Saare and Grigori, former Battlesages and part of the Master Rooks assigned to the Papacy in the Holy Empire of Lubelius. He came to know the two men as he went around the country on inspection runs; they had committed mistakes that made them no longer welcome in the Papacy, so he picked them up as new disciples. This wasn't because they particularly hit it off. Razen just had a lot of sympathy for them—especially Saare, who had to admit his epic defeat to newspaper reporters from around the world. It was Diablo who handed him that defeat, and to Razen, that struck too close to home.

Saare could be a hothead, but he still accepted Razen as his master. Grigori, for his part, had spells where he'd be struck by terror about something, but over time, his natural fearlessness was coming back. In terms of pure strength, they were attractive talents, so Razen planned to train them as behind-the-scenes agents in the future. Handling potentially dangerous incidents like this was part of that training.

*Me, Saare, and Grigori? If I can have Sir Gruécith join us, that should be enough to handle Gadora.*

Regular infantry would be useless against such a uniquely powerful sorcerer. The Kingdom of Farminus lacked champion-class talents at the moment, a major weakness. Chief Folgen of the former Farmus Knight Corps and his men were now a thing of the past, and Farminus's major issue was finding people to replace them.

Being reminded of this made Razen grit his teeth over how late he was to react.

By the time he reached the palace gate, Saare and Grigori were already there—and already in a stare down with Gadora on the other side.

"Hey, man, I don't know what brings you to this castle, but this is where we live, all right? You know we can't let strangers inside, okay?"

"He's right, old man. Take it from us—you'll wanna be on your way for now. If you're here to see someone, ask a clerk, and you'll get a response in two or three days."

The two of them were rather polite (by their standards) as they blocked Gadora's way. The sight made Razen feel like years were being taken off his life.

"Stop!" Razen hollered. "Let that man through!"

"Huh? You don't want us to stop him?" said Saare.

"What'd you call us for, then?" Grigori demanded.

They didn't appreciate the order much, but Razen didn't care.

"How nice to see you again, Sir Gadora. I'm afraid I was unaware you were still alive. I apologize I was not worthy enough to call upon you earlier."

He took a knee in front of Gadora as he spoke reverently.

Razen had a motive for wanting to stay on good terms with Gadora. If push came to shove, he'd put everything he had in stopping him—but it didn't seem like it'd come to that.

"It has indeed been quite a while, Razen. You look different, but it seems it really is you, eh?"

"Yes, sir. Unlike you, I have survived thanks to taking on a new body—"

"No need to be so formal. I'm not chiding you. I've come here today because I need to ask you about some matters. And you, the beastman hiding over there—there's no need to be so wary of me. If I was hostile to any of you, I wouldn't have come here by myself."

Gadora's words finally eased the tension. But Razen and his apprentices didn't let their guard down, asking for time to set up a conference space before taking their leave.



\*

The next day, their conference began at a room inside the palace. The attendees were Yohm, Gruecith, and Razen, with Saare and Grigori standing nearby as Yohm's bodyguard detail.

Mjurran wanted to join as well but was turned down—she had only just given birth, and Yohm insisted she stay in bed and rest. Their newborn was a girl named Mieme, cute and resembling Mjurran. Prince Edgar was giving the little one all his doting care.

"So, Master, what did you want to ask me about?" said Razen.

"Mmm... Well, before I broach the subject, I'd like to point out a few things first. You... Saare, was it? You seem decently strong...but magic is a weakness of yours, isn't it? Casting magic isn't about memorizing a spell, you know. You must learn how to correctly manage the magic force inside you. And this beastman, Gruecith—as for you..."

Thus Gadora began pointing out the weaknesses of everyone in the room. Gruecith, as he said, needed to learn how to gauge the capabilities of his foes before attacking them. "Transforming in front of your enemy," as he sternly put it, "is all but ceding the first strike to them." For Yohm, while he was "more powerful than the average person, by the looks of it," he suggested focusing more on protecting his own body, as overreliance on his weapons and armor would be his downfall. With Grigori, on the other hand, he struck a bitter tone, simply ordering him to polish his skills more.

Finally, Gadora's eyes settled upon Razen.

"Razen, I see you've been quite diligent. Your magic is possession-based, is it not?"

"Yes, Master. The Secret Art of Possession, based on the theory behind your Mysterious Art of Reincarnation."

"Mmm. A very interesting experiment. Unlike *my* spell, it doesn't require the target to spend time as a weakened, defenseless child."

"It is an honor to hear—"

"But it is all pointless unless you make the best use of it. You went through all the effort to seize that body, and you're not extracting everything you can from it."

"Yes, Master!"

Razen bowed at the advice, breaking into a sweat. This was something he already knew about himself. It forced him to admit that Gadora was probably right about everyone in the room.

*Truly a fearsome figure. In the space of a day, he's perfectly judged every aspect of our abilities...*

He fell silent, unable to put anything into words. But Saare and Grigori were less appreciative.

"Whoa, where do you get off lording it over us like that? How can you take one look at me and spout off all that nonsense?"

"Yeah! I owe a great debt to Sir Razen, but I ain't got no reason to kowtow to his master, too. If you're *that* confident about yourself, how about you and I have a little lesson together, huh?"

Now they were ready to duke it out. Razen wanted to scream at them to shut up, but seeing the look in his master's eyes, he refrained. To Gadora, this much was expected, and he fully anticipated showing off his skills to Saare and Grigori.

*If so, Razen thought, perhaps there's still an amicable end to all this. Let's play along with my master.*

So in a sort of warm-up before the meeting, Gadora fought a battle against Saare and Grigori. This was held in the palace's training grounds, and Gadora naturally destroyed them.

"N-no way..."

"This old man is crazy... He didn't even break a sweat whipping both of us..."

Gadora's overwhelming strength completely smashed their pride as former Battlesages. His intention was to show off his might, then use that to smoothen their negotiations, and Saare and Grigori reacted exactly as he had hoped. What

happened after that, however, didn't follow the script.

"But you're not as good as that demon," said Saare.

"That bad, eh? Then again, I'd say that dog I fought is about as strong as you, old man," Grigori added.

"...Hmm?"

They had just lost big but seemed oddly accepting of it—and despite seeing Gadora's strength, they didn't act too surprised.

*...As strong as me? And a demon out there is more powerful than me, even...?*

The unexpected reaction confused Gadora, but it didn't seem like Saare and Grigori were being sore losers. They must have really meant it. And Gadora wanted to inquire in more detail...

"We can discuss this later, Sir Gadora. For now, allow me to answer your original questions."

...but Razen put a quick end to the proceedings.

\*

Returning to the reception room, the meeting was picked up anew.

"Man, you really *are* Razen's master," a jovial Yohm began. "What a monster! I don't think I could ever beat ya."

Gruecith nodded excitedly. "Yeah, the magic-born Razen's made a big name for himself around here, but we never hear many stories about his instructor. Mjurran said you crafted a new system of magic theory, and the way you fought, I believe her."

Gadora's magic was stupendous, as expected. He interfered with the magical energy of his opponents, blocking their spells as he launched two of his own simultaneously, both with punishing force. It was a spectacular feat, one designed to serve as a dazzling demonstration. Saare and Grigori were much more powerful than even a charged-up, ready-to-rock Gruecith, and Gadora treated them like playthings. There was no doubting his strength.

Thus, while Yohm and Gruecith enjoyed the spectacle, the losers seemed pretty discouraged as they dutifully returned to guard duty.

"So," Razen asked, "what is it that brought you here?"

"...I wanted to show you my strength to make sure nobody tried pointlessly resisting me. As I believe Razen knows, my anger is entirely directed at Luminism. I have no interest in anything else, so I cannot bear to have this nation exposed to an imperial invasion and untold casualties."

It was an ominous statement despite Gadora's casual tone.

"Imperial—"

"For real? C'mon, man," said Yohm. "Don't go barging in here while *I'm* the king."

"You said it. We'd never beat you, and I don't want Mjurran or my baby girl exposed to danger," added Gruecith.

"She's not *yours*, dammit. Get that through your head already. She's *my* treasure!"

"Ah, shut up!! She's not mine by blood, but she's *my* daughter. I've decided I'm gonna live like a father from now on."

"That's not for you to decide!!"

It was a pretty painful argument, waged between Yohm and Gruecith. Razen cleared his throat to shut them up.

"Right. Now I see, Sir Gadora, why you came here. You'd like Farminus to switch sides to the Empire, in exchange for not being touched during the war?"

"Quite so. You know perfectly well how powerful the Empire is, I imagine? I am part of that package, of course, and should Farminus join our forces, capturing Dwargon would be a simple job. That nation is extremely vulnerable to being starved out. Keep anything from entering or leaving, and they'll quickly throw in the towel."

Of course, that would only work if something was done about Tempest. Razen was quick to point that out. "I'm afraid, Sir Gadora, that is not possible. A railroad has been built between the Dwarven Kingdom and Tempest that allows for high-speed transport. Even if we halted all food exports today, they can supply themselves well enough via that route."

"And that's why I'm asking you to betray them. Tempest itself is not terribly self-sufficient foodwise, either. What you grow here could—"

"Sir Gadora?"

Razen interrupted Gadora, as rude as he knew it was. He had realized Gadora was relying on outdated information—he wasn't keeping up with the times. World trends were operating much, much faster than they used to. If they turned traitor to the Western Nations at this point, they'd be banned from the world economy, and that would spell doom for their kingdom. Even if the Empire offered them protection and generous support, they couldn't expect as much luxury as they enjoyed at present. That was how much Farminus was now influenced by the West—or really, by Tempest.

"...I see," Gadora said after Razen explained all this. "I was aware, although I wanted to hear about it straight from the horse's mouth. But you truly think the demon lord Rimuru doesn't fear the imperial force? I suppose, of course, that he could even defeat an army of angels with his power, but it would cause untold damage to everything he has built up. The Empire has been considering a train system of its own, but we've taken a wait and see approach for just that reason..."

That was how he responded to the news of a rail network linking the world's bigger cities.

"Sir Rimuru, I assure you, is not afraid of collateral damage."

"Nah, not at all. The guy hates losin' *people*, but anything else, I don't think he really cares that much."

"Yeah. And hell, maybe he likes it. It gives people more work to do."

Razen, Gruecith, and Yohm all lobbed out their opinions. Yohm's words, in particular, had real weight behind them. People find happiness in being relied upon; they want to use their skills to help others out. If there's no work and nothing to do all day, that'd take the wind out of anyone's sails. Some of them might turn to crime. It was thus the job of a leader—or employer—to find new work for them.

"Once all this construction work is wrapped up in each country, that'll just

leave repair and maintenance. My pal Rimuru's been frettin' over what he's gonna do after that. We were drinkin' together a while back, and he was all like 'Ohhh, I wanna do this, I wanna do that, but our technical skills aren't keeping up...'"

"And if the angels attack at a time like that, it'll breed a huge demand for rebuilding and recovery. I bet Rimuru'd act pretty pissed off about it, but maybe he'd actually be glad, deep down."

Even Gruecith was agreeing with Yohm. Saare and Grigori looked exasperated, but they didn't seem eager to refute them.

"But even if he's a demon lord, if he starts meddling too much in the human territories of the West, the Rozzos won't take that sitting down, will they?"

Razen's story was generally a match with the information Gadora assembled, but some pieces of the puzzle were still missing. Gadora wanted to use this occasion to milk Razen for as much intelligence as he had. The Rozzos wouldn't wait for things to unfold; they'd take action to protect their investments. If economics get involved, Gadora reasoned, they'd engage in nonmilitary sabotage to get their way.

His question for Razen, of course, was framed so he could learn as much as possible about the Rozzos' current state. Razen, correctly reading this, gave Gadora what he wanted.

"The Rozzos, my master, are finished. The Kingdom of Doran is still going strong, and the survivors are gathered inside it, but they will never hold sway over the Council at this point. The surrounding nations continue doing business only because Sir Rimuru allows it. King Doran has surrendered to him as well."

As Razen explained this, he decided to divulge the truth behind why the Farmus military lost so badly. That was the first revelation of the day that truly surprised Gadora.

"...So the demon lord Rimuru laid waste to the Farmus army all by himself? And the Rozzos are no longer...? But hold on one moment! If those are no mere rumors, then what of Gren—of Granville Rozzo?!"

Granville the Hero was, in Gadora's mind, the most powerful man in the

world. He had been so careful in his campaign plans against the West because he knew he led the Seven Days Clergy. But now Razen claimed the Rozzos were gone.

"So the rumors that the Seven Days Clergy were killed...?"

"They are also true, Master. The Seven Days Clergy opposed Sir Rimuru, so they attempted to pit Hinata of the Crusaders against him. But the plot was discovered, and they were destroyed soon after."

Now even Gadora was stunned into silence. Razen had clearly stated that everyone in the Seven Days Clergy was dead. Even Gren, the Sunday Priest, met his doom at the hand of Cardinal Nicolaus. It made Gadora realize just how feeble his intelligence network was. If Granville was dead, that lent credence to the reported fall of the Rozzo family. If he had learned that sooner, Gadora thought, he could have greatly revised their plan for this campaign.

And also:

"That little sneak... He knew it all along, and he never told me..."

Gadora recalled the face of Yuuki as he bitterly intoned the words. Perhaps the young man thought telling him would damper his lust for revenge; if so, Gadora didn't like it one bit.

"By 'little sneak,' are you referring to Yuuki Kagurazaka?" asked Razen. "That man's taken advantage of us as well, so I think I understand how you feel."

Being comforted by his apprentice put Gadora in a mood that was difficult to describe—half frustration, half embarrassment. And the way Razen put it, Yuuki was a thorn in Rimuru's side, too, although the demon lord chose to see how things unfolded before declaring Yuuki his enemy.

*Damn you, Yuuki... Hiding things from me yet again, are you? You know full well I'm here to destroy Luminism, and you give me nothing but the vaguest reports from the Western Holy Church. Is there something that would cause you trouble if I heard about it...?*

Now Gadora realized he was being used—and there, in front of Razen and the rest, he found himself unsure how their future would unfold.

\*

"What a pickle this is. Now that I know all this, I really must reconsider our approach to this Rimuru."

The demon lord Rimuru was a greater threat than Gadora pictured. What was the correct way to address this? Gadora had his friend betrayed and killed; he wouldn't stop his crusade against Luminism now. But now everybody in the Seven Days Clergy—the most urgent target of his revenge—was already dead.

Now there was no reason to advocate for the West's fall so passionately. Gadora and the Empire worked together because they had common goals...and if that was no longer on the table, Gadora had no real obligation to the Empire.

*...No. There is still another. The god, the one at the top—the demon lord Luminus remains.*

His friend's belief in their god killed him. There was no way a demon lord borrowing the name of a deity could be allowed to stay alive. The realization made Gadora renew his drive to soldier on.

Or it made him *try* to.

"Sir Gadora, forgive me if I am out of line, but I feel that stopping this campaign is your best choice."

"Hohh?"

But the sight of Razen looking concerned for him made Gadora doubt his resolve all over again.

"Even now, my master, I see myself as nothing more than your faithful servant. However, I have now devoted even more of my loyalties to another. And if you are going to wage war against his country, it will force me to become your enemy as well."

"You don't mean Rimuru...?"

"No. It is Sir Diablo, one of many serving him, who is my master now."

This more than surprised Gadora a bit. Razen was his apprentice, one he was quite proud of, and hearing him serve someone who himself served a demon lord was a hard pill to swallow.

"I hate to interject," Saare said without prompting, "but I'm gonna take this

opportunity to say something. Diablo's the guy...um, I mean, the demon who defeated me."

*The demon who was stronger than me? I have a hard time believing it, but if Razen serves him now, I can't discount it as a lie...*

He still didn't think he'd lose, but Gadora made sure to keep the name Diablo in his mind.

"And let me tell you this as well, Sir Gadora," added Razen. "Sir Diablo is one of the *old* demons."

"I'd imagine so. If you lost to him, he'd have to be an Ancient. Maybe even a Prehistoric—a rare breed indeed."

If he was both that and a named creature, his powers could easily surpass a demon lord's.

"No, nothing of that level," said Razen. "He is far, far above that—"

"He said he was a Demon Peer," Saare cut in.

"That...?!"

*That's ridiculous,* Gadora almost shouted. Demons could only evolve up to a set level—that was a hard rule, and as far as he knew, only one demon had ever defied it. This Arch Demon found a way to enhance himself up to Demon Peer, and it made him the most powerful, most villainous of all demon lords—Guy Crimson, the Lord of Darkness.

"Sir Gadora, the life span of my master, Sir Diablo, is not a matter up for debate. I trust you understand what I mean by that?"

Razen's words seemed a planet away to Gadora. He couldn't believe it; he didn't want to believe it.

"A—a Primal?" he mumbled.

"Yes."

The affirmation cruelly reached his ears. He tried to calm his heart as he discerned how truthful this was.

There certainly *seemed* to be ample reason to doubt Razen. If a Primal Demon

had taken physical form anew, it wouldn't be strange at all to see one reborn as a Demon Peer. If Razen was being truthful, it'd mean a massive rewrite of the Empire's campaign. Looking at Blanc, the Original White, and the headaches she'd caused the Empire, there was no need to explain just how dreadful a threat this was.

*But...wait a moment. If a Primal has acquired a physical body, why hasn't any tragedy ensued?*

Gadora had composed himself now. But even he knew the question wasn't important.

*Now hold on just one minute. Does it even matter whether Diablo's a Primal? He's certainly taken Razen as his disciple—that much is obvious—and that could very well mean he's at least a Demon Peer already...*

Then, hearing Yohm and the others chat among themselves, he froze.

"Yeah, but isn't that Sir Diablo guy the butler to Rimuru or somethin' like that? Like, when I went to the opening ceremony for our railroad earlier, I heard he didn't want to deal with Rimuru's personal stuff on his own any longer, so he scouted some friends and brought 'em on board."

"Oh yeah, I caught sight of one of 'em! Rimuru made her his special diplomatic envoy, so we met at the Council. She's got this snow-white hair, these deep-red eyes... Like, crazy hot."

Gadora sank weakly into his seat.

*It—it can't be! Those are the exact physical traits of Blanc...*

It was looking more and more like the truth, but to Gadora, it was nothing but a nightmare. He looked at Razen, currently sagely nodding to himself.

"This is all true?"

"I would never lie to you, my master."

Then Gadora realized something. Razen and his cohorts were being truthful. And it was purely out of concern for Gadora's health that they urged him to stop this war.

"It's that bad?"

Gadora's question was greeted with silent nods across the room. And when he saw this, a new thought made the blood drain from his face.

*Ah! Shinji's group might already be out on the field!*



The Tempestian capital of Rimuru was teeming with people. It was a real metropolis now, experiencing a major boom—and even to otherworlders like Shinji and his friends, there was nothing rustic and unsophisticated about it. The capital in the province of Nasca wasn't so bad, but the surrounding towns still had a barnyard-animal smell to them. Nothing so unpleasant here. It was an incredible surprise.

"I thought they razed this whole city and left nothing but a gate in place. Guess that was wrong, huh?" said Shinji; Marc and Zhen responded in kind.

"I doubt it, man. Maybe they can flip it on or off, or maybe our agents saw an illusion or something."

"...We must remain on guard."

The trio looked at one another and braced themselves once more.

They had been transported here via the elemental magic Warp Portal by Kagali, who had visited Tempest before. She left before very long, but they were due to meet Gadora here later, so his magic would drive their return trip. Until then, they were ordered to investigate as much as they could without exposing themselves to danger—and Shinji's band, being no fools, intended to stick to that.

"Ms. Kagali sure was pretty, huh?"

"Whoa, Shinji, you wanna get dumped?"

"Dumped? I'd need a girlfriend first. It'd make for a more exciting life if I had one, but..."

"Huh?"

"...Forget it, Marc. He's too slow on the uptake."

Marc and Zhen shrugged at the whining Shinji. As they continued entertaining

each other, they reached the town entrance and underwent the entry inspection. They had Free Guild ID cards provided by Yuuki, so the process went surprisingly fast—a basic rundown, and they were on their way.

So they procured an inn, then started touring around town on their “intelligence-gathering” mission. It was all quite a surprise.

As otherworlders, they enjoyed great physical strength and generally good treatment wherever they went. This, however, didn’t mean they did whatever they wanted, the way the demon lord Rimuru did, and they probably couldn’t anyway. Yuuki had worked hard to improve their diets and living environments in general, and that was starting to trickle down across the Empire, but this city was well beyond that point.

Shinji knew a fair bit about this already, so he was more amazed than surprised. There was *takoyaki*, *okonomiyaki*, *yakisoba*...even desserts like crepes and cakes. They also found places offering incredibly high-end meals, making them wonder how they ever tracked down the ingredients. From street stalls and cafés to restaurants and fine dining, Tempest had it all. Everyone seemed so passionate about their food, and so much of it re-created the tastes and aromas of their old world. The locals must’ve been flummoxed at first, but now they were used to all the variety. Shinji, for his part, cried literal tears of joy when he saw the curry rice on offer at one eatery.

Even the bathrooms were first-rate. And their inn was nice and comfy, too—complete with an open-air bath, added as entertainment for the masses.

“Hey, you guys mind if I live here?” said Marc. “Like, how about we just *don’t* go back to the Empire?”

“Whoa!”

“Uh, my bad... I’m just kidding. Don’t get so angry, Shinji!”

“I’m not angry, I’m just...like, seriously ready to consider it and stuff.”

“...I want to live here, too.”

They all exchanged glances, then sighs. Until now, they thought the Empire *was* the world, running at the bleeding edge of civilization. Now that they knew about Tempest, they realized how wrong they were. The town was alive with

energy; there was tons of good stuff to eat. It was comfortable to live in, it seemed like a hub for entertainment and civilization, and new games and diversions were being invented every day. These games were all very familiar from their original world, and after the harsh environment they had been living in, such pleasures left the trio feeling nostalgic. The Empire had culture and entertainment of its own, but that was strictly for the nobility. It wasn't as free as this town, and it wasn't priced low enough for common people.

Meanwhile, look at *this* place.

"No, no, no, we really can't..."

"Yeah. I'm sure Yuuki would be pissed, and I'd be scared of Lord Gadora, too. There's about to be a war, besides..."

"...Desertion's punishable by firing squad."

They were right. War was fast approaching. This town was a clear target, incapable of avoiding the storm of battle. The three knew all about the Empire's military might, and thus it hardly seemed worth the time to consider Tempest's chances against their enemy.

So without anything else to do, Shinji and his friends gave up on the idea—and then, following their orders to the letter, they began challenging the labyrinth.

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"Y'know," Shinji began, "they said the Hero Masayuki just beat Floor 50, but this is actually pretty damn easy, huh?"

"Ha-ha!" Marc laughed. "Of course it is! Remember what Yuuki told us? He said Masayuki wasn't actually anything *that* special."

"...But you can't play down his skill," Zhen pointed out.

"Yeah, all the more reason he was super-careful, I bet. It took him over half a year, after all."

This lively chat between Shinji and his pals took place as they advanced through Floor 40. They began their journey through the Dungeon on high alert for anything in their way, but the intensity was starting to wear off. It was just too easy.

Before going in, they gathered as much intel as they could to avoid needless danger, but as the trio saw it, this was like a game packed with tons and tons of side quests and bonus content. Zhen grew up without much in the way of video games, but Shinji and Marc were hard-core gamers—Shinji was a big fan of RPGs in particular, finding time between research stints in college to play through the big franchise titles.

Pooling their knowledge, the trio concluded that this Dungeon was a huge joke. Whichever sadistic maniac designed it was clearly out to destroy the challengers—but if you were familiar with video game tropes, a lot about it was familiar. This held especially true in one way—Zhen Liuxing was gifted at detecting traps, and with his advice, they could find them all with surprising accuracy. And in this labyrinth, if you could deal with the traps, the monsters just weren't all that strong.

"I bet a lot of challengers had trouble getting far in this just because it's too new. Like, nobody's got the right knowledge for it."

"Yeah. I called it an obstacle course earlier, but that still sounds pretty right to me. Once you understand how the creator's twisted, evil mind works, it's actually pretty doable."

"...And we don't die, either."

They found out about the Resurrection Bracelet in their prior research. The admission desk even gave them one for free. With it on, if you died in the Dungeon, you'd be warped back to the front door safe and sound. When they heard about this, Shinji's team exchanged quizzical stares. It was really hard to figure out how to take this. Here was this dead-serious world they lived in, and now someone had created this wacky comedy world inside it.

Now the main issue they faced was not knowing just how deep the Dungeon went. They could keep advancing all they wanted, but they could only hold so much food at once. Shinji wasn't sure how best to prepare for this, but over at

admission, the guy at the desk told them about something unexpected.

"Oh yeah, no worries about that. When you reach a stairway, you'll see an entrance to the inn. It'll cost you money, but you can stay in there all you want. You actually don't have to worry about food that much, either. Sir Rimuru said all refreshments are '*under three hundred yen*'—his words, not mine. I dunno what he meant by *yen*, but I'm sure it's something important, you know? Oh, and there are merchant traders stationed at the inn, too, and they'll buy anything you find but don't need."

They literally thought of everything. Shinji cared a lot more about buying actual food than just light refreshments, but he didn't want to shout that out and be accused of insulting the leader of Tempest, so he kept that frustration to himself.

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It had now been a week since they began navigating the labyrinth. The three of them were at a room in the inn, relaxing as they gazed at the booty they won.

"...You know, is it me, or are we making a *ton* of money the past few days? And this inn's supposed to be a bare-bones joint, but it's actually pretty nice. Cheap, too. And the money from the equipment we don't need has to be really adding up now, huh?"

Marc was clearly enjoying himself.

Zhen lifted his head up a bit at this, a little curious. Shinji, in response, took a roll of gold coins out of his bag, their golden shine attracting the eyes of everyone in the room. This wasn't just the money they earned for selling items from monsters and chests; between that and the reward money for bounty hunts and the like, they had obtained several dozen gold coins and even one stellar. It was a laughably high pay scale.

"Yeah, we've saved up quite a bit. And from what I've heard since, not even the frontline dungeon runners have made it past Floor 50 yet. Only Masayuki's

party has reached that point, so that makes us number two.”

Even Masayuki and his team were reportedly stalled at Floor 60 right then, and everyone else was getting blocked by the boss monster on Floor 40. Thanks to that, Shinji’s party had won the Dungeon Party of the Month award.

“Oh yeah, that’s where that tempest serpent is, right? He was pretty strong, but still, y’know, nothing we couldn’t handle.”

The tempest serpent was an A-minus foe in rank, one that’d give even seasoned adventurers fits. Its dangerous ranged-breath attack was a menace in cramped quarters. There was nowhere to run, so you had to face up to the monster—but the snake’s body was tough as metal, and if he coiled it around you, it was all over. You’d normally want to be on high guard against it, but Shinji’s team managed to defeat it without too much of a fuss.

What amazed them wasn’t the monster’s strength but what they obtained after defeating him.

“So what’s with this weapon? The one with a slot in it? Because it got appraised for this crazy high price...”

So high, Shinji noted, that he was too afraid to sell it.

These weapons with slots began to appear around Floor 40, and they were like nothing they had seen in the Empire, so Shinji’s party couldn’t understand the premium. They could sell them for a high price, but they honestly weren’t sure whether they should.

“These recessed slots, though... My appraisal magic didn’t turn up anything. Maybe we better keep ‘em until Lord Gadora shows up.”

“Yeah, we didn’t find any until Floor 40, so...”

“...Right, yeah. We’ve only seen them in boss chambers and as drops from the stronger monsters around Floor 50.”

“Y’know, though, we saw them around town, too, didn’t we? They were pretty rare, but they’re circulating. People say there’s a tiny chance you’ll find them in chests from Floor 30 on.”

“Yeah. And it’s clearly a good make, but is it really worth *those* prices?”

“...Is there some secret to them?”

“I’d guess so. The merchants don’t tell us anything, either. They just kinda smile at us.”

“That is so suspicious. We better not pull the trigger until the old man shows up. But hey, look at this thing!”

Marc picked up his Minos Bardiche pole ax and showed it off to his friends. It gleamed a beautiful silver, an exquisite showpiece made of mithril. This put it in the realm of Unique weapons; they’d picked it up from a treasure chest guarded by the Floor 50 guardian.

“This is a Unique, y’know? You don’t even see these in the Empire too much.”

He must’ve liked it a lot. His companions wondered if he’d start hugging the pole ax and bringing it to bed with him. But it *was* a nice piece. Becoming an Imperial Guardian granted you access to a set of Legend-class gear, but any officers and enlistees below that got normal, sturdy, non-magical equipment. Unique gear was hard to find even for career officers, so Marc could be excused for his excitement.

“Yeah, Yuuki told me the Empire mass-produces its weapons, so... And we hardly even get to see it, but supposedly the Legend-class gear is all identical.”

“...Is that even possible?”

Zhen was asking Shinji, in essence, whether it was possible to manufacture Legend gear on any kind of scale. Logically, it was said to be unthinkable.

“That’s kinda jumping the gun, isn’t it, Shinji? Just because it all looks the same doesn’t mean there’s a factory or something.”

Marc laughed off Shinji’s idea, perhaps a bit miffed the subject was turning away from his new prize. If there *was* a factory, he thought it’d lower the value of the Unique in his hand.

“Well, you couldn’t manufacture these any *normal* way. Lord Gadora told us how hard it is to produce a lot of magisteel at once, even. But if you can keep things under the right conditions, it’s not impossible.”

“...The right conditions?”

"Yeah. Basically, you need someplace with a super-high concentration of magicules. Like, enough that it'd instantly kill most people. Even if you're B rank, it'd kill you given enough time—if you're above an A rank, all it'll do is make you really sick. So if you can put a sword or armor in there for a long time—like, hundreds or thousands of years—those are the right conditions to make it evolve. Then, once the equipment finds an owner it accepts, it'll start doing its own unique evolution."

"Oh, like you'll find *that* kinda place."

"...Yeah, I doubt you would, either."

"Right? But Yuuki and Lord Gadora said they exist."

"...Okay. But so what if it's just 'possible'?"

"Well, you know, I'm starting to wonder if this bardiche was mass-produced, too..."

"No way."

"You wouldn't think, would you? But there's a slot in this ax. Have you ever seen one of these out in the wild?"

"No. What's *with* that anyway?"

"...It's a pretty weapon. Kind of eerily shaped, but..."

Shinji wasn't out to complain. He wasn't jealous of the overjoyed Marc. Neither he nor Zhen could wield large weapons the size of bardiches anyway. But:

"But the way they're just giving these weapons away to people... Is it me, or is this nation more insanely powerful than we thought?"

Marc and Zhen fell silent. They were feeling the same way—after he won that Minos Bardiche, Marc was even worried they'd confiscate it at the front counter. They knew the rules dictated that anything you found in the labyrinth belonged to the challenger—but a weapon *this* strong? Would a nation really allow you to waltz out the door with it?

If Tempest took it away, Marc and his friends were prepared to accept that. They were beholden to Tempest at the moment, and they had to respect the

nation's decisions. That's something that applied anywhere. Besides, they were technically spies, and no spy would go out of their way to stir up trouble.

But the reception they got was beyond any expectation. All the employees in the front-desk area applauded them, shouting "Congratulations!" in unison. Even more astoundingly, they gave the party another cash bonus. The party didn't really need any more evidence by this point—Tempest really *was* a crazy land.

"And even outside of the weapons, this whole nation's nuts, isn't it?"

"It's a shock. I mean, we could earn a ton more money just beating this Dungeon, and it'd be more *fun* that way, too. Like, do we really stand to lose anything? If you're a wimp, it'd be hard to make a living off this, but with *us*..."

"No, Marc. Remember what Zhen said about desertion?"

"...Firing squad."

"...Right, yeah, there *is* that. But still, I think it'd be *so* much more fun to live here."

Shinji and Zhen nodded at Marc's words. But reality didn't work that way. It was certainly an inviting idea, but they couldn't go pursuing this pipe dream all day.

"And you know the war's gonna wreck this place anyway."

"...Yeah. I mean, if Tempest *does* win, I'll gladly switch sides. But what kinda nation's gonna accept a deserter *and* a traitor, y'know?"

"...I don't want to lose everything."

They all sighed, figuratively abandoning their sweet dreams.

It was time to mentally switch gears, and soon, their thoughts shifted to the next day's dungeon hacking.

"Okay, so we're gonna head for Floor 51 tomorrow. That point on, people call the Haven of the Dead. Marc's Minos Bardiche is made from mithril with the holy attribute, so it oughtta perform well against undead and ghosts and stuff."

"Yeah, that's the other weird thing, y'know? This whole place really *is* set up

like a video game. Like, having the boss guard the one key thing for tackling the next section..."

"...And the challenge amps up step by step."

Shinji picked up on this as well. He was the biggest RPG player in the group, so it occurred to him long before anyone brought it up. But he tried to banish the thought. It was just too creepy, because a lot of it was so familiar. And if anything, the boss monsters stationed every tenth level were getting harder way fast.

First was the B-rank black spider, then the B-plus evil centipede. Floor 30 featured a B-plus ogre lord leading a small force of minions working together, making it more than a test of brute strength—this was a choke point for many parties. Floor 40 had an A-minus tempest serpent, and finally, Floor 50 had Bovix, a talking magic-born tauroid. By this point, you were now talking about monsters who *maybe* showed up once every hundred years—a Hazard, to use the danger level Yuuki devised, which made it an A ranker. Certainly, Bovix was a menace, the kind of magic-born you'd expect to be serving a demon lord...and while Shinji's team had trouble, they still beat him. If they were *really* serious, chances were just one of them could've done it—besides, since you didn't die in the labyrinth, you had the freedom to try some pretty reckless tactics.

"Right, if a monster *that* class is guarding Floor 50, I can only guess that the next one's gonna be that much stronger."

"...Might even be the last battle."

Marc agreed with Shinji, Zhen brooding hard over the future. Things had gone smoothly up to now, but all three agreed that it'd turn into an uphill battle pretty quick.

"I think Marc's gonna remain the key to our offense. You got a Unique with special buffs, so let's just see how far it'll take us."

"...Yeah."

"And I don't think you can collect many more monsters *this* powerful, either. I think Floor 60 is the bottom of this thing, but if it's not, that's just scary."

"Oh, no way," said Shinji—but he'd heard ominous rumors. Rumors he had no

intention of telling Marc or Zhen. He was sure it'd lower their morale if they heard this labyrinth might actually have a *hundred* floors.

*It's crazy*, he concluded. The next boss was concerning for him, but he wasn't going to get worked up about it. He figured they would win at the end of it—they couldn't die, after all—but it was likely to be a long, hard ordeal.

"But hey, we can't die either way. Let's just try to keep our guard up."

Marc and Zhen nodded at this. Their goal was the very bottom—and to find out about the top-secret research facility there. Once they went over everything a final time, they retired for the night.

Three days passed. After conquering a poisonous swamp and a corroded wasteland, Shinji's team finally discovered the stairs to Floor 59. They were a short trip down to Floor 60 and that much closer to the boss's chamber. It had taken a week to reach Floor 50, but nearly half that again to get to 60. The size of each floor was shrinking, but the difficulty had ratcheted up to overdrive.

"You guys ready for this?"

"Yep."

"...Yeah."

They had rested up the previous night. They were fully prepared, ready to take the challenge.

"So they say the boss here is another guardian type, like on Floor 50. We can expect another sentient monster."

"Right. A lot more trouble than the Death Lord yesterday."

"...Gotta go all out from the start."

As long as they kept their cool, this boss would go down like the others—all three thought so as they quietly nodded. Then, ever so carefully, they opened the door and swarmed inside.



Going back a little bit...

I was in my chamber, debating with myself over our surveillance system.

Right then, Soei's and Moss's agents were on standby at important points across the Forest of Jura. We were also covering the entire coastline from Farminus to northern Englesia—and even the mountain peaks in between. But despite that, I was still anxious about our intelligence gathering.

For me, the time lag was the scariest thing. Our agents were spread out in teams of two, but there was every chance they could both be killed at once. If so, all intelligence would cease from that location. I'd hate to lose those people, but the resulting delay in transmission could put the entire nation in danger. I warned Soei about this in no uncertain terms.

Even if our monitors were found, whether they were killed or not, they might be forced into battle. That, again, would cause delays, so I was feeling around for a way they could work while keeping themselves safer. As I did, I stumbled upon the idea of using magic to surveil our lands. Distant-view magic like this existed in the shamanistic family, but it turned out to be kind of tough to wrangle—all you could really do was view a target, and it didn't give you too much information about them. It could also focus only on a single point, so you had to cast the spell again to watch somewhere else. This took valuable time, and your target could slip away in the meantime—the magic just wasn't flexible enough for the job. Besides, if the target put up a magical barrier, the distant-view spell would simply bounce off it and dissipate.

Thus, I concluded, the spell was useless since you couldn't observe foes above a certain level of power with it. But I had another idea—the physical magic Megiddo.

Megiddo uses collected water droplets as a lens to focus sunlight on a single point. Reworking this magic, I thought, could make it work as a kind of surveillance spell. For example, what if we floated up balls of water across the land that reflected the area below it? If we could transcribe that somehow, we could easily check on faraway scenery. If not, perhaps we could project an image through a high-altitude lens, expanding and broadcasting the signal through a monitor. We'd need a combination of a telescopic lens, photograph device, and a system for transmitting the information. Essentially, it was like building a monitoring satellite entirely with magic.

Making all the required core magic work seemed like a hassle, but Raphael

stated that with physical magic, spirit magic, and Dominate Space, it'd be possible to implement. After that, I just needed to work out the little details with Raphael—and with that, I had the complete magic I wanted.

Once this monitoring system was finished, it'll be a lot easier to gather information. It was safe, reliable, collected a massive amount of data at once, and made it a breeze to keep up with enemy movements, no matter what they did. You might be wondering why I was wasting time during such a busy period with this, but this was actually really important. “Those who control information control the world,” as they say, so I was sure I could control a war with it, too.

During the Russo-Japanese War, Admiral Heihachiro Togo commanded his naval forces as it destroyed Russia's Baltic fleet in the Sea of Japan. In this fight, the key question for Togo was whether he'd have a chance to encounter the enemy fleet. He had to guess at where he'd intercept the enemy and be in position to engage them; if he messed that up, the battle never would've been fought, and Japan likely would've lost the war.

That, I felt, was similar to my current situation. If I spread my forces too thinly, there was a good chance I'd lose, given how much I was outnumbered to start with. Victory came down to whether I could read the Empire's moves and concentrate our forces at the most suitable point of land. Meanwhile, if the Empire spread itself too thin, I could work out my plans in further detail and destroy every pocket of resistance. But if I wanted to work the battle to my advantage like that, and (most of all) if I wanted to be sure of victory, I absolutely had to complete this monitoring magic.

...Which, you know, I tried to build up the drama there, but we actually had a test setup already complete. What I was asking Raphael for now was extra frills—the little things that'd make it easier to use.

What? Why don't I do it myself? Don't be silly. Raphael *is* my skill, so by anybody's definition, *I'm* putting in all the hard work.

You know what? If you put it *that* way, I think I've been overworking myself a little. I think I'll take a quick rest to soothe my fatigue.

I had my first cupful of Shuna's tea in a while, savoring the moment.

As I relaxed, wondering if I should give my completed monitoring magic a shot

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(Sir Rimuru, I have an urgent report for you!!)

—Beretta's strained voice came in through a Thought Communication.

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He had quite a surprise for me. It turned out a second party had made it past Floor 50.

The first one, it goes without saying, was led by Masayuki. They were taking a break from the Dungeon as we prepared for war, but they made it as far as Floor 59—and thanks to them, our labyrinth was running a brisk business. Tons of challengers used our services on a daily basis, filling up our coffers—and they got a lot out of it, too, of course.

Over the past year, our regular customers had really been stepping up their game. Little by little, we had begun to see more people take on levels in the 30s. Some were coming up with strategies that took advantage of the “no death” rule, such as “zombie attacks” (continually dying and coming back to fight the enemy again) and “sacrifice runs” (leaving someone behind to get preyed upon as the rest of the party forged onward).

Once you were into the 30s, though, you had more than just unfamiliar insta-kill traps to deal with. The monsters there began working in teams, and gimmicky tactics weren't as effective any longer. But some of our dungeon runners really were up to the challenge. Parties taking a strictly conventional approach still struggled to keep up, but they were honing their skills, and their equipment was improving by leaps and bounds, too. That, in turn, helped to strengthen them further. It's funny what your body can get used to—some runners began to develop instincts for traps, dodging them no matter how vicious they were.

Thanks to all that, the front-running parties had started reaching the boss monster on Floor 40...but as of now, that was the last stop for most. The monster they faced there was a tempest serpent, an A-minus creature. This was

the very same black snake I first ran into way back when, packing an effective breath attack that just *annihilated* parties. Many of them got destroyed, lost all their equipment, and tearfully trudged into the shops to buy more. We'd be kind enough to lend them Tempest-brand equipment and the like—on a “you break it, you bought it” policy, of course, and that turned into *another* nice income stream.

So yeah—thanks, black snake! That little reptile was great for shaking our challengers down for all the profit they made up to that point. He was such a wonderful, reliable, moneymaking guardian for us...but *ohhh*, death should not have taken thee, black snake!

That—and even our guardian on Floor 50 got done in. With Masayuki's party, we were admittedly cheating a little bit, so this new party must have been *real* legit. We had to award them the bounty as well, but it was more than worth it for all the free advertising. The entire labyrinth lit up again upon the birth of a new set of heroes, and now things seemed busier than ever before.

Floor 50 was defended by a pair of sentient magic-born, Bovix the tauroid and Equix the equinoid, who took turns serving as the boss. I ordered them to the job, and neither was a pushover at all, so seeing someone pull off the upset amazed me. After all, if nobody was around to challenge them, they usually sparred each other, helping add more creativity to their battle approach. I was witnessing some real intelligent strategy in their fights now—they weren't just big brutes any longer. What's more, they had become best friends, no longer snapping at each other all the time.

This second party's success reminded me that I put a frankly pretty awesome prize in place for beating Floor 50. You only got it the first time you beat the boss, but it was a guaranteed drop from the treasure chest—one item, picked at random, from the Unique-class Minos series. I named this after the mythical labyrinth-guarding minotaur, and they were both completely insane-looking *and* stupidly powerful. In the weapons department, we offered the Minos Bardiche and the Minos Trident. There was no shield, and armor filled out the rest of the list. I figured it'd be a while longer before someone made it this far, so I don't think I had more than, like, ten complete sets made yet—but this was definitely top-of-the-line gear, a team effort crafted by the best of Kurobe's

apprentices.

Losing one of them was a problem, but what impressed me more was this party's fighting skill. Bovix and Equix got a *lot* stronger when I named them, and if they managed to beat one of them, I'd honestly wanna recruit them for our nation. If they said no, well, they might be our enemy someday, and that would kinda suck, so I planned to keep them under surveillance.

That was why I left instructions to inform me immediately if Bovix or Equix ate it, and that's what I got from Beretta just then.

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(Who are they?)

(The winning team is a party of three people, all possessing unique skills.)

Maybe I know them?

It turns out I didn't.

So here we had a set of just three guys, unique skill users, who beat Bovix... and they were pretty brand-new to the Dungeon, too, not veterans at all. In times of peace, I'd just sit back and marvel, but we were at war's eve right then, and in my eyes, they were likely spies picking at low-hanging fruit.

We needed more intel on them badly, so I delayed my magic-monitor practice and headed for the command room inside the labyrinth.

\*

I found Ramiris and Veldora already there.

Deeno and Vester had the day off, apparently. Vester really had been looking haggard lately (Deeno, not so much), so I wanted him to get as much rest as he could. Ramiris and Veldora, meanwhile, couldn't have been better. I'm not sure they even knew how to be tired. They never stopped—like children, if something had their attention, they just kept going.

"Well, look who's here! Hello, Commander!" chirped Ramiris. "No changes to

report yet!"

No changes to what? Ah well. I'm sure she's just playing navy captain in her mind.

I looked at the large screen set up in the room. It currently showed three young men, the group who had been storming through the labyrinth.

Their fighting style, I have to say, was extremely unique. One of them seemed to be grabbing the air itself, gathering and throwing it with intense force. Maybe some kind of air-compression blast? Definitely not something a normal person could pull off. The man was large, firmly built, with brown hair and a chiseled face, and he had on a tank top and jeans. You read that right: a tank top and jeans. Definitely otherworlder fashion, I thought.

Now for the other two. One was small, skinny, and mostly hidden inside a large black robe. The other was a young man wearing chain mail with a lab coat over it. Yes, a lab coat—the kind you see in labs and hospitals, although not at all in *this* world. His face suggested he was Asian—and almost certainly Japanese. I couldn't guess about the dude in the robe, but Lab Coat and Tank Top sure seemed like otherworlders to me.

Regardless, they were still fighting as I watched on-screen. They were facing a pretty tough challenge—a pack of six death wolves, lunging at them faster than a normal person could respond. They must have calculated that remaining far away would leave them open to attack with no way to respond. Once you plunged below Floor 50, even the minion-level foes had real intelligence.

A death wolf, by the way, was a B-plus monster, and that was for a single one of them. Six at once was an extremely dangerous encounter—and being a ghost type, they were impervious to melee attacks outside of holy or magic weapons. Their bodies were made entirely of magicules, so even if you sent them flying, they'd just regenerate themselves and jump right back in. Unless you had a good way to handle them, you couldn't win—show any weakness for a moment, and you'd be torn apart.

But:

"Don't mess with us, you stupid mutts! *Hraahh!!*"

This was Tank Top the air-thrower. Now he took out the ominous-looking battle-ax on his back and started swinging. A single swipe took out three at once, their bodies fading into particles of light.

...Whoa, *that* ax! I remember that ominous-looking thing. It's the Minos Bardiche, isn't it? Once you got into the realm of Uniques, magical force came with the package as a given. That made this a type of magic weapon, easily capable of damaging ghost types; the magic alone could hurt monsters all by itself. We also worked hard on the materials for that bardiche; if I recall, we made them out of mithril, a special mix of magisteel and silver. That instilled the holy attribute, geared for mowing through undead and ghost enemies.

"Man, the Minos Bardiche can take out those death wolves in one hit," I muttered.

"Yes, I believe Bovix drops that," Veldora replied with a nod. "And look at how used to that weapon he is, so soon after picking it up. He's got a good head for battle."

As I watched the trio fight, I listened to Veldora and Ramiris recap this party's progress for me. Would've been nice to have had some fries to snack on as I did.

From how they put it, Tank Top had been defeating most of the monsters so far, and looking at him, I could believe it. He *was* strong.

What about the traps, though? The guy in the black robe had a knack for quickly finding them, tipping off his two companions. Our trickier, more ingenious traps began popping up on Floor 51, but as I looked on, Black Robe accurately marked out the positions of each trap they encountered. It must've been his unique skill—he was the ideal man to bring with you on a Dungeon run.

Finally, Lab Coat had only taken action once, really, according to my partners, during the battle against Bovix. Veldora's description of events was too cryptic to understand, so I asked Raphael to read out the labyrinth's past memories for me. When it brought them up, well, yeah, it *was* strange. All he really did was take a syringe out from a pocket, inject both of his partners—and then Bovix visibly slowed to a crawl. Was this some kind of status ailment?

*Understood. According to an analysis, the attack sustained by the subject Bovix involved a nerve poison. The room was filled with poison gas, preventing the movement of those not resistant to it. It is no longer in effect.*

Oh, poison gas? And it looked like they could customize this gas for maximum lethality on the target, too.

Heavily slowed, Bovix was easy pickings for Tank Top—but Lab Coat delivered the final blow, removing a silver scalpel from a shirt pocket and slicing through the jugular vein. Lab Coat was the leader, it seemed, playing a control-tower role instead of getting involved in actual combat much. He was good at it, too, capable of fighting if he needed to, so Tank Top up front was pretty much free to go wherever he wanted. It was a really intelligent, well-balanced party.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. It quietly opened up, revealing Shuna; she had brought along a file with information on these three people.

“Here’s the immigration data we have on this trio.”

With a light bow, she handed me the piece of paper.

*Shingee: age twenty-three, magician*

*Marc: age twenty-six, warrior*

*Zhen: age seventeen, huntmaster*

It contained a brief list of their names and professions. Their profiles listed them as being from a small province of the Empire. When asked what brought them to Tempest, they said a merchant told them about the Dungeon, and they came over to test their skill. Yeah, right. That was *such* a lie.

Raphael, meanwhile, was giving me its own analysis. As Beretta said, each one of them had their own unique skill. The idea that these three just happened to come together at the same time and form a party sounded pretty farfetched to me.

That, and their listed professions piqued my interest. The term *magician* was reserved for advanced casters who learned at least two families of magic—in Shingee’s case, this was spirit and elemental magic. Smart young man, for sure.

A warrior, meanwhile, had to be a master of both weapons and martial arts—to be exact, one core martial art and at least one weapon. This could be a sword, a bow and arrow, or even throwing weapons like knives or stones; you were free to pick the one that suited you the most, but you then had to master the deepest levels of it. In Marc's case, he was a brawler with throwing-weapon and pole-arm proficiencies, a real multifaceted talent.

Finally, a huntmaster was the moniker applied to those at the pinnacle of the hunting profession. It required a mastery of bowhunting, as well as Formhide, one of the more difficult Arts to learn. You also had to master the Detect Danger skill, and overall, it took a lot more than raw talent to become a huntmaster. In a hunting guild, they were revered as reliable partners. There just weren't many people with trap and monster discovery skills, both a vital part of any search mission. Huntmasters pretty much always came from hunting-oriented clans, and it was an extremely difficult job to get into otherwise.

So here we had three people with three esoteric, high-level jobs forming a party. It was all but asking us to suspect them of something.

"These really look like spies who took the bait."

"Indeed...but would spies so blatantly take center stage like this?"

Diablo, standing unnoticed in the background, picked up on my muttering. He had offered me assistance in magical development, eagerly awaiting my new ventures in monitoring magic, and me canceling our next meeting about it really set him off. His eyes told me he was resenting the on-screen trio for it, but I think he was judging them correctly.

"Oh, I was wondering that, too. I thought it might be a diversionary tactic, but things are calm around town right now."

It was certainly a very suspicious party, but all the information they gave seemed to be the honest truth. Would they be stupid enough to not cover their tracks at all? Or was *this* a clever feint, devised to make us start suspecting everything except for them?

"I'm sure you're overthinking this, Rimuru," said Veldora. "Aren't you always telling me that honesty is the best policy?"

"Well, it *is*. But we need to figure out how we handle these challengers!" replied Ramiris.

Glad you guys don't have a care in the world. I truly began to envy Veldora and Ramiris for that. But oh well.

No matter who they were, we had to watch out for them. Shingee was the black-haired man in the lab coat—I'm just gonna assume he's using a fake name, and his real one is actually Shinji.

Marc was the brown-haired tank top guy, and he did more than throw air around. Whether it was a monster corpse or a pebble on the ground, he could throw anything you could grab. I saw him throw a (still-alive) monster at a pack of skeletal warriors, crushing two of them, and it almost made me spit out my tea. He probably wasn't lying about his warrior job; I could tell by the way he expertly wielded his Minos Bardiche, taking down one ghost after another.

Zhen was the black-robe dude, and I was sure he could use his eyes to detect traps. I thought it was Detect Danger at first, but judging by how he could avoid any dangerous place before it triggered, I figured a unique skill was granting him that. For most parties tackling Floor 50 and below, not even the monsters were as vicious a danger as the traps. The undead didn't need to breathe, so we adjusted the air in those floors to make sure everything was normal. There were some oxygen-free chambers as well, ensuring a quick death even if you just stumbled in unawares. To this we added poisoned lakes, acid swamps, rooms with corrosive gas, and so on and so forth. They'd damage both you and your equipment, making for a truly atrocious gauntlet for challengers to gnash their teeth about.

These were all ingenious traps that said a great deal about their creator's personality, and the whole concept of the floors past the fiftieth was to use them to keep people from advancing. But if someone could see through *all* of them, they were useless. What's more, Zhen had an excellent sense of direction; he could easily find the shortest route through something, not letting rotating floors or anything else stop him.

This whole labyrinth was meaningless to this trio. If anyone got hurt, Dr. Shingee could heal them. They could even disable poison, so I couldn't expect

that to work too much. They may have only been a trio, but they couldn't have been better suited for deep dives.

Three days passed. Veldora, Ramiris, and I squealed with glee as we watched Shingee's party press on. No, we weren't watching for hints we could use for our own conquest. Really, we weren't. We were just watching them in awe, is all.

Diablo was sitting in a corner of the room reading while Shion was learning some new baking skills from Shuna, who poured out more tea for us—black tea, with a pleasant apple flavor.

"By the way, Rimuru," Veldora began, "you mentioned that they 'took the bait,' but what did you mean by that?"

Huh? ...Oh, wait, you mean our conversation three days ago? Veldora's brain ran about as quickly as a dinosaur's sometimes, but then, that made sense for him.

"Ah, don't worry about that."

"Oh, don't be a stick in the mud. Tell me!"

He never usually cared about stuff like this, but today he just wouldn't get off my back. Whatever.

"Okay, well, to tell the truth..."

I decided to lay it on him. When I said they took the bait, that's exactly what I meant.

We had added some evacuation training earlier because it had become possible for us to—as nutty as it seemed to me—sequester the entirety of the town inside the Dungeon. Ramiris's intrinsic skill Mazecraft really *was* amazing. I knew she could freely reorder and rearrange each floor, but it turned out she could treat the ground level above the Dungeon as another "floor" for her purposes.

Once the town was quarantined inside, it'd remain in there for twenty-four hours, but things like air and water supply weren't an issue. In fact, we could still see the sun, so I figured this "quarantine" wouldn't put much stress on our

citizens at all. This took a *gigantic* amount of energy, of course, but so what? We got Veldora.

So essentially, we were crafting our war plans based on the assumption that our town could be stowed away for safekeeping. This was something we tested out several times, and *that* was the bait meant to catch imperial spies. All we left behind on the surface was the labyrinth's entrance gate, which had to look incredibly suspect. In my talks with Benimaru and the rest of my cabinet, we concluded that someone from the opposing side was bound to investigate.

"Ah, I see! Boy, my master's really powered me up, too, huh? Glad to see I'm pitchin' in a little!" said Ramiris.

"Heh-heh-heh... So this is thanks to *me*, is it? Heh-heh..."

Veldora looked at me, blatantly fishing for compliments. It drove me up the wall, but it really *was* thanks to him.

"Yeah, you've been a huge help to all of us, Veldora."

"Kwaahhhh-ha-ha-ha! Yes! Yes, I imagine I have been! So may I have some of that cake?"

*No!*

I was looking forward to that slice.

"Please, take mine."

Ahhh, *thank* you, Diablo!

"Sorry about that."

"Not at all. If it will aid you, Sir Rimuru, this much is nothing."

Such a big help, that one. Might as well indulge his graciousness this time.

Savoring my slice of cake, I looked up at the screen. The party was about to take on the guardian at the end of Floor 60.

"Well, if we know they're spies, shouldn't we detain them?"

"Nah. I wanna test them out, so I figured we could see how far in they make it. I hate paying out so much money to them, but it's generating a lot of buzz, so I can live with it."

If worse came to worst, I could always arrest them and confiscate their winnings. I wanted to look incredibly generous for now, paying what I promised, and then wring whatever I could get from them in exchange.

"A fine plan, Rimuru."

"It's so *dirty*! You're a true genius, y'know that?!"

Veldora and Ramiris also had kind words for me, although I can't say they made me feel too happy. Shuna, meanwhile, just rolled her eyes at us.

"I have to say, though, this didn't turn out like I meant. I didn't expect him to score a Minos Bardiche on the first try," I said. "That's a holy-attribute weapon, and it just *rips* through ghosts and undead."

"We shouldn't have offered that guaranteed drop the first time around..." Ramiris lamented.

Floor 60 was guarded by Adalmann. I had him go by the moniker the Immortal King in the hopes that he'd drive away challengers like back in his wight king days...but really, his strength lay mostly in commanding armies. He was weaker than Bovix or Equix solo, and I had a suspicion we'd be disappointed once more today. As a wight, too, he was laughably weak against the holy and light elemental attributes. As long as Marc bandied that Minos Bardiche around, I really didn't like Adalmann's chances.

I had given Adalmann as much advice as I could, but the traps were supposed to be the main performers in this group of floors. I never expected a blockbuster performance from the boss himself, and that was why I felt okay with giving challengers a weapon that struck at his weak point. Now I felt like I wasn't fair to Adalmann.

Sad to say, I didn't see him stopping this trio. I'd like to think I'm just assuming the worst...but yeah, I hope he won't have a grudge against me for this. So I turned my expectations toward the guardian of Floor 70 instead.



Upon realizing there were intruders in his domain, Adalmann the Immortal King let a smile cross his fleshless lips. His teeth softly scraped together, making a light clattering sound. It might've been hard to tell, but this was Adalmann's

take on a villainous grin.

“You seem to be in a good mood, Lord Adalmann.”

This was Alberto speaking, a former paladin and Adalmann’s closest associate, following in his footsteps even after his boss fell into a trap and died. After joining Rimuru’s force, Alberto had been demoted all the way down to skeletal fighter, about as low-level a monster as you could be, but at least he wasn’t rubbed out entirely. He normally wouldn’t be able to speak at all, but he demonstrated perfect fluency. Why? Simple—the Alberto of right now was no longer a plain old skeleton. He wasn’t even a death knight, several rungs up the ladder. No, he was a Death Paladin, far above either of those—and while he was a wight and possessed no material body, he looked just the same as before death. True, he was rather pale, and there were blue will-o’-the-wisps floating around him, so it was clear he wasn’t living and breathing, but regardless.

Adalmann, meanwhile, had no particular attachment to his flesh body—in fact, he rather liked being nothing but a skeleton. But Alberto didn’t share his view, and given how his magical force far surpassed a regular death knight’s, he had the ability to freely construct whatever body he wanted from magicules. And Alberto had both an affinity for and a sense of pride in his old appearance, a fresh and energetic-looking (or as energetic as a ghoul *could* appear) young man. This body was protected by an ominous-looking set of armor, making it clear at one glance that Alberto wasn’t to be trifled with.

“Yes, Alberto. A *very* good mood. It seems we have guests.”

Alberto nodded gleefully. “Ah. So our moment is here at last?”

They knew each other so intimately by this point that few words were needed.

“Indeed. The time has finally come—time to serve the demon lord who granted us this peaceful abode. With as much power as we’ve been given, you know that mistakes will *not* be permitted.”

“Of course not. I, Alberto, am fully aware of that.”

“Hee-hee-hee... Forgive me for repeating myself, then. All this excitement must be loosening my tongue.”

The two looked at each other and smiled. Then another joined in.

*“Groorrrggghh!!”*

A bloodcurdling scream echoed across the city of the dead.

“Ah, I see we’re not the only excited ones here. Very well. Today you will have an occasion to fully unfurl your powers. Prove your loyalty to our god!”

Quietly, but thickly, the area was awash in the incoming trio’s ardor. Adalmann’s faith had died once, only to be reconquered by his new god—the demon lord Rimuru. It had been several months since tasting bitter defeat. He hoped fervently that he could help Rimuru, and so in just those few months, Adalmann had regained his powers as a wight king, more powerful than even at the pinnacle of his career. That was how deep his faith extended.



To Rimuru, of course, this faith was as excessive as it was stifling. In fact, he had already thought *Sorry, guys, but you don't have a chance* and pinned his expectations on the next guardian—but Adalmann didn't know that, and he was eager to fight.

This time, for sure—and every time after this—defeat was not an option. He had to win—and continue winning. And so Adalmann and his cohorts waited for the foolish intruders who would come at any moment, carefully discussing their strategy as they anticipated what was to come.



An intense battle began...and ended in an instant.

Well, really, I'd *like* to call it intense, but in fact it was so one-sided that it left my mouth agape. I'd even brought along a deck of cards in case things got boring midway, but I never had to bust them out.

In the end, Adalmann simply dominated. It was a stark, vivid victory, one I could hardly believe I was watching. The challengers were hardly pushovers; they weren't sick or injured. They were in perfect health and enthusiastic to start fighting...but Adalmann's team performed above them in every way.

Statistically speaking, this wasn't a mismatch. I had finished analyzing the challengers' skills, and they looked stronger than Adalmann. All three of them merited an over-A rank, and each one boasted their own unique skill.

Shingee's in particular was Restorer, quite a rare one. It granted him control over the structures of tiny viruses, letting him destroy living creatures from the inside. He could even modify the composition of the air around him to create lethal, contagious viral clouds. It was pretty crazy, really. Could *any* living thing deal with that? Like, unless you could detect these clouds of pathogens you'd need a microscope to see, you had no chance of beating Shingee. That, and he could use this to heal people, too, even more efficiently than medical nanomachines. The all-purpose flexibility Restorer offered was just amazing.

Next, Marc's power was derived from his unique skill Hurler. It allowed him to throw anything he could hold in his hands like a javelin—really, anything he could lift up, including monsters. Combine it with gravity-control magic, and

he'd be more of a threat than nearly any mass-based weapon; I'd say the skill was more suited for effectively taking on entire armies instead of single targets.

Finally, Zhen's unique skill was a kind of mix of useful tools. The unique skill Observer allowed him to instinctively dodge threats, detect danger and traps, and discover monsters and other presences before they appeared. He could even pick up on Shingee's viral clouds. All this was combined with Zhen's own fighting abilities, which made him capable of evading or fleeing just about anything. He was fast, he was nimble, and traps basically didn't work on him—the mortal enemy of any labyrinth.

That about summed it up. It was a real buffet of sweet-looking skills, and I'd definitely be gaining some inspiration from them. Each one was a huge boon by itself, but they also worked so *well* with one another—the real key to this trio's record-making run. I don't think I could be blamed for assuming they'd steamroll right over Adalmann.

But I was wrong. Turns out Adalmann had spent the past few months getting buff, so to speak.

I mean, normally, a non-sentient monster would never really change in terms of fighting ability from what it's originally granted. If it could survive several decades or so, you'd see some improvement then, but the process took more than a few years, at least. And then we have Adalmann and Alberto here.

"...Like, what *is* this? How did these guys get so powerful?!"

And also, what the heck's up with that dragon?

Peeking into the boss chamber, I spotted Adalmann, Albert...and an evil-looking dragon I had never seen before, nearly forty feet in length and oozing a deadly looking miasma from its mouth. Who the hell dragged *that* in? Something clearly had been going on while I was out on my international tour.

"Heh-heh-heh! Surprised, aren'tcha? I kinda kept this from you on purpose, but y'know how you gave those guys some new equipment? Well, they *really* dug that stuff, so they've been working extremely hard on their training! And um, you know how high the magicule levels are across the Dungeon, right? Well, they've been absorbing some of it, and now Adalmann and Alberto have regained their old powers!"

Ramiris sounded like a guy on a prank video revealing everything to the victim. And—yeah, taking a closer look, Adalmann had evolved from wight to wight king. He was still a skeleton, and his gear was just as gaudy as ever, so I didn't notice at first, but his magical power was off the charts now. Alberto, meanwhile, had skipped death knight entirely and now was a Death Paladin, a super-high-level monster.

"Wight kings and Death Paladins have magicule levels about even with an Arch Demon, don't they...?" I said.

"Kwaah-ha-ha-ha! Look at these meek little underlings, striving so hard to be of aid to us!"

They made evolution sound so easy—and what's more, they powered up beyond anything I could've guessed.

"What about that dragon?"

"Oh, didn't you know, Rimuru? That's Adalmann's pet!" Ramiris announced.

Pet...?

Hmm... Come to think of it, I *did* remember Adalmann talking about keeping a pet, maybe. I just didn't expect it to be this wicked-looking dragon. It was, in fact, a death dragon, the alpha predator of the undead-monster hierarchy. Shuna and the rest of the cabinet were familiar with it, apparently, so Ramiris honestly thought I knew as well. That was my fault, I suppose. It's so important to have everybody on the same page in upper management.

So as for how this battle unfolded... Well, there's really not much to say. In fact, Adalmann didn't even move an inch from his throne, and the death dragon stayed ensconced on his left side. Only Alberto stepped forward, and he beat all of them himself. Marc's Minos Bardiche wasn't even given the time to strut its stuff—it was stopped in its tracks by the similarly Unique-class Cursed Sword, and Marc was promptly slashed down afterward.

The sight stopped Zhen in his tracks, leaving him open for a moment, and Alberto seized the opportunity. His speed made him almost seem to disappear for a moment as he unleashed upon Zhen, and that by itself spelled the end for him.

This made Shingee mutter “Huh?” in surprise. He scrambled toward Alberto, blasting out a Holy Cannon magic spell. This was a common ability among paladins, but not many civilians had access to it—Shingee didn’t mention any paladin training in his immigration papers, so I imagine it was a hidden last resort for him.

This spell was suited for speed, and it landed a clean, direct hit on Alberto. It seemed like he dodged it for a moment, but maybe Alberto let his guard down—or so I thought. But I had no reason to worry. Alberto simply didn’t move, because he had no need to evade it.

Shingee managed to squeak out an “Oh, come on!” before Alberto swung his sword down upon him. Then it was all over.

But... I mean, Alberto’s still undead, right? Isn’t he weak against the holy attribute? I know I’m not the only one to think that—but Alberto was kept safe, and it was entirely thanks to Adalmann. It turned out to be his previously hidden extra skill, known as Holy-Evil Inversion, at work.

*Report. Holy-Evil Inversion is a secret skill crafted by the subject Adalmann. It has the effect of swapping the holy attribute with the evil one and vice versa.*

Adalmann used this to change Alberto’s attribute from evil to holy. The effect didn’t extend to his equipment, but since Alberto was undead, there wasn’t any life force for his cursed gear to suck away, so his elemental attribute didn’t matter along those lines. Plus, if an ally applied that skill to him, there was no chance of his body resisting it.

A holy undead? What kind of joke was this? It was *unhol*y, if anything, but Adalmann’s Holy-Evil Inversion made it a reality. And as a spiritual life-form, Adalmann had natural resistances to each kind of elemental attack. Most melee strikes didn’t work on him. As a duo, they had also overcome their weakness against holy attacks. Really, I didn’t see how any normal dungeon-runner team could take them.

So Adalmann won, and without even using any of the magic I taught him. Shingee’s team was defeated in truly anticlimactic fashion, fading into clouds of light before departing the chamber.

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"Rimuru, my lord, were you watching us? We dedicate this glorious victory to you!!"

Watching Adalmann shout this dedication at the top of his nonexistent lungs, a thought occurred: *Isn't Adalmann's gang a little too much force to bust out for Floor 60?*

I mean, yeah, I *did* tell him that if a party approached, he should fight back with a party of his own. He certainly took that advice to heart, and he certainly didn't try to *outnumber* his opponent, no. But this is getting pretty close to fraud. Like, come on! If you have a special-A monster, a Calamity-level threat—and *three* of them at once—you could destroy a lot of the smaller kingdoms out there! And by the looks of things, they still had some other tricks they were hiding, too.

So I decided to interrogate Ramiris about that later. For now, I needed to offer Adalmann my congratulations.

"Well done, Adalmann! Why don't you come up to the control room? No need to talk through the screen like this."

"Oh, ohhhh...! Such a joyous honor! I will be by your side posthaste, my lord!"

As stiflingly formal as always. Well, that's how he is, I suppose.

"And Alberto can talk as well these days, huh? Can you bring him along?"

"Very well. As for my death dragon...?"

"Um, let's have it keep guard over there, okay?"

"Yes, my lord!"

The death dragon whimpered a bit about that, but I had to stand firm on this. I mean, it's freakin' forty feet long. Maybe we could fit him in the special chamber we made for Veldora on Floor 100, but this control room just ain't that big. I felt kinda bad for the guy, but he'd have to give up on that.

So I ordered Shion to make some tea for Adalmann and Alberto.

"Can he drink it?" she asked. "He's nothing but bones."

“...”

Rrrrr...ight. Yeah. Looks like Alberto found a body, kind of, but Adalmann's still nothing but a skeleton. Maybe he can enjoy the aroma, at least?

“Well, this is... You know. A polite gesture for him.”

“I see. Very well!”

We chatted a bit more as we waited for their arrival.

“We are here, Sir Rimuru!”

“I offer you my sincere gratitude for the honor of personally experiencing your holy visage.”

Adalmann and Alberto both kneeled before me. In person like this instead of through the screen, I realized just how much more powerful they were now—I could hardly believe they were the same people as before.

“Yes. Well done. Alberto was your name, was it? You have proved to be quite an effective fighter. And, Adalmann—you have done an exemplary job as a guardian. Keep up the good work!”

“That’s right! Keep it up!”

Veldora and Ramiris heaped praise on them before I could speak up. If *they* got to give out all the praise first, I wasn’t too sure what I should follow up with...but let’s just keep it benign.

“Yeah, I tell you... It’s been a while since I’ve seen you guys, so I’m kinda shocked at how much you’ve grown.”

Grown...or I suppose “evolved” is the right term, isn’t it? That trio was pretty strong, so I seriously thought they’d struggle...but no, I better not say that. Sometimes, there are things better thought than stated out loud.

““Yes, my lord!!””

Both of them were visibly moved. I had them sit down, trying to hide my pangs of guilt.

“Truly... Truly a fine aroma,” said Alberto. “If offered by anyone else, I might have taken it as sarcasm, perhaps...”

Oh yeah? Hmm. Shoulda seen that coming. If you can't drink it, it's just unfair, isn't it?

"...but when offered by my lord, I find the scent deeply satisfying for my heart. It has truly rejuvenated my body."

Well, great, but Shion made it, so...

"...How delicious. Sweet—and fragrant like nectar. I, Alberto, cannot offer enough gratitude for this wondrous moment of bliss."

Geez, don't lay it on *too* much...

I guess Alberto had built a physical body for himself with magicules—a kind of temporary vessel, made possible inside the labyrinth.

"Why don't *you* take on a full body as well, Adalmann?" I asked.

"...Pardon me?"

"Well, I mean, then you could enjoy that tea more, so..."

"Y-yes, perhaps, my lord, but in my case... Well, I prefer to project a certain *image*, you could say..."

Uh-huh. That was kinda over my head, but if it was important to Adalmann, it's nothing I have a right to comment on.

"Fair. No need to force it, in that case."

I changed the subject.

"By the way, I was really impressed by how you approached using Holy-Evil Inversion. The fact that you developed it at all shows me how hard you've been working."

"Thank you very much! Sir Beretta provided me with some assistance. And also..."

I asked about Holy-Evil Inversion as a quick way to shift the topic, but this was actually pretty surprising. It turned out that even Luminus lent him a hand.

"Lady Luminus taught me Day-Night Inversion, one of her secret techniques, you see. An 'apology,' as she referred to it. Sir Beretta then applied his unique skill Reverser to modify it, and then I was able to master it."

And there you have it. I suppose Luminus was “apologizing” for letting the Seven Days Clergy act out of line.

Why was Granville trying to kill someone as talented as Adalmann? I had my own reasoning for that. Outside of Granville, the Seven Days Clergy members were all obsessed about keeping their positions safe from threats. They were all trying to eliminate Adalmann, but Granville must’ve reasoned that he’d only be useful if he could overcome the trap they set for him. Instead, Adalmann and that dragon zombie killed each other off—something Granville may not have intended. Maybe his perspective was along the lines of “Well, if you can’t beat an enemy at *that* level, you’ll never become a guardian of humankind anyway” or the like. Seeing Granville’s final moments—supremely proud but all alone in life—I couldn’t help but think that.

Still, it wouldn’t be right to bring it up with Adalmann. It’s something I’d like him to realize himself someday—but for now, time for another subject change.

“Well, that’s wonderful! I’ll have to send Luminus my thanks later on. But, Adalmann!”

“Yes!”

“At this point, you can beat the guardian of Floor 70, can’t you?”

“...How do you mean, my lord?”

He seemed confused, so I spelled it out for him in detail.

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Currently, Floors 61 through 70 were nicknamed the Golem Zone, filled with inorganic, tirelessly working sentries. Some of the specialized area bosses on those floors even wielded test versions of the firearms we were working on. There were also a lot of brutal traps, headed up primarily by land mines—but none of them were particularly lethal. The zone was overall meant as a trial for people playing the healer role in adventuring parties.

The main boss of this zone was a new machine, a modified version of the

Elemental Colossus. Vester had finally completed it with the help of Kaijin. It still boasted the high defense magisteel offered, but now it was lighter and more compact, making it mobile while keeping the pilot's seat fully protected. It wasn't sentient, but it had room for a pilot inside, although it could also run on the thoughts of a remote pilot.

At the moment, I believed Beretta was operating it remotely. I liked that—it certainly eliminated the threat of viral cloud attacks, and not even a Minos Bardiche could cut through a magisteel body. Its armor also featured a layered structure, the shielding scales from Charybdis granting it the powers of Magic Interference.

It was a completely invincible metal guardian—once the Elemental Colossus, now called the Demon Colossus. And I was fully sure Shingee's party would never make it past Floor 70.

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However, after seeing how Adalmann fought today, I was starting to reconsider matters.

"Veldora, who do you think's stronger—Adalmann or the Demon Colossus?"

"Hmm... Adalmann, without a doubt."

"Right? So you see, Adalmann, we're going to promote you to Floor 70."

There you go. If Veldora agreed with me, I couldn't be mistaken.

*Understood. The power comparison between the subjects Adalmann and the Demon Colossus is—*

Oh, um, I don't need the numbers, thanks. This is more about image, so...

"Ah, ahhhhhhh...!! I, Adalmann, promise to expend every effort to live up to your expectations!"

"And I, your humble servant Alberto, promise to support my master, Adalmann, with every fiber of my being."

They kneeled before me again as they made their pledges. They had changed so much when I'd taken my eyes off them. The Demon Colossus was hardly any slouch, but honestly, it didn't really have the *gravitas* a boss needed. That, and if it got broken again, it'd just break our hearts. We have to implant it with a soul, or it wouldn't be subject to Ramiris's powers in the Dungeon, so we can't experiment to see if it'd get resurrected after being smashed up. Maybe with a soul, things would be different—or if there was a pilot inside it, would that work? Oh, but if someone was possessing it, maybe it wouldn't be treated as an item any longer...

Regardless, we sadly had no plans along those lines yet. I thus saw no reason why we shouldn't promote Adalmann and his crew.

"All right! Then as of today, I want to have Floors 51 through 60 switched with Floors 61 through 70."

"Roger! You got it!" said Ramiris.

And so we restructured the labyrinth right then and there.

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Following Adalmann's exemplary performance, the Dungeon had a new hierarchy. That took care of matters for now, so I was about to order Adalmann out of the control room when the previously silent Diablo spoke up.

"We seem to be at the end of the conversation, so I have something I'd like to report to you."

"What's that?"

"Well, my servant Razen sent a magical call stating that he has something to urgently discuss with you. It seems his former instructor or the like called upon him, and now this man is asking for an audience with you, Sir Rimuru. His name is Gadora."

Hmm... Never heard of him.

*Report. He is listed as the author of a number of books on sorcery.*

Oh, he's famous, huh? I thought Razen was a pretty well-known and talented sorcerer himself, but his master must be even more so, huh? Kinda interesting. I

wouldn't mind meeting him, but...

"Wouldn't that be a trap, though? We're on the eve of duking it out with the Empire, so a meeting at this point seems really suspicious, I think..."

"Exactly! There is no need at all for you to meet with such a dubious person, Sir Rimuru!"

Shion was even more doubtful than I was—and I could see why. Given the times we lived in, if my personal guardian wanted to keep me away from danger—well, she was just doing her job. I wasn't nearly as wary as her, so I figured it was better to listen to my advisers for matters like these.

"Indeed... I see no need to lend an ear to the opinions of someone on the level of Razen. In fact, I hardly even need to listen to him at all."

Diablo made this sound like an accepted fact, but I was sure he just wanted to be excused from all this. Regardless, if both of my personal secretaries were advising me against it, I was ready to call this off—but then I noticed Adalmann fidgeting a bit. Yeah, I understood how he felt. Sometimes, just when you're about to leave your boss's office, a phone call or unexpected visitor comes along. You don't want to interfere, but you don't want to just walk out on the boss, either...so you're stuck there, helplessly watching the clock tick away. Or is it just me?

Regardless...

"Sorry, Adalmann. That's all I needed from you, so you guys can leave."

"N-no, my lord! There is no need to be concerned about us. But apart from that..."

"Hmm?"

"To tell the truth, I...um..."

"Yes?"

"This man, Gadora, that you speak of..."

"Mm-hmm?"

"I believe this may perhaps be a friend of mine."

“Huh?”

I turned my eyes to Adalmann. He was shifting a bit in his seat, looking flustered. I almost wanted to say *No, Adalmann, you’re allowed to have friends. I don’t think you’ve betrayed me...*

So I asked Diablo to hold his opinion for now while Adalmann gave me more details. He and Gadora, as he put it, were close friends over a thousand years ago. I figured he’d have to be long dead in that case, but Gadora was a master-level wizard, so it wouldn’t be unheard of if he wove his own magic to extend his life. After all, this was the very man who cast Reincarnation on Adalmann to save him.

Adalmann also recognized the name Razen; as he recalled, he was one of Gadora’s primary apprentices. We kept discussing them for a while, and as we did, it was increasingly clear this Gadora wanting to see me was the exact same guy.

“Diablo?”

“Understood. I will arrange a date and time.”

*Such a talented secretary. All I had to do was call his name, and he instantly recognized my intentions. My not-so-talented other secretary had no objections, so I decided to go ahead and give Gadora a tryout.*



With their defeat on Floor 60, Shinji’s party got to experience returning from death for the very first time. They woke up to find a large audience thanking them, cheering them, booing them, even reassuring them that they couldn’t have avoided that loss. Their battles in the labyrinth were broadcast live, and Shinji’s conquest was turning into a popular diversion.

Dungeon challengers, of course, had the right to turn down any recording or broadcast of their exploits—it was a purely optional contract to sign. But Shinji had two reasons to go through with it—one, they got a cut of the broadcast fees; and two, they figured becoming famous would help keep them safe. They were in enemy territory, so if they became known names, it’d be that much harder for someone to assassinate them—and since the contract only allowed

their boss fights to be broadcast, they didn't have to be on edge the entire time.

It looked like the contract would be pretty lucrative for them, besides, so Shinji had no reason to turn it down. The same was true for his companions, so Shinji signed on the dotted line...and the result was this huge crowd greeting them now.

"Boy, that was too bad! Hope you train up a little more and try again!"

"Man, those guys never stood a chance. What kind of monsters *were* those anyway? He swung that sword like it was a twig...and what about that skeleton on the throne? Some kinda legendary monster?"

"It was probably a wight king. The earth-shattering ruler of the dead. Not even an Arch Demon could take him!"

"Whoa. So was that dragon alive or not, though? It didn't *look* like a statue or anything, but if it could've joined the battle, too, I don't think *any* human being had a chance in there."

The questions came hard and fast from the audience. Shinji's party just smiled and waved as they found their way out of there.

"Well, I'm gonna keep my eye on you heroes!"

"You're all gonna be in the record books alongside Sir Masayuki now! If you wanna beat that boss, you better find a way quick while Sir Masayuki's preparing for the war!"

"Yeah, I got money down on you guys doing it, so keep it up!"

The voices remained just as loud behind their backs as they retired to their inn.

Once they reached their room, the three of them flopped down on their beds.

"So now what're we gonna do?" Marc asked.

"Who cares?" an utterly exhausted Shinji replied. "Just lemme rest a bit."

They put everything they had into that boss battle...but it made everything up to Floor 59 look like preschool. On Floor 60, even the non-boss adversaries worked with a clear command structure—the sentient Death Lord they

encountered led a team of fighters into battle. They managed to beat him and make it to the boss chamber, but what ensued in there was just wretched.

“...You gonna report back to Yuuki?”

Zhen’s reminder made Shinji get up. He sat down on the bed, sighing, as Marc and Zhen picked themselves up and sat around him.

“I don’t really know what we *can* report. We had no idea that side-quest zone was gonna be so hard.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t too bad up to Floor 59, but what the hell was up with 60? A Death Lord with a whole platoon of death knights—like, they had a whole *army* loaded up for us in there! Any normal soldier would’ve had his ass kicked in the blink of an eye!”

“I know.”

“...That was awful. Everything got so well defended on that floor. And those three bosses—not just the knight who beat us, but the skeleton on the throne and the dragon... Those *had* to be secret bosses, I think.”

Now they were lost in conversation, too excited to worry too much about each other. The easy-breezy atmosphere up to yesterday had disappeared in under twenty-four hours.

“And that boss sittin’ on the throne... That was a wight king, you know. I guess someone with high-level appraisal magic managed to identify it...but it’s so *different* from how it looks on-screen!”

“One hundred percent,” Marc said in agreement with Shinji. “Having that show up when we were totally unprepared for it... How could we even deal?”

“...Honestly, I never wanna see it again.”

Zhen’s companions were on the same page. And the wight king didn’t even participate in the battle. It didn’t move from the throne—just sat there, exuding royal dignity.

“I mean, that minotaur guy seemed like a ‘regular’ boss, y’know? He was around an A in strength. But wasn’t Floor 60 way too much of a step up?”

“...Yeah. Too much. I’m starting to think everything up to Floor 50 was meant

to put us off our guard.”

“But now I’m really sure of it,” avowed Shinji. “If monsters *that* strong are protecting it, there’s *got* to be something in that maze.”

“Yeah. That Alberto guy was just *way* out of our league.”

“Even his equipment! I tried appraising it while Marc engaged him, but it was all Unique from head to toe.”

“Ah, *that* explains it. I came in figuring my Minos Bardiche could cleave right through all that.”

“I guess weapons you pick up from treasure chests work well on the next boss only in RPGs, huh...?”

“Well, yeah. I think we got too full of ourselves in there.”

“...Yeah.”

They looked at each other and heaved a sigh in unison. Now they were a bit calmer. It was time for some tea and a moment to catch their breath.

“Wanna try again tomorrow?”

“Are you serious?”

“...Not against *them*. We’d lose every time.”

“Yeah...”

“Also, that ‘hero’ talk... Yuuki mentioned Masayuki to us before, right? Like, that kid who has incredible good luck and nothing else? And *he* took on Floor 60?”

“I don’t think he has yet, no. His party advanced down pretty easily as well, but they say he’s never died yet in there.”

“Oh. Has any other party tried it?”

“The chatter I heard said the top runners are all tackling Floor 50 at the moment, but none of them signed broadcast deals, so until now, Masayuki had the best public record. Beyond that, there’s a few broadcasting parties stuck on Floor 40.”

Signing a contract didn't mean you were watched inside the Dungeon at all times. The cameras were only situated in the boss rooms every ten floors, and occasionally camera crews would follow you around for special events and so on. Thus, thanks to being the first team to Floor 60, Shinji's party became the big celebrities of the moment—and with the way they kept rewriting records, people were starting to place bets on them.

"Y'know, I'm willing to bet Masayuki got tipped off. He probably knows Floor 60's home to a secret boss."

"I guess we shoulda expected to lose, then. Like, two guys at *that* level, *plus* a dragon? This labyrinth is *so* unbalanced."

"...It was pretty well-balanced until Floor 50. I really *do* think that was meant as a hidden boss. The hidden town's probably right past that."

So they continued talking and consoling themselves for a while, before moving on to their future plans.

"You know, guys, if we've got crowds cheering for us in this city, I don't think we can really do any kinda spy work."

"Nah, nah, that's not a big problem. Like I said, we're safer this way."

"...All we've done is go into the labyrinth so far."

"So should we wait for Lord Gadora to show up? Because I think we hit a pretty big dead end down there. Or," Marc said with a grin, "you wanna try training or something?"

Shinji chuckled. "Well, there's definitely something past that chamber, and the guardian's way stronger than anything else we saw. I think I can report that much to Yuuki."

"Tell him how big the labyrinth is, too. It must've been magically expanded or something, because it's way too large and deep to be man-made."

"...And don't forget, he was *far* stronger than anything on any other floor."

Shinji meekly nodded at Marc and Zhen. "Right, right. Okay, once I'm done with my report, you guys wanna tour around some more?"

There was no need to spend any more time talking about it. The three of

them mentally flipped the page as they went out into the night.



Their first stop was a secluded spot outside of town, where they made their report as agreed upon. After sending the summary report to Yuuki, they received a magical call from him about ten minutes later.

*"Hey. Glad you're doing okay."*

*"Well, we were until last night, but today was awful for us."*

*"Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, sounds like you guys got your asses kicked. So what are you up to next?"*

*"I think it'll depend on Lord Gadora. We've got no way to pass Floor 60 by ourselves, and the labyrinth's not really set up so we can sneak our way around it."*

*"Yeah, I'm sure. All right. Now, lemme ask you something else..."*

*"Yes?"*

*"Can you go into more detail on just how strong the Floor 60 boss is? Just, like, anything you felt in there is fine."*

Only Shinji and his friends understood the angle of this question. What Yuuki asked, basically, was how high up in the Imperial Guardians this opponent would be.

Shinji thought it over a moment. The imperial army's ranking duels held little interest to him. He didn't care much about working his way up the military ranks, so he had never tried challenging anyone before. He owed Yuuki for picking him up and taking care of him, so he just served him as a way to pay back the debt—in the military, though, since he didn't like lending a hand to organized crime. The moment Yuuki began leading the Composite Division, he transferred over there from his original assignment in the Armored Division.

He wasn't the only otherworlder in the East to think along these lines, either. Quite a few of them avoided making shows out of their power, dodging major responsibilities and just living normal lives. That made it harder to accurately gauge their strength, so nobody could really say whether the Imperial Knights

were truly the strongest or not. They were by name, at least—and in a way, it was natural that they were ranked on such a detailed basis.

*"I'd say he'd at least make it into the top fifty. I don't think anyone lower than that would stand a chance."*

*"Are you talking about Alberto alone?"*

*"Yes. Oh, and I dunno if this helps, but I was deployed as an army medic for an anti-Arch Demon mission once. I only got a quick look at that fight, but the wight king I saw today had pretty much the same magicule count, I think."*

*"Do you mean the Crimson Shore disaster?"*

*"Oh, um, yeah."*

*"Roger. Okay, thanks for the guidance. You guys can go on R & R until you regroup with Lord Gadora."*

With that, the magical call ended.

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The Crimson Shore disaster was considered among the most ignoble events to ever occur on imperial soil. It had its origins in a beautiful lakeside province that rebelled against the Empire and declared independence. They were at a military disadvantage, of course, but what their king did to make up the difference wound up triggering a catastrophe. He had tapped into secret demon-summoning arts—an all but forbidden taboo.

His orders were to summon the most powerful demon they could manage, and his court sorcerers did his bidding. The Arch Demon they summoned wound up laying waste to the entire province.

This was a small province, its total population less than ten thousand, and it had no chance of outgunning the Empire. But the king still had good reason to go rogue—his only daughter, the princess of the realm, was being claimed by an imperial noble as his concubine.

With the Empire being as vast as it was, the emperor didn't waste his time in the nitty-gritty dealings of the tinier provinces. All imperial territory belonged to him, its management left to the nobility, and so nobles had free reign to treat the provinces as they pleased. It was thus common to see a frontier earl use the emperor's authority to act like a brutal tyrant over the region he ruled.

What the demon wanted, however, was the splinter kingdom's princess. The king steadfastly denied this request—but once his head sorcerer caught sight of the demon's full glory, he went mad, his spirit crushed forever, and he agreed to the demand. Thus, with an evil smile, the demon possessed the princess's body. The king was enraged, but that rage was soon replaced with terror—for once the demon had a body, that was when the massacre began.

When the Empire was informed that the province was leveled, they decided to send out a force to subdue this demon. They were fortunate they did, for if they had acted any later, it could have been the birth of a second Guy Crimson.

This force arrived to find the beautiful lake turned a deep shade of red, dyed by the blood of the province's citizens. It was a black mark on the history of the Empire, the worst thing to happen to it in centuries.

It was ultimately the Armored Division, its bases located across the Empire, who put an end to the Crimson Shores incident. That's what the history books said. But the truth—as Shinji was witness to from far away—was that a small group of soldiers defeated the Arch Demon all by themselves.

The whole affair struck Shinji as fishy, really. Clearly, the nobility was oppressing the countryside—but once the demon aimed its terror at the Empire's own citizens, Shinji began to wonder if the truth was as cut-and-dried as reported. For one, the Empire reacted almost *too* quickly. In the time it'd take to report the incident to the imperial mainland, debate over countermeasures, and form an expeditionary force, the demon could've easily completed its full manifestation. Instead, the Empire stopped this just in the nick of time—thus proving, in Shinji's mind anyway, that they were tipped off in advance.

He had no intention of telling anyone else about this. When he saw the strength of the demon his deployment was fighting, it taught him that some

things were better off left unexplored in his life.

*I have to imagine those guys had to be at the top of the Imperial Knights...*

No matter what he did, Shinji doubted he'd ever have a chance against them. It truly felt like they belonged to some other world—and that's when he stopped caring about his army rank.

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Shinji breathed a sigh of relief as Marc and Zhen eyed him carefully.

"You done?" asked Marc.

"...Thanks for handling that," said Zhen.

"Sure. I think that about covers it. Now we get to chill out until Lord Gadora shows."

"All right. But damn, you survived Crimson Shore?"

"...Good thing you did."

"Yeah. By playing possum. One of the better decisions I made in my life, I think."

"Aw, hell, you deserve a medal just for making it out. Didn't like two-thirds of that force get killed off?"

"That's right. I never wanna join anything like that again. I mean, I was an army medic, and I couldn't even *do* anything."

"...Oh?"

"Yeah, every attack killed its targets instantly, so healing didn't matter. That's why I bugged out real early on."

"Wow. That sounds rough. Arch Demons are really that bad?"

"Well, the one *I* saw was. *Beyond* bad. And plus, I swear we made eye contact once, but if you ask me, I think she let me go. Her eyes were, like, bloodred. Just remembering it makes me wanna piss my pants."

Shinji gave his surprised-looking audience a smile.

"But if that skeleton's on the level of an Arch Demon like *that*, there's no way we can take him."

"...It's really on the same level?"

"The magicule counts are anyway. They say that the longer a demon's existed, the stronger they are...and I think the one I saw was pretty old."

It had to be, or else the highest echelons of imperial government wouldn't have taken such drastic action. But Shinji stopped himself from saying that.

"But there's no point dwelling on it. I heard they're working on a machine that can tabulate the power of your adversary, but I don't really see the point. Even that knight Alberto—based on his magicules, I can't even imagine how strong he is. And do you remember back in our classes? How good you were in a fight involved a lot more than just how strong you were."

"Right. I get what you're sayin'."

"...Yeah."

"*That* sort of thing. Some demons are just beyond anything we can measure. That's all I want you to remember."

The way Shinji put it, they couldn't even begin to work on that level. The other two took that to heart.

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With the worst of the day behind them, the trio hurried over to the Free Guild office before it closed and sold their magic crystals and extra equipment to the resource department.

"Whoa, these crystals are from really deep down, aren't they? The quality's completely different."

"Another slotted weapon? And *pure* magisteel? They'd never let these out in *public* in other countries."

The Guild staff members were pretty impressed. Shinji's party could've fetched higher prices if they shopped around, but they were here on an undercover investigation, so they didn't want to expand their social network

*that* much. Besides, the Guild paid well enough. Their mission was at a standstill, but the past few days alone ensured they were *damn* well funded, at least.

In the army, they were paid an annual salary, all in advance; if you got promoted in rank, you'd receive the difference in salary the following year. Even if you were penniless upon enlistment, you'd get a reserve fund based on how many days remained in the year. Thus you really couldn't lose money in the military—even if you died in combat, the advance salary would be treated as part of your family's consolation payout.

Foot soldiers ranked up to private received a base salary of around ten gold coins, equivalent to approximately ten thousand dollars a year. The army covered your room, board, and clothing, so this pay was still a blessing for the lower classes. To this, enlisted men could add rank pay, hazard pay, and a lot of other side bonuses, depending on their duties.

Marc and Zhen were both first lieutenants, while Shinji was a major with a medic qualification. None of them had the authority to give orders, but their rank still afforded them a few nice perks. Otherworlders, in general, were treated well in the Empire—at least on the level of a second lieutenant—but Shinji was ranked higher than his companions.

Regardless, though, all of them were on a much higher pay scale than rank-and-file infantry. A first lieutenant's rank earned them thirty-six gold coins, while a major netted forty-four—every rank promotion meant an extra four golds a year. Combined with the base pay and other income, Marc's and Zhen's yearly salaries were around fifty golds, while Shinji's usually broke seventy.

A military salary gave you an income above the imperial average, but you still weren't living like a tycoon. You'd be rich by rural standards, but in the capital, the cost of living was sky-high. Still, life could be tough in this world if you decided to go it by yourself. Having a stable career, whether in the military or elsewhere, was a godsend.

Now, though, this trio knew better. They didn't need to cling to the army at all. They could just live in that city within the labyrinth, and they'd be just fine.

Their confidence chiefly stemmed from the fact that today's trip to the Guild

alone earned them over *three hundred* gold coins. That well outpaced what a year in the army would earn them all combined. That, and unless the Empire handed it out to them, they'd never have a chance at scoring Unique-class equipment in their lives. It was a huge windfall.

All three of them realized this well enough, but all three hesitated to say it out loud. They kept their silence as they headed to their next destination.

Once in Rimuru, the monster city, they chose a fairly high-end restaurant for dinner, enjoying the kind of luxury they hadn't experienced in ages.

"...Is this really okay?" Zhen timidly asked. "Selling equipment like that?"

Shinji and Marc were unmoved.

"Of course it is! We didn't sell *all* of it. We kept some samples."

"Yeah, and it's not like we can take it all home anyway. As long as we keep the good stuff, nobody's gonna complain."

Unless they received permission to loot it, anything procured during a military operation belonged to the armed forces. In this case, none of them would have any right to protest if everything they earned was taken away. At the same time, though, they were asked to investigate the labyrinth. They were posing as adventurers, and selling booty on the market was perfectly normal adventurer behavior. It seemed safe to take this as a nice side benefit. Besides, it's not like Yuuki would demand this stuff from them anyway—he was bound to let Shinji's party have it all, except for what he personally needed.

"But y'know... If they *do* confiscate all the money we've made, you gotta start seriously thinkin' about moving here, don'tcha?"

Shinji finally said it first. Nobody disagreed.

One gold coin is equivalent to around a thousand dollars, a ballpark conversion that applied just as well in the Empire as it did here. Minted in the Dwarven Kingdom, they circulated around the world, and the Empire recognized them as official currency. Whatever they earned here, they could bring home and use like any other money.

"I think that's totally doable."

"...Yeah. I was just joking about it earlier, but now I feel like working here would be a lot more fun."

Shinji only half meant it, but Marc and Zhen were more up for it than he anticipated.

Yes, the Empire was on the cutting edge of culture and technology. It boasted a fine capital, the food was good, and they lived comfortably. As long as they had money, they could enjoy life well enough, even compared with their former world. But they were in the military, and that always came with the potential for death.

Meanwhile, the Dungeon offered everything they could possibly want. You never worried about dying—something they didn't quite believe at first, but now that they'd experienced it once, they were convinced. And if death wasn't a concern, wouldn't it be better to just earn what they could in there and party it up in town? That was the conclusion Shinji and his friends made, and no one could blame them for it.

Money, of course, was meaningless without entertainment, something the monster city of Rimuru offered lots of. There was a battle arena open to the public when events weren't taking place, giving citizens a nice, well-maintained space to play and relax. Sports like soccer and baseball were starting to spread, and some of the dungeon runners were forming teams. And then there were the hot springs—and the theaters, which housed a flourishing drama scene that played to big crowds on a regular basis, something they already witnessed for themselves. The food was just as good—no, even *better* than the Empire's, featuring familiar Japanese specialties, desserts, and a dizzying range of adult beverages. They were re-creating cuisines that didn't even exist in this realm, and an Earth native like Shinji found it all hopelessly attractive.

Plus, when you really got down to it, their only obligation was to Yuuki—and Yuuki didn't look like he wanted conflict with the demon lord Rimuru. It didn't even seem like they'd be betraying anyone if they moved here.

"I know desertion gets us the death penalty. But we're not at war, are we? Not yet anyway."

"Right? I was just thinking about that, too, Shinji. 'Cause we can still request a

discharge, yeah?"

"...That'll depend on Yuuki."

Desertion was a crime only when the nation was in a state of war. That didn't apply at the moment, luckily. Depending on how you interpreted this, an honorable discharge still seemed possible.

"But the problem," muttered Marc, "is this war."

That was the whole reason they couldn't commit to abandoning the Empire. War was obviously looming on the horizon, ready to rise up on them, and it'd leave its scars across this entire region. If it weren't for *that*, they'd be house hunting right now.

"Who do you think's gonna win?"

"...Like, before that, if we're ordered to attack this city, what're we gonna do?"

The trio exchanged glances. It was an excellent dinner, but suddenly it tasted bland to them. Attacking the city was the last thing they wanted, in a couple of ways.

Shinji's group had stayed here only a little while, but they really liked it. They'd hate it if this city got wiped off the map. That was one reason. The second—as their imaginations ominously suggested—was that if the labyrinth bosses were any indication, the strongest of Tempestian fighters had to be absolute beasts.

"I mean, of course they're gonna have someone really strong defending their important facilities, right?" said Marc. "But their troops have to be weaker than that. Or I guess we *hope* they are, huh?"

"I agree," Shinji replied with a nod. "I think once you get to the level of Rimuru, at least, it's a whole other ball game. There's a story about how Veldora razed an entire city long ago, and now I *really* don't think that's a joke at all. I mean, that wight king could do it, even."

The monsters who called Tempest home certainly seemed capable of disasters like that.

"You know, the way I see it, Arch Demons are kind of like nuclear weapons back home. They've got nuclear magic here, even."

"Yeah. 'Cause we've seen how war is all about numbers...but with a boss like *that*, all the numbers in the world wouldn't do a thing."

"...You'd need dozens of fighters as good as us to stand a chance."

All of them scowled...and the magical call from Gadora came shortly afterward.



An elderly man was prostrated before me. Behind him, the trio I had been watching on the control room's big screen were following his lead.

The man's name was Gadora, the very one who went through Diablo and Razen to request an audience with me. He wasn't gaudily dressed, but he had an expensive-looking magic robe on, his eyes sharp enough that I doubted his age a little.

Shingee, as I surmised, was actually named Shinji—Shinji Tanimura, to be exact. The other two put their real names on the processing form. All three were apparently assigned to Gadora here, a master sorcerer; they usually worked under Yuuki but were serving as assistants to Gadora in their current investigations.

They had explained all this to me, and after Gadora was done, he took *this* pose, Shinji and the gang copying him. We weren't gonna get anywhere like this.

"Yeah, um... That's about what I figured with you guys, I guess. But we can't really get comfortable and talk if you're posing like *that*, okay? Let's move somewhere else."

Shion nodded. "Lift your heads," she intoned, sounding grumpy for some reason. This is why I *hate* royal audiences like this—I know I'm gonna mess up my manners somehow. I'd prefer to just skip the whole thing.

"A-as you wish!!"

Given all that exaggerated shouting, I was starting to dread our meeting.

So we relocated to a reception room—a plainer one. I tended to prefer this one; over in the fancier chamber, the furniture and stuff were so high-end that I was afraid I'd break or ruin something. One false move with a full teacup, and it'd be liable to stain the fancy carpet we had in there. In my heart, I was still just another common peon, and I preferred surroundings within my means. It appeared Shinji's party was the same way; they looked a bit more cheerful than before.

"Which do you like more," I casually asked, "tea or coffee?"

"Uh, um, coffee, please."

"*Shinjiiii!!!*" Gadora shouted. I spent a few moments calming him down.

"And you, Gadora?"

"M-me? Well, um, I'll have what Shinji's having."

Oh? Don't they have coffee in the Empire? I figured they would, but maybe there's not that much in circulation. Turning toward Marc and Zhen, they simply nodded back at me—they were okay with the same thing, I supposed.

"Okay, four American blends, Shuna!"

"A-American?!" Gadora yelped.

"Oh, did you want something stronger? Dark roast, maybe? Or you wanna try it Tempest style?"

"N-no, um, I didn't mean it like that, but... Ah..."

"Oh?"

"S-Sir Rimuru, would you happen to be...an otherworlder?"

"Um, yeah...?"

*That's the question he has? Because if so, he clearly hasn't done his homework.* I sized the four of them up, but only Gadora had an "oh crap" look on his face. I guess the other three knew but forgot to tell him. Ah well.

"Now, how about we get down to business?"

Shuna laid out the coffee cups on the table, along with enough milk and sugar for everyone. Leaving Shinji and his friends to watch in wonder at this, I decided

to address Gadora first. He gave Shinji a spiteful look after he exclaimed “Oh, this coffee’s really good!” but I was kind enough to overlook this.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I am something of a veteran reincarnate as well.”

...Hmm. Lord Gadora certainly kicked things off with a bombshell. The other three turned toward him, looking just as surprised.

Apparently Gadora, in his mission to master the magical arts, had reincarnated himself many times over an untold number of years. With every rebirth, he’d read through the secret libraries of this or that royal palace, allowing him to build a vast store of knowledge. He came to know Adalmann in the midst of this clandestine sorcery research, and the two became close friends.

“As I mentioned earlier, I had a personal vendetta against the Western Holy Church—one I kindled after my best friend Adalmann was killed. Thus, over the course of centuries, I crafted my plans and coaxed the Empire into doing my bidding.”

Gadora gave me his personal history. After Adalmann was put into a trap, he swore revenge, headed into the Empire alone, and gradually built up his reputation. He had experienced battle against Veldora as well—certainly, he’d led a far more eventful life than I thought.

“In hindsight, I’m honestly glad I completed my reincarnation ritual before we challenged him. I always wanted to see for myself the ultimate in evil, the worst nature could create...”

Only four True Dragons had ever been born. They sat at the precipice of monster-dom, the most powerful beings on the planet. Based on his experience battling one of them, he didn’t think the imperial army was likely to ever beat Veldora. He was, of course, saying this *right in front* of the guy, who was already shooting me gleeful sidelong glances. I wish he’d stop. Yeah, it’s amazing and all, but it’s not like I was obliged to keep praising him over it.

“I do think, mind you, that we could have scored a tactical victory against Sir Veldora. But those fools in the Empire insisted on trying to win that beast over to our side. I warned them, time and time again, that it was an impossible waste of time.”

Gadora's interests were fixed squarely upon the West and his revenge against Luminism, and he didn't want to waste good soldiers on pointless campaigns. He attempted to prevail upon his superiors how unrealistic their hopes were, but the commanders refused to listen, overvaluing themselves far too much.

Hearing all this, Gadora sounded like a pretty stand-up guy. But Gadora was also the one who fanned the Empire's lust for expansion, it seemed. I asked him to spare me all the details and skip to more recent trends.

"So for the most part, the Empire's trying to start a war because of you?"

"That... That's part of it, you could say..."

No, old man—you can try talking your way around it, but you *had* to be the cause. He quickly began making excuses, perhaps sensing my displeasure.

"But... But no! The Empire has *always* had that will to dominate, you see. If I didn't give that lust for power a direction, they would've fanned the flames of war all over the world. All I did was turn their eyes toward the West. Their goals matched with mine, you could say. It was a good arrangement...I thought..."

Oh, like hell it was! And now we're mixed up in it for no reason?

"And let me tell you, I was against invading the Forest of Jura. It is the domain of Sir Veldora, the Storm Dragon, and I didn't want to repeat our mistakes from before. I suggested they devote their efforts toward scheming against the Dwarven Kingdom instead, but they can be so stubborn, all of them. They try to use military might to solve all their problems..."

Gadora sounded pained about it. I didn't care.

"Wait a minute! So the Empire *does* want to hit the Dwarven Kingdom?!"

I had pretty much discounted it. But did we need to consider a campaign route through Dwargon after all?

"You thought about that, too? Well, it's nothing as concrete as wanting to 'hit' them, exactly. My suggestion was to propose an alliance with King Gazel, so he'd allow us to march through the kingdom. My only grudge was with the Western Holy Church, remember..."

The old sorcerer was already aware that Adalmann was safe. They would be

meeting after our talk was done—and that's why Gadora, realizing just how badly he whiffed on all of this, had switched to an antiwar stance. He was on friendly terms with the emperor, he claimed, but not even he could ask him to withdraw their military plans. Instead, he kept pleading his case against the war in subsequent government-level meetings.

This attitude seemed a little too convenient for my tastes, but if Gadora could help us avoid war, I was willing to bite my tongue. Either way, I wanted to get as much out of him as I could right now. As I did, Benimaru and my other officers were in the next room over, listening in and holding their own strategic conference. My job was to make Gadora as comfortable—and loose-lipped—as possible.

"I imagine King Gazel turned you down, huh?"

"As one would expect, I suppose. Some of our commanders considered an assassination attempt, but I spoke up against that. If we were prepared to do *that*, I said, we may as well crush them with an all-out assault!"

It didn't strike me as anything to be proud of. He was more of a warmonger than I thought.

I rolled my eyes a bit but kept extracting more info from him. The Empire's military structure, the thoughts of their leading officers...even the astonishing news that Yuuki was planning a coup. All this assured me that I was getting pretty much everything Gadora could provide.

Finally, seemingly at ease, Gadora opened up to me.

"Let me assure you, Sir Rimuru, that I bear no particular sense of duty toward the Empire. They broke up the army division I personally built from scratch and took all my men away from me. This group with me—Shinji, Marc, and Zhen—are my personal apprentices, so I'm allowed to turn to them as needed. But in the end, if Adalmann is alive and well...or um, *well*, at least...then I have no attachment left to the Empire."

He was an egocentric, self-centered old man, not a shred of loyalty in his heart, and he wasn't afraid to admit it. I had to hand it to him—I wasn't about to say it out loud, but I kind of respected that attitude.

"So with that in mind, Sir Rimuru, if I may have the honor of joining your cause, I am ready to exert myself as best as I can!"

Right after admitting his utter lack of loyalty, he was courageous enough to ask for a spot in my administration. I gotta admit, I liked the guy. But Benimaru and some others were in the next room hearing all this. I could already picture them losing their temper over Gadora's attitude. It was gonna be hard to calm them down later.

Still, that didn't stop me from bringing Gadora on as a guest adviser, albeit on a probationary basis. If he wanted to join me, I'd make him work for the right. He certainly wasn't gonna be too loyal to me, but I'd see how he could pitch in.

For now, I was okay with him meeting Adalmann and using a Transport spell to access Floor 70. His knowledge could help us out a lot—maybe he could assist Ramiris. But before he settled down in Tempest, I planned to have him return to the Empire and do a little job for me.

As for Shinji and company, I'd allow them to remain here in Tempest. They told me they'd take it easy for a while as they figured out what they wanted to do. This was their request, made under Gadora's advice, and I had no reason to turn it down. If they turned traitor, I could always banish them—but I guess they *really* didn't want that, because they readily pledged their loyalty to me. However, they also professed a great respect for Yuuki and asked not to be involved in any hostilities against him. I was okay with that.

"Really," I said, "the relationship between us and Yuuki's people is so complicated. We kinda have a truce for the moment is the way I'd put it. He's pissed me off a lot, and I'd like to get back at him, honestly, but I can't really will myself to hate his guts, either."

Despite it all, Yuuki was still Shizu's student. And whenever I recalled how happy Shizu seemed when she talked about him, I couldn't help but cut the guy some slack. Maybe I was too soft on him, but hey, we're fellow countrymen. There'd be no more second chances, but for now, I'd put our past history on ice. If you asked me to *trust* him, however, that was another story. Trusting *that* bastard at this point was nothing but a death wish.

"And you know, guys, I don't think *you* should trust Yuuki too much, either."

Gadora nodded at this, interestingly enough. Guess he had his own thoughts about Yuuki, too. They were acquaintances and partners at one point, so maybe Gadora could be a good go-between for us. I was starting to think recruiting him was a pretty smart idea. If *he* didn't excessively trust Yuuki, either, I could at least believe him on that point.

Later, I reunited Gadora with Adalmann, the two of them fondly reminiscing. Adalmann consented to take him in, so for the time being, I'd let them live together.

But before he did...now that I had all the info I wanted from Gadora, I ordered him to return to the Empire and follow my instructions. First, he'd advocate against the war for me.

"You think you can do that?"

"By all means, Sir Rimuru. I am used to behind-the-scenes maneuvering, trust me."

I'm sure he was. But normally, it'd be impossible for a single person to stop the will of an entire state. It's not that I didn't believe Gadora, but I figured it best to give him a plan B as well.

"If you can stop the war, that'd be best...but from what I'm hearing, that sounds like an uphill battle. You said the Empire's got an expansionist streak, right? If they're on the move, we can't really stop them now."

"But..."

"So if that winds up not working out, I want you to point 'em at this labyrinth."

"How do you mean?"

In the labyrinth, we could take all the casualties in the world and still not have a problem. That led me to this idea.

"I see... So you'd use the labyrinth to chip away at the imperial forces and break their morale?"

"Pretty much. And I'm sure Yuuki's gonna use that opportunity to act as well. If he starts a riot back home, the Empire can't really keep a war going, can

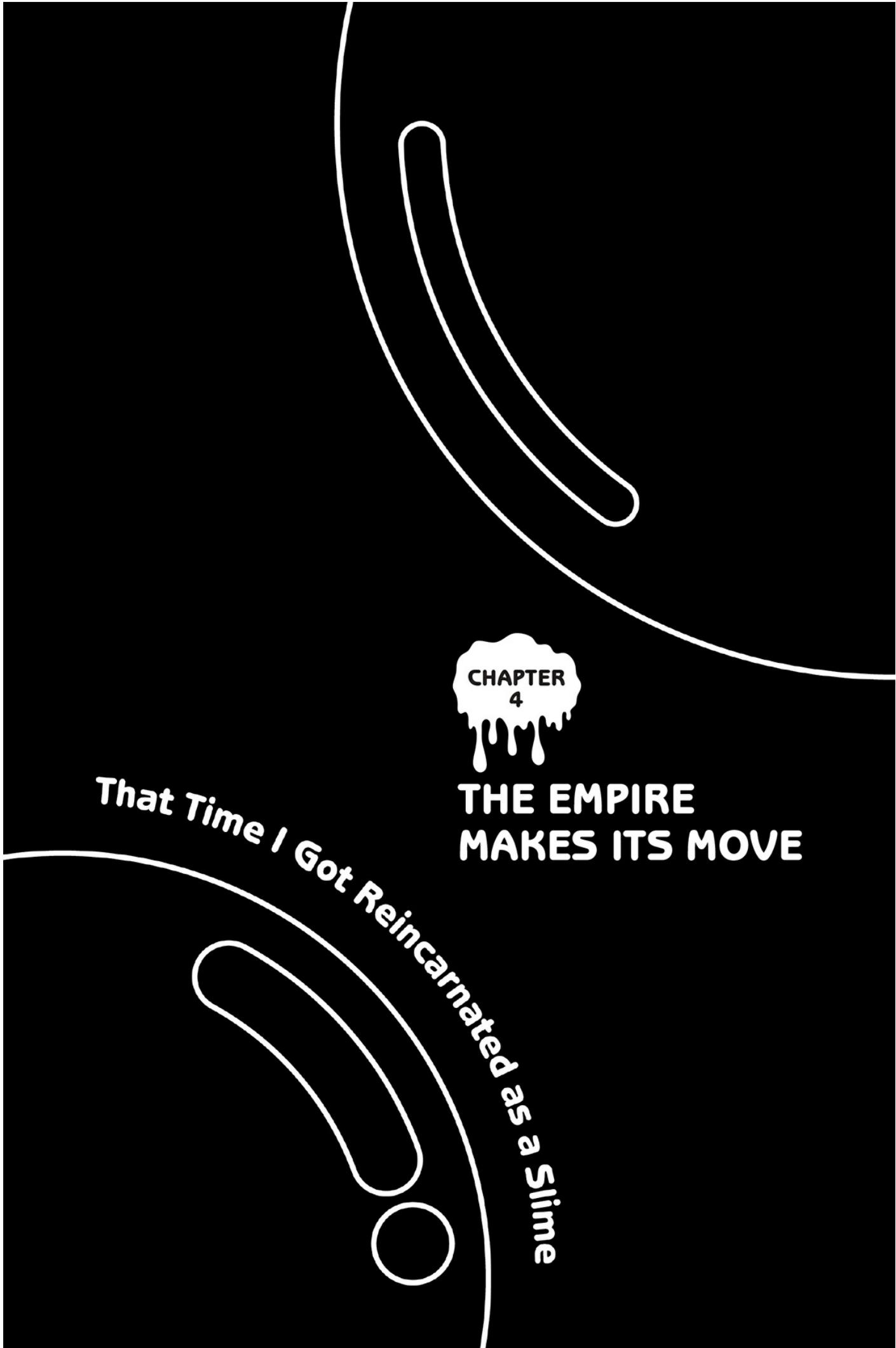
they?"

I wasn't sure how well it'd all work out—but in the labyrinth, at least, we were guaranteed not to lose anyone. I explained all this to Gadora, giving him some labyrinth equipment and three Resurrection Bracelets. He could use this, I figured, to sell the Dungeon to the commanders for us. No army wanted to be attacked from the rear. I doubted they were going to ignore the labyrinth and march on to the West, but if we could dangle some rewards in front of their eyes...

"Ah, I understand. A very astute way of thinking—and I know a few commanders greedy enough to take the bait. I think you can expect results from this scheme, Sir Rimuru."

So Gadora accepted it with full confidence. If possible, we'd stop the war. If not, we'd divert them into the labyrinth. The rest was up to him.

Thus I granted Gadora and his three apprentices asylum—and with these new, unexpected allies, the incident came to a close.



*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
4

# THE EMPIRE MAKES ITS MOVE

## CHAPTER 4

### THE EMPIRE MAKES ITS MOVE

The Empire had a mystery man among its ranks. His name was Tatsuya Kondo—an otherworlder who knew everything there was to know about the imperial underground. He was the imperial capital's darkness itself.

Tatsuya kept his black hair short and tidy, his bangs flowing gently down toward his eyes, and he had a relaxed, if well-honed, manner of carrying himself. On the surface, he seemed like a nice young man, still in his early twenties. But on the inside, he was cold and calculating, eyes glinting from his barren face. They seemed sharp enough to see through anyone they looked at—not friendly, but clever and cunning. It was only to be expected...for First Lieutenant Kondo wasn't at all the age he seemed.

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Here in the imperial capital, otherworlders were not too uncommon a sight. The Empire pledged to safeguard them, and they had been collected from all around the world. Tatsuya was one such person rescued by this plan...and it entirely had to do with the magic that existed in this realm.

Over seventy years ago, Tatsuya risked his life for the sake of his country and served in a special military operation—a kamikaze squadron ordered to strike enemy naval fleets. Tatsuya had no comment on the need for this mission. Looking back on how things were those days, all he thought was, well, there was nothing else he could do. He just looked back at the men who lived and died serving under him and hoped he could find some kind of meaning in their actions.

Even now, he never forgot about them. And to make sure of that—so he could continue living with the memory of his comrades—he retained the same rank of first lieutenant that he held back then.

So Tatsuya had headed off to his death—but with a flash of explosive heat and light, he instead found himself in another world. He felt death at arm's length, but rather he survived.

It was the emperor himself who saved Tatsuya. Luck was on Tatsuya's side that day.

He appeared in a garden accessible by only the emperor and a few close associates. The emperor happened to be relaxing there that very moment.

*"How interesting,"* Tatsuya heard a voice say. *"Perhaps this is fate at work."* Then he passed out, and when he woke up, he was completely intact, not a scratch on him. His luck had saved his life—the same life he'd once abandoned, which he now swore to use to repay the emperor's kindness. All the powers he awoke to after his journey across worlds, and his brush with death, he gave to the emperor. That remained true to this very day.

He never appeared on the public stage. He never aged, looking exactly as he did back then. And there, in the imperial intelligence office nestled in the capital's shadow, deep in the Empire's darkness, he could be found.

A mysterious figure stalking the halls of information; a man hidden behind the Empire's shadow. A human; a wrangler of evil.

Tatsuya Kondo went by many monikers. He was the head of the Imperial Information Bureau, and he was feared as a question mark—one not even the commander of each division could ignore.

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The IIB had picked up information that Gadora sent a team led by Shinji to conquer the Dungeon.

"Ah. I see. Good work."

First Lieutenant Kondo was a quiet man. He said no more than that. His informant, used to this treatment, saluted and left—Kondo was never one to state his thoughts to others.

The report submitted to him contained detailed information on Yuuki's men. Over a thousand otherworlders had been collected from around the world. A little under a tenth of them had awoken to zero unique skills; these men and women were set up in the imperial capital and allowed to live their lives in peace. A little over a tenth had battle-oriented unique skills; they numbered over a hundred, and each was assigned to the division that best suited their abilities. The rest were referred to nonmilitary professions based on their skill set, finding useful work in a vast variety of professions.

Right then, the problem was that the otherworlders awakened to battle skills. Yuuki Kagurazaka was the founder of the Free Guild in the Western Nations, serving as grand master until a year ago, and he harnessed that power to rescue otherworlders. That, at least, was how Yuuki described himself, but the IIB already knew that was a lie.

Trends indicated that he had grown friendly with the Rozzo family, taking advantage of their influence. The IIB knew that the West was proceeding with an illicit, forbidden summoning program that had led to large numbers of otherworlders in their lands. There was no other explanation for why they had so many battle-oriented ones in their possession. Through the use of a locking curse, it was also possible to force the summoned into an irreversible oath of loyalty. These summons were the best way to build a team that was guaranteed never to betray you—and now those otherworlders were deployed in a variety of militaries.

Kondo saw this as grave news. An imminent danger. He had consummate perception skills and an intuition that was truly fearsome. And Kondo was right to be concerned. The results were revealed in this report—based on his words and actions since moving to the Empire, the Imperial Information Bureau believed there was a high probability that Yuuki was going to launch a coup attempt.

They also had a list of the people Yuuki had tapped for the effort. Based on his achievements, the Empire had accepted his request for asylum, but he didn't

seem to appreciate it much. Instead, he did his own thing, working hard to expand his power and putting his handpicked associates into each army division. Several of them had even been appointed Imperial Knights, one of the Empire's highest honors. The army division was one thing, but allowing traitors into the Imperial Guardians—the force built to protect His Majesty the Emperor—simply wasn't allowable.

Kondo could no longer let this slide. *This is dangerous*, he decided. *Yuuki Kagurazaka, you are clearly someone who deserves to be eliminated.*

Now, however, was not the time to act. Lord Gadora, master sorcerer and one of the most powerful people in the Empire, was reportedly connected to Yuuki. They had evidence to back up this report, but it was unclear just how deep this relationship was. Lord Gadora's importance to the Empire went without saying. Kondo doubted he'd turn traitor on a passing whim—but he also knew that he worked alongside the Empire chiefly because his goals matched the state's ideals. Perhaps, then, some trigger might put his goals in conflict with the Empire.

*If it ever does, that old man is just as dangerous. In which case...*

Yuuki...and Gadora.

Yuuki looked like just a boy, but his actions indicated the touch of an experienced man. Like Kondo himself, he was too dangerous a subject to judge on looks alone. Gadora looked like an aged man, but he was much more than that—a living monster, really, having lived for over a thousand years. Anyone who wanted to oppose him couldn't go in with a halfhearted approach.

So it was time to gather information. They had evidence, but there still wasn't enough intel. For now, it was too early to move out in the open. He would carefully investigate each of Yuuki's otherworlders and examine whether any had locking curses upon them.

But if Yuuki or Gadora made any suspicious moves...

"...Don't expect a public trial."

First Lieutenant Kondo, the man hidden behind the Empire's shadow, would never give mercy to traitors.

"Dance on, won't you, for the sake of the Empire. Both of you are already in my hands."

There, in the darkness of the Empire, Kondo softly whispered to himself, a cold light in his eyes.



Inside an office with an ornate desk, a one-eyed man was seated in a luxuriant chair. A patch covered his left eye; he was skinny and appeared in his forties. His name was Caligulio, and he was commander of the Armored Division, the most powerful force in the Empire.

On the desk before him were several magic crystals—pure, high-quality examples, known sources of magical energy. With technology provided by Yuuki, these crystals—taken from the cores of monsters—could be refined into magistones, turning them into a reliable, mass-produced magic source.

Monsters would occasionally drop natural magistones, but these could only be collected from those ranked A and above—and having the huge magicule count to prove it. These natural magistones were unparalleled in quality, most often used as decoration or magic catalysts than for their content. Unless one had a steady supply of them, they were useless as an energy source.

Caligulio reached out and grabbed a magic crystal from the desk. The more he observed it, the more he realized just how high-quality it was. He put it back down, already missing the feeling of it in his hand, and picked up the report that came with these specimens.

It was from their research lab. It stated that magic crystals of this quality could each produce a hundred Empire-made magistones. They were pure enough to turn into energy as is, and naturally collecting crystals of this standard would require at least a B-rank monster.

"Damn you, Gadora! Keeping such a moneymaking opportunity under your hat..."

Caligulio was angry. He had paid off the researchers, telling them to inform him of any developments, and this report was the result. Gadora had only just brought in these magic crystals; he didn't say where they were collected, but

based on their number, Caligilio surmised he stumbled across a monster nest. They were first-rate specimens, after all, and testing indicated they all contained around the same amount of energy. You couldn't see this consistency from harvesting different species at once—some variance would be unavoidable, and you'd have to refine them into magistones for practicality's sake.

No, these magic crystals were surprisingly similar in quality, indicating they all came from the same species of monster. Caligilio didn't expect to be able to tame these monsters (whatever they were) and raise them in captivity, but even regularly scheduled culls would help the Empire shore up its energy mix.

However, it appeared things were far more complicated.

Caligilio's face twisted into a longing grin. The report concluded that securing whatever hunting ground produced these magic crystals would put them a long way toward a steady energy supply. And they had more than a vague idea where these monsters lived. In fact, they had the exact spot—the heavily rumored Dungeon, located within the demon lord Rimuru's domain.

"That damned old man's been giving too much attention to that kid Yuuki. I hardly see him any longer. How *dare* he try to hoard this opportunity for himself!"

This was the origin of Caligilio's annoyance.

And that wasn't all. A high-level noble he was on good terms with informed him of a rather interesting story. He, along with many of his kin, didn't bother hiding their glee when they told him that Gadora had gone off to investigate this Dungeon—and lost three of his apprentices to it.

This would normally elicit little more than a bit of sympathy, but what Gadora brought back was the problem. It turns out he didn't just come home with magic crystals—he brought treasure, too. Among them was a sword currently decorating Caligilio's office, a pristine example of magisteel make that clearly required great skill to forge. It was a truly excellent piece, one only the finest artisans of the Dwarven Kingdom were capable of—in fact, considering the metal's purity, it was even better than that. Nothing circulating within the Empire compared.

Caligulio had purchased this sword from his well-placed noble friend, part of a set of three, one of which he already handed over to this division's technical department. The noble boasted about how it was "*a rare find, perhaps infused with some mysterious power,*" and he encouraged Caligulio to invest in them—even though Gadora had presented them to the noble at no charge. Caligulio asked why Gadora gave them away for free, and the noble demurred—"You know *I can't tell you*," he had bragged.

So the commander paid a total of three hundred gold coins, a hundred per blade. Even he was curious about them, and after purchasing the set, the noble finally agreed to give him a few hints.

Caligulio himself was from lower-level nobility, making it up to division commander exclusively through talent. Since the Empire was a pure meritocracy, he technically outranked the upper-crust noble he got the swords from, since *his* title was based on birthright alone. Normally, he wouldn't give someone like Caligulio the time of day—but thanks to his rank, he had to at least feign politeness.

*I'm sure he's still turning up his nose at me, but that doesn't matter. Right now, I need to figure out how to exploit them for all they've got.*

The upper nobility never took action unless they stood to gain something from it. None of them were soft enough to tell him anything out of the goodness of their hearts. No, there must've been some cold number-crunching behind their reaching out and telling him about Gadora's findings. Essentially, they had put Caligulio and Yuuki on opposite sides of the scale.

"I can't believe how utterly greedy those nobles are! But look at *you*, Gadora. How dare you lobby the nobility to send the Composite Division to capture the labyrinth! You could have recommended *my* division, but *noooo...* I can't believe he's still sore about me taking the Armored Division from him..."

The Armored Division had just completed a major modernization campaign, thanks to Gadora's support. Its head count had grown tens to hundreds of times over, but Gadora had absolutely no command over it. Caligulio was sure Gadora envied him for that.

"But fine. My noble informants were certainly a stroke of good luck. Now I

can give them all the slip and claim this prize for my force.”

Winning over the upper-crust nobility, of course, came at a price. If Caligulio *did* claim that prize, a decent percentage of it would have to go into their pockets. But he still didn’t think it was a bad deal.

*This labyrinth produces more than just magic crystals. This sword is simply excellent—Rare class now, maybe Unique class in a hundred years. Even faster, perhaps, given how much magisteel they used. This alone proves how valuable the labyrinth would be in my hands!*

That was why Caligulio went through the effort of winning over the nobles.

Now he was thinking about how he’d continue to fund this effort, going forward—but in the back of his mind, there was one nagging doubt.

*...But what could that slot be for anyway?*

The well-placed noble mentioned a “mysterious power,” and he was sure that was straight from Gadora’s mouth. Caligulio couldn’t detect anything like that—but the empty slot on the hilt intrigued him. What could it mean? He had no way of telling. That’s why he gave one to his technical department, but their analysis wasn’t done yet.

*Of course, unlike in the West, the sword era’s well and truly over in the Empire anyway...*

He was right. No matter what kind of value was locked inside this sword, it meant little to his modernized division. Only a well-trained warrior could get much use out of it—one like Caligulio himself or his close advisers. That was why he couldn’t wait to hear the results.

A few days later, Caligulio received an astonishing report.

“Allow me to explain,” said his chief technician, who came over to deliver the analysis in person. Following a scientific examination, they had discovered quite a few things. For one, the slot wasn’t a design touch. It was an energy absorption device, a vehicle for the efficient production of magic. This wasn’t a sword at all—it was really more of a magic launcher.

“This is from the demon lord Rimuru? ...Then we sure can’t make light of him,

no. What an interesting idea.”

“Absolutely so. I believe it’s meant to confuse opponents into believing it’s a close-range weapon, only to surprise them with magic. And if the right energy supply is inserted into a slot, the caster—or the wielder, I suppose, in this case—can cast magic with no effort at all.”

Yes, the most unique aspect of this weapon was how it let people nonsensitive to magic cast their own spells. It just flew in the face of common sense.

“But,” the chief technician asked, “are you sure this was discovered inside the labyrinth?”

“Yes, we’re sure about that. I sent some of my own men to the scene, and they backed up everything Gadora told us.”

Caligulio had sent a team of his own to the monster city of Rimuru to gather intel on the labyrinth. Their investigation hit a brick wall around the Floor 40 region, but a merchant gave them an interesting bit of info. Apparently these slotted weapons were discovered inside the labyrinth, and while they went at a premium on the market, they were still cheaper than Unique-class arms.

“So what are they for...?”

“Hmph! Think about it a little. We only approve a new weapon after extensive testing, don’t we?”

The chief technician was an intelligent man, but not at all a tactician. Only when Caligulio spelled it out for him did he understand their usefulness.

“Ah, I see... So they’re putting them in the hands of that massive crowd of adventurers and having them examine their performance? That *does* make logical sense. When we placed a magistone into this slot, the sword immediately went up a rank and became a powerful magic sword, but we don’t think their utility ends there. They’d need to experiment a great deal more to gain a full picture of it. I’m sure it would take them years.”

“Right! So instead, they’re more or less passing ‘em out at random and letting the masses test them. And once they have all the data they need, I’m sure they’re planning to take them all back.”

Caligilio had, to some extent, accurately read Rimuru's motives. Based on his own experience, he knew an experiment like this would take time to conduct. For now, these were strictly test weapons—but it'd still be dangerous to let them buy any more time. Humans were strange and interesting creatures; some of them had a knack for stumbling upon the kernel of something brilliant, especially those who willingly exposed themselves to danger.

"It really is a smart idea," he mused. "Literally conducting human experiments in a lab where nobody would ever die."

"We were told this bracelet was required for that, but our analysis hasn't produced any reportable results yet. If the rumors about that are true, it'd certainly be a boon to military training, wouldn't it?"

The chief technician took out a carefully sealed box and showed it to Caligilio. Inside was a Resurrection Bracelet, one of the treasures Gadora brought back.

"I'm sure this example's a fake, of course. Regardless, if our army can capture this labyrinth..."

If it did, and discovered this bracelet system to be the truth, the results for his force would be beyond substantial.

"Hohh... You are an ambitious man, Sir Caligilio. But are you prepared to fight a demon lord over it?"

"Of course I am. It'd be a bad move to challenge him for no reason, but the Forest of Jura is right in the middle of our invasion route, and this labyrinth's at a spot we can't possibly ignore. *Someone* has to capture it."

"Hee-hee-hee... Well, it's all in how you frame it, I suppose."

They exchanged a chuckle over this.

"Think about it, after all. In one fell swoop, we can secure a stable magic crystal supply and an efficient test space—and maybe the enemy's latest new weapons, if all goes well."

"In that case, it's imperative the Armored Division captures it before someone else does, isn't it, Sir Caligilio?"

"No need to remind me. You can expect big news before long."

The chief technician gave this a pleased smile. Caligulio returned the favor with a thin smile of his own.

"It'd seem the old man is losing his wits, though," said the technician.

"Seem'? Oh, I'm sure of it. He's so distracted by the magic crystals, he failed to realize this sword—and the labyrinth itself—is the *real* prize."

"One unfortunate side effect of focusing so much on magic, no doubt. After all, a weapon that can change its rank is nothing short of a breakthrough."

Caligulio believed his technician was right. Gadora was a great man, but the age of pure magic was over. A new wind called science was blowing across the land, and that combined with magic heralded the beginning of a new era.

*And that, you see, is why I'm better qualified to lead the Armored Division. That old man could've won my respect if he only knew where his place was. But if he's going to recruit Yuuki for his schemes, I see no need to show him mercy.*

As he thought this, Caligulio began formulating a plan. Attempting to take on multiple demon lords would be ill-advised, but Rimuru alone would not be a problem. The Storm Dragon—one of the Empire's most fervent desires—was targeted for a takedown. They had a new weapon, developed by Caligulio himself, and with it they'd force the Storm Dragon to do their bidding. If they pulled it off, it'd pay huge dividends, even if it required some sacrifice...and yet Lord Gadora remained staunchly against it. That was the last straw, the one thing that made Caligulio and Gadora part ways.

*Pfft! Once we tame that evil dragon, the demon lord slime will be a pushover. Then we'll prove to the masses that we are the strongest force in the Empire!*

The time had come, and Caligulio couldn't be more excited. He'd break the nose of Gadora for all his insolence, and he'd firm his position within the Empire for good. But before he could, he needed to prove himself—he needed the dragon tamed, and the labyrinth captured, by his Armored Division.

And to make that happen...

"It is time to march. I will make the proposal at the next Imperial Council."

"Ah, the day's finally here..."

Caligilio nodded. No need to wait for all their demon lord preparations to wrap up. He was ready to shut the mouths of anyone using that as an excuse for hesitation.

*You won't get your head start, Gadora. And Yuuki—I bet you're ecstatic to have Gadora on your side, aren't you? Well, I'm about to teach you exactly where you belong.*

He sneered at all his foolish colleagues. They had every chance to gain valuable information, and they let it go by without even realizing it. They were all a bunch of imbecilic wannabes anyway—Caligilio was sure of it.

But even as he derided his peers, his mind never stopped working. How could he glean the most profit from this? He thought this over as he began to assemble his full proposal to the emperor.

And with that, the Empire would begin to move.



The Imperial Council was about to begin.

The military officers—and the civil officials, too, seated in a neat row—were all nervous. This was not a peacetime gathering, and nobody else even dared venture near the great conference hall where the Council took place. Things were different with this meeting; everyone could feel it.

Everyone bowed their heads when the emperor's entry was announced. Behind the blind, they could sense someone—the United Emperor Ludora Nam-ul-Nasca, supreme leader of the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire, the world's greatest military superpower. He never spoke directly to the masses; only through the blind could one be privy to his presence. He was the apex of society, and only his closest associates even laid eyes upon him. Simply being there overwhelmed all nearby. He was the sole commander, the absolute, and just a very small handful of people were permitted to voice their opinions around him.

Nearly two hundred people were assembled in the meeting hall. The commanders of each imperial division were there, along with their aides. So were the elite members of the Imperial Guardians, standing at attention in a

clean, well-practiced line. Government ministers, and members of the House of Lords, filled the chamber's seats—a truly distinguished group of people, all with their heads bowed as one.

Only the rustling of clothes echoed in the silence.

Then all sound disappeared. With that signal, the prime minister motioned toward the chief of protocol.

"His Majestyyyyy the *Emmmperorrrrrr!!*"

Everyone in the chamber voiced their greeting in unison, breaking the stillness like a mighty choir. So began the Imperial Council—one that would doubtlessly go down in history, for they were scheduled to debate the Empire's upcoming invasion.

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The meeting solemnly began.

With regards to the large-scale campaign in the works, opinions among the Council were divided into two factions—a cautious, conservative side and the more enthusiastic among those calling for war.

The first topic for discussion: What pretense would they use to launch the war? It was a silly question—the emperor willed it, and so it shall be. But was war possible? That's where opinions differed. One side called for careful action; the other, an all-out trouncing. Meanwhile, the civil officials argued that they should begin with diplomatic efforts—a call to surrender, for example, or some threats to lay on the pressure.

If the emperor believed the time for war had come, no one had the authority to defy him—but the imperial edict had yet to arrive, and so every side brought their own motivations to this Council. The war was a matter of time; how to wage it was the issue. The demon lords, their domains dotted across the continent, were an annoyance, but none of them would take action unless their borders were violated. The real obstacle was the Storm Dragon, and the debate

subsequently turned toward the Forest of Jura.

One Council member voiced his opposition to the war.

"If I may, Your Majesty, I am against this campaign."

This was Lord Gadora, the Empire's greatest sorcerer, and he spoke without a hint of fear.

"How shamelessly timid! You bring this up yet again, Sir Gadora?"

He was rebuffed by Commander Caligulio of the Armored Division. This happened every time—they were the leaders of their respective factions, conservative and belligerent.

"If we want to strike the West, that will not be an issue—but Veldora, that evil dragon, lurks in the Forest of Jura. We have only confirmed the dragon's revival two years ago. How could we *not* be cautious?"

Some voices agreed. Others derided Gadora for his weakheartedness.

Over three hundred years had now passed since the Veldora massacre; the terror it caused had largely faded from people's minds. The war hawks formed the majority faction; the situation didn't look as good for Gadora's side.

Caligulio, sensing this, decided to fan the flames.

"There is much, my lord, we can learn from your more cautious stance. However, as I've said here many times before, we now have foolproof measures against Veldora. With our new weapon, it is now fully possible to make that dragon bow to our commands!"

"That is absurd! This is not a forum to talk about your dreams, Sir Caligulio. Nobody can deny the possibility of it failing, so why would we *not* be cautious? Especially *now*, when the entirety of the forest is ruled over by a new demon lord! They say demon lords never form alliances, but there's no reason to go out of our way to antagonize one. We have word that the dragon is revived and working in a partnership with Rimuru, the new demon lord. And with any demon lord, the proper way to go about things is with a nonaggression pact!"

The Valley of Death that linked the Empire with the former domain of Clayman was large enough to march a large army through. That option,

however, was off the table, for it meant making an unauthorized entry into the demon lord Milim's territory. If these were fertile lands, their army could proceed much faster than if they had to navigate a forest, but the advantage wasn't worth riling Milim over. Along similar lines, a path through the Forest of Jura would put them within shooting distance of the West—but Veldora the Storm Dragon was back, and right next to him was the demon lord Rimuru.

As Gadora saw it, there was no need to deliberately create more enemies. Several of the Council's civil officials agreed with this—but Caligulio just snorted at it.

"In that case, Sir Gadora, are you asking the Empire to give up on its dearest of wishes?"

If they can't traverse the forest, it'd be difficult to deploy a substantial force in the West. Caligulio's question thus had the full support of the military behind it.

"Sir Caligulio is right, my lord. Before the mighty Empire, a demon lord is no threat at all!"

"How can you be so disrespectful in front of His Majesty?! Dare you defy the will of the emperor, Sir Gadora?!"

"No! Think about it! Instead of taking on a demon lord, it is far wiser to win the cooperation of the dwarven king. We'd suffer no casualties, and it would make seizing the West that much easier!"

Gadora tried to rebuke these opposing viewpoints. But one onlooker laughed at him.

"*You* are the one being absurd, Sir Gadora. The dwarven king is renowned as the Master of the Sword. His predecessor was a mighty champion, and he is just as powerful. He is surrounded by a legion of other notorious heroes, all capable of putting up more resistance than any demon lord. I would relish the chance of waging battle against them, but that is not our main objective. Instead of fighting a group of champions, we would receive far more public support for slaying a demon lord!"

This shouting came from Gradim, the Beast King and commander of the Magical Beast Division. All he had to do was stand up, and the intimidation he

exuded was overwhelming. He had the air of a ruler and the power to tame any magical creature. He was also one of the foremost fighters in the Empire, leader of a proud band of warriors. In terms of strength, the commander was said to be the second best in the Empire—he wasn’t in the Single Digits rankwise, but his powers had quickly earned him a post leading a division. Being in a position untoouchable by any ranking duel made him believe he was the strongest, and thus Gradim resented the Empire’s Marshal, the one person higher than him in the military hierarchy.

Some rumors said he had lycanthrope blood in him, but none of these had been confirmed. Whether that was true or not, Gradim was definitely the type to act on gut instincts instead of reason, and Gadora therefore had trouble dealing with him.

“Sir Gradim, I fear you are making an incorrect comparison. I am saying that we should make King Gazel our ally!”

“Fool! If we were going to annex the Dwarven Kingdom as well, your point would make sense. If anyone gets in the way of the Empire’s ambitions, all we have to do is pound them into submission. But what kind of scheme is *this*? We have all the war power we need, and we *still* can’t take action because of this tepid nonsense you’re spouting at us!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! The Dwarven Kingdom is a natural fortress. The idea of taking it down by force is simply—”

“Silence!! Why must you continue your pathetic mewling in front of the emperor? This is exactly why you were dismissed from your role as division leader!” Gradim the Beast King shouted at the top of his lungs. He was telling the truth. Until about thirty years ago, the Gadora-led Magic Division was one of the three major ones the Empire boasted. Now, though, all its best talents were reassigned to technical departments, and the others shuffled into other posts.

This was because magic, at the heart of it, depended on the talents of individual casters. First, you needed magic force to cast anything, and that wasn’t something you could acquire in a class—that limited the numbers right there. Second, while magic was an effective tool in battle, the Empire had

developed a weapon that all but supplanted it—a portable magical weapon, commonly called a spellgun. These were powered by magistones that activated a magic circle carved inside the gun barrel, allowing anyone control over magic. A single spellgun could generate only one type of magic, which was a disadvantage, but their usefulness still couldn't be overstated.

Meanwhile, for close-range combat, the Empire had developed magic sabers. These handheld weapons operated on the same principle as spellguns—they were small arms preinstalled with magic. The example they set was part of why imperial military technicians could pinpoint what the Dungeon-made slotted weapons were for.

It was clear now that both sides of this conflict were thinking in similar ways. And now that even those without natural talent could cast magic, the role of the Magic Division was over. It was the end of an era, a melancholy moment for Gadora.

But the scorn for Gadora wasn't over yet.

"Ha-ha-ha! You are well advanced in years, my lord. Your magic knowledge is the treasure of the Empire. You have given untold assistance to the Armored Division's development of new magical weapons...but as Sir Gradim stated, you're speaking out of line. Have you completely lost your nerve?"

Caligulio gave him a mocking laugh. Snickering bubbled up from the seats of the military and the House of Lords.

"Don't any of you understand? That evil dragon holds control over natural disasters. He is one of the most powerful presences in the entire world."

"*You* are the one who fails to understand, my lord. The imperial military is not what it used to be. We have studied the knowledge of many from other worlds; the 'science' they have brought with them. We have obtained an entirely new and different technology from what this world knew before, and with this new technology, our army has grown dozens of times more powerful than the last generation. Sorcerers like you are anachronisms, failing to keep up with the march of time. It is time for you to accept His Majesty's good graces and humbly announce your retirement."

"Wh-what?!"

Gadora fumed at this...but it was just an act. He had, after all, already capitulated to the demon lord Rimuru. He was trying to guide the Council away from war, but beyond that, he didn't care much what came next.

*I pity every one of these buffoons. Science is a wondrous thing, but the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion has its own secret knowledge—sorcerous science, they call it. Sir Rimuru himself is an otherworlder. And the Empire may be kept secure by its military might, but for how long...?*

Now that he knew the truth about Tempest—and about Rimuru—victory for the Empire seemed very uncertain to Gadora. He didn't wish misfortune upon his former colleagues, and he felt a debt of obligation to the emperor. That's why he made an honest effort to steer the Empire off its course...but if it failed, he wouldn't dwell on it.

Yuuki had a coup simmering anyway, and once it broke out, Gadora intended to keep the emperor secure. He was sure Yuuki wanted the emperor assassinated—if he planned to conquer the world, then all its leading figures were nothing but obstacles. Before now, he let him do what he wanted—but now that he had no reason at all to wage war, Gadora could no longer allow Yuuki's schemes to plunge the world into chaos.

*I can't say what'll happen in the future, but I doubt what I say here will change anything. Now, I suppose, I'll fulfill Sir Rimuru's request and build up more excitement for the Dungeon.*

With that tacit decision, Gadora turned his eyes toward Yuuki—who, up to now, hadn't said a word.

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Seeing Gadora fall silent, Caligulio assumed victory was his.

Gadora's Magic Division was dismantled in the military's last major reshuffling. Since then, Gadora had been treated as a technical adviser for the Armored Division, an honorary post and nothing else. But he was widely known for his champion-level powers, and he may still have had more influence around the Empire than Caligulio himself.

*And it was Gadora, and Gadora alone, who recommended Yuuki as a division*

*leader. Simply infuriating.*

Caligulio didn't like it one bit. The great Gadora, lauded as a master sorcerer, was an old man—but his career was filled with meritorious deeds. He knew he couldn't afford to shed his politeness when dealing with him. But:

*Heh... He's a relic of the past. Now he's nothing but a crotchety old man, a drain on all of us.*

Over time, the Empire had grown into a superpower in war. And as sad as it was, poor old Gadora simply couldn't keep up with that.

The Empire was in a new era, and its three new military divisions were incomparably stronger than before.

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The Armored Division Caligulio led was the largest military division in the Empire, driven by a combination of otherworld science and magical technology. Its force consisted of over two million deployable soldiers, but this included troops garrisoned across imperial territory. Only about a million could engage in maneuvers on a moment's notice—but this was still an army on a stupefying scale, one unthinkable a hundred years ago.

The Magical Beast Division Gradim led was using DNA analysis technology brought by otherworlders to capture and raise magical beasts. The tamed, powered-up creatures this program produced now formed the core of this division. Nothing like this had ever been attempted before with such beasts, but this division made it happen—and thanks to their effort, the Empire could even train magical beasts as battle mounts.

These were used by the Empire's greatest champions—those who analyzed the blood of ancient heroes and made it their own. These champions were innately powerful, and awakening the forces within their blood allowed the Magical Beast Division to recruit nothing but these champions. It was a comparatively small division, only around thirty thousand—just one in one hundred thousand had this kind of talent. But their mounts were magical

beasts, at least A-minus in quality, and when matched with the right champion, their power was incalculable. It was truly an elite force, worthy of being a full division despite its smaller size.

Finally, the Composite Division Yuuki led was a group of talented individuals with extremely powerful latent abilities. The general public considered this division a hodgepodge of scrappy odds and ends lacking any real cooperative spirit, but that wasn't the right way to describe them. They didn't work well with others because they were already pretty omnipotent by themselves. As a band of exceptional, tough-to-control individuals, they had many talented otherworlders, their latent potential anybody's guess.

It was populated by those with irregular traits, things that couldn't be reproduced after extensive experimentation—difficult to handle, but packing more of a punch than an A-rank magical beast. They may not have known what their abilities were, exactly, but as weapons, they were too good to dispose of—and this force was where such accomplished people were inserted.

They had barely been supervised up to this point, but with Yuuki as the division's new leader, it was reborn as a treasured force, one whose powers couldn't be defined by pure numbers. They totaled some two hundred thousand people, about half of whom were deployable—the rest were commissioned intelligence officers, office staff, and so forth. That, and within the Composite Division was also a specially selected elite force—the foundation of the entire division, one absolutely faithful to Yuuki.

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This was the composition of the Empire's three new military divisions. It was a formidable power, and the moment the emperor gave the edict, 1,130,000 soldiers could likely begin operations at once. According to the Imperial Information Bureau's latest intelligence, the Western Nations' total fighting power was under a million troops; in terms of what was deployable right then, they'd likely be happy to gather four hundred thousand. Even more encouraging, the IIB expressed doubts that this could act as a coherent force,

due to expected logistical difficulties.

It was thus an unruly mob of four hundred thousand against over a million imperial-trained elites. The numbers were simply overwhelming. And right at the core of this overwhelming imperial force was Caligulio's Armored Division.

Caligulio intended to bring his own handpicked forces out on the field to handle this war. He planned to deploy a million soldiers, as follows:

- The Restructured Armor Corps, the division's main force

These soldiers boasted the latest in otherworld technology and magical modifications. As individuals, each one ranked at least a C-plus, and some had even reached A rank.

- The Magitank Force, their most decisive weapons

This was a squadron of three thousand magitanks, the latest new imperial weapon brought into practical use. Each one had a crew of five, and they offered firepower that broke all previous rules. Their main armament, known as a magicannon, could fire bolts that shot out at two thousand yards per second. A magitank could hold fifty of these bolts, firing them up to five times a minute, and they packed a punch—the equivalent of a tactical-level high-speed flame spell.

Although these bolts were launched with magic, fundamentally, the shots themselves were simple metal balls. They could still smash through things like anti-magic barriers and anti-archery defenses, making them a fearsome mass-based offense. Thanks to that, the kind of force you once needed a wizard to unleash (assuming you could find one) was now at the beck and call of a common soldier. These magitanks resulted in a major breakthrough for the army, due to the difficulty of defending against them.

Two hundred thousand soldiers were assigned to this force, including mechanics and other personnel, and the more tanks you added, the more powerful it'd become.

- The Flying Combat Corps, responsible for a set of highly classified weapons

This consisted of four hundred flying airships—the treasure of the Empire and a testament to the grand new knowledge the otherworlders brought with them. Each airship could house up to four hundred people, a staff of fifty piloting them while the rest handled defensive magic or operated the cannons. They were fitted with many magically amplified guns, making them warships bristling with offense and defense, and they were also useful as transportation craft. In this world, the concept of air superiority didn't really exist; no army paid any attention to antiair defense, so the Empire could transport large forces while the enemy's guard was down. Airships could also assist in surrounding an enemy on the front and rear, making pincer attacks child's play—another invention that turned conventional tactics on their head.

A hundred thousand people were assigned to this corps, mostly members taken from the old Magic Division.

With this many soldiers at his beck and call, Caligulio was basking in a feeling of omnipotence.

For example, the average strength of a knight in this world would be around C rank at best, although it varied depending on the size of a nation. Pad that strength with weapons or armor and put them through grueling training, and you *might* see that brought up to a B. Meanwhile, the Armored Division put its members through assorted magical modifications—after a health evaluation, anyone deemed fit enough for it was half forced into the operation. This successfully lifted the baseline for the entire division, and that was true for the forces stationed elsewhere across the Empire. They were like an insurmountable rock—Caligulio was sure of it.

For this grand campaign, he planned to deploy all the magitanks and airships at his disposal. He had enough soldiers to overwhelm any foreign alliance—in quality *and* quantity—and he had so many new weapons to unveil. As he saw it, the Armored Division was the best way of showing the full might of the Empire to the world.

*Why worry about Veldora? Why worry about a demon lord? My division alone could conquer the whole world!!*

It was with that confidence that Caligulio observed Gadora. That was why he noticed the sorcerer's eyes shifting over to Yuuki—and the next moment, Yuuki spoke up for the first time in this Imperial Council, as if he'd been waiting for the opportunity.

"I agree that old man Gadora's overly careful. I think he's just being too wary—and I'm counting the Storm Dragon when I say that, too. Like Commander Caligulio said, the Empire as it stands now wouldn't have a problem against him, don't you think?"

The fact that Yuuki seemed to agree with Caligulio put him on alert. *That bastard... He's gonna nominate himself to capture the labyrinth, isn't he? You may think I'm not on to you, but you're wrong! You can't hold a post as lofty as division commander without keeping yourself well-informed!*

As Caligulio thought this, he flashed Yuuki a friendly smile. Gradim was an exception to that rule, but really, it was only his scale-breaking strength that put him at the top of his division. Yuuki, meanwhile, was Caligulio's enemy from the start—the post was far too lofty for him still, he believed.

"Well put, Sir Yuuki," he said, biting his tongue. "A young, energetic leader knows how to build momentum for himself, I see."

"Ah, I'm no one that special. But the way I see it, we still have some scout work to do before we can run a war, right? If we want to make it through the Forest of Jura, we're gonna need to proceed through the demon lord Rimuru's domain. And along those lines, actually, I have some interesting news—apparently the demon lord's city can be transported completely inside the labyrinth."

"The labyrinth?" Caligulio asked, feigning ignorance.

"Yeah," replied Yuuki, as if expecting this. "The Dungeon, to be precise. I don't know how it works, but it allows them to make the entire city disappear from the surface, leaving nothing but a large gate."

*Hmph. How absurd. Now I'm sure he's going to volunteer to go explore the Dungeon himself and steal away all my interests...but it's so terribly shallow of him!*

"Oh?" Caligulio gave Yuuki a gloating smile. "Are you sure about that intelligence?"

"If it's true," said another Council member, "we cannot ignore this Dungeon. They may emerge from it to attack us once we march past."

"Indeed. Assuming the Empire's no fool, I'm sure they're shoring up their defense lines as we speak. If the demon lord's forces cut off our supply lines, we'll be in trouble."

"That could make the Forest of Jura route dangerous..."

Everyone who heard Yuuki began giving out a smorgasbord of feedback. Yuuki grinned as if this was exactly what he'd been seeking all along.

"There's no doubting the credibility of this intelligence, no. Old man Gadora went over there himself and examined it for us!"

He had waited for just the right moment to say that, but he wasn't done yet.

"Now, the things old man Gadora saw have convinced him that the demon lord Rimuru is a threat. And he also brought back another rumor. It said that the labyrinth goes down a hundred floors, and that the guardian on the deepest floor is none other than Veldora, the Storm Dragon. Now, there's no evidence backing this rumor at all. Gadora's investigations ended on the sixtieth floor after his team sadly took some losses. It's said not even Masayuki the Hero has made it past that floor. In terms of difficulty, we believe it would rank an A-plus equivalent...and no matter what route we take to invade the West, I think this requires further investigation."

Now Yuuki was sounding serious, doing away with his carefree attitude.

"Losses...?"

"Quite a pity. I can understand Sir Yuuki's feelings."

"An investigation certainly wouldn't be uncalled for. Perhaps we could leave that to the Composite Division?"

The nobles excitedly talked among themselves. It rankled Caligulio. *Tchh! You fools were all bought off by him! How dare you try to talk your way into this, Yuuki! You should've become a politician, not an army commander!*

But the sincerity of Yuuki's attitude was even starting to turn the minds of the nobles he didn't bribe. It only further provoked Caligulio.

"One moment, please!" he shouted as he stood up and bowed to the emperor behind the blind. "Your Highness! Lord Gadora and Sir Yuuki seem absolutely petrified of Veldora, but not I—and that goes without saying for the Western Nations as well! It is my fervent hope that I may soothe your mind, Your Majesty, so please—give me, Caligulio, the order to begin our conquest! I promise to you I will stake my body and soul in the ensuing battle!!"

The statement sent a shiver through the chamber. Addressing the emperor directly was far beyond the realms of convention.

"Wha—?! Of all the outrageous things to do...!"

"This will not stand, Sir Caligulio!"

"Trying to get a leg up on the competition, Caligulio? Your Majesty, our Magical Beast Division is ready to deploy on a moment's notice. Please, grant us your order as well!"

Even Gradim was entering the fray.

"In that case," a frazzled-looking Yuuki added, "allow the Composite Division to investigate this!"

With him standing up as well, all three commanders were bowing their heads at once. At this point, only the emperor could put an end to this commotion...

...Him—or one other.

This figure stood up behind the blind and smiled sweetly. She was the Imperial Marshal, the supreme commander of the Empire's forces.

"All right, you idiots, quiet down. You are in the presence of Emperor Ludora."

Calling the emperor by his given name was an affront no common citizen could dream of. Only someone granted the rank of Marshal could do so without fear of consequences.

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In the Empire, being Marshal meant being the strongest.

Only a very few close associates knew who she was. Not even the rank holder's name was revealed to the public; it was said she was always attending to the emperor, protecting him. A few words from her were all it took to silence the meeting hall.

Now, as everyone in attendance fell to the ground to pay their respects, the Marshal's voice boomed from high above.

"So what of this Veldora? He may have interfered with our previous campaign, but did that shake the Empire?"

"""No!"""

"Of course not. And that is because our great emperor has afforded us his divine protection."

"""Yes, ma'am!"""

It was beyond overpowering. An air of dominance filled the room, leaving everyone powerless to resist it. And in the midst of it, the Marshal asked:

"Yuuki, was it? You have been in the Empire for not even a year, and I must praise your achievements. However, you are soft—too soft. From the moment Veldora resurrected himself until now, the Empire has not taken any action. Do you know why?"

"Because we were not fully prepared—"

This was already well-trodden territory, but Yuuki gave the answer anyway. But the Marshal answered him with a scornful smile. "No. It's because the idiots among us were so stricken by fear of the past, they made up this or that excuse to run away. Isn't that right, Gadora?"

"I-indeed it is!!"

Everyone, deep down, knew that to be true...and not even Gadora had the willpower to say no. It was true—he had argued for avoiding battle instead of debating whether they could beat the Storm Dragon. He had no leg to stand on.

*...But what is this? Why is she, of all people, in such a panic?*

Gadora was one of the few people who had seen the Marshal's face. That's why he could tell, despite her detached air, that she was growing impatient. But

he couldn't bring it up here. Instead, Gadora felt a vague anxiety, one whose reason he couldn't put into words, as the Marshal continued.

"There's no way negotiations with King Gazel of Dwargon would go well, is there? I'm sure you understand that, so why be so stubborn about it? Or are all of you more idiotic than I thought? You're not trying to interfere with the Empire's dominance, are you?"

The cold voice made Gadora's spine freeze.

*Has she spotted me out...?*

He couldn't believe it. He was a senior member of the Empire, one who served as counsel for the emperor—but even he found himself cringing in the presence of the Marshal.

*And come to think of it...I still don't even know her name...*

Gadora was trusted. He was treasured—there was no doubt about that. But maybe that was all just Gadora kidding himself. The thought felt like a shock wave—and then, for the first time, he began to wonder what the Empire—or really, the emperor—actually was.

Turning away from him, the Marshal set his sights on Caligulio.

"So, Caligulio. You like your chances of victory?"

"Y-yes, Marshal!! I absolutely do!!"

"Ah. Then tell us about your strategy."

"W-well..."

He was in high spirits earlier—but the full brunt of the Marshal's dominant presence bowled Caligulio over. His plan to bulldoze the enemy with sheer quantity, it made him realize, seemed so childish now.

Caligulio did have his own plan for the fight against the Storm Dragon, an intricate plan he had carefully worked out over the course of many years. He wasn't afraid of Veldora—he's just a dragon, he thought. And yes, the dragons of the Canaat Mountains were tough monsters to face—the Lesser Dragons at the foot of the peaks were one thing, but once they had grown into full-fledged adult specimens, they ranked at least an A in strength. Once you got to an

element-infused Arch Dragon, that was dangerous enough to upend a small kingdom.

Not so with the Empire. All they'd have to do is deploy a force of five hundred from the Restructured Armor Corps, and they could subdue him. They had undergone repeated military training for just this mission, and as long as they didn't make any mistakes, they wouldn't lose too many men.

*That*, if anything, proved the Empire's power. It had the strength to raise tens of thousands of these fighters. They could beat a whole flock of dragons—and as far as Caligilio was concerned, Veldora was just another dragon. *Why*, he concluded, *are we so afraid of a single dragon?*

A monster's strength was defined by the size of its magicule store. That remained true no matter how powerful one was. Dragons were so strong because their magical energy was as enormous as their physical mass. They had high defense and breath attacks that pummeled a wide range, both requiring a massive amount of magicules. So why fight them from the front in the first place?

No, Caligilio and his force had a secret plan—a new technology, a magicule-disturbing beam known as a magic canceler that had been developed under strict confidentiality.

Magic-based weakening attacks occasionally didn't work on dragons. Some of them could annul any such attempt with Magic Interference. With this new tech, that didn't matter. A magic canceler beam interfered with the magicules themselves—not controlling them but scattering them in wild, unpredictable patterns, making them essentially go haywire. Applied to a sorcerer, it'd jam his spell and keep him from invoking the magic. Against a monster, it'd scramble its magicule-based body and impede their movements. It'd not only weaken them, but maybe even neutralize them entirely.

This would be particularly effective against someone like Veldora, essentially a huge blob of magicule energy. It was the source of Caligilio's unflappable confidence.

What's more, they had a second card to play—their magitanks. The magicannons attached to them were intensely powerful, capable of dispatching

even a large magical beast in one hit. After some experiments conducted with a captured live dragon, they found that a magiccannon blast could even kill a full-grown, A-rank specimen instantly.

Finally, there was the wild card—the airships, their secret weapon and the crown jewel of their magical technology. They could travel at will beyond the speed of sound; no living creature could hope to outrun them.

Caligulio's strategy for Veldora was as follows: First, his quickest forces would lure Veldora within range of a magic canceler set up in the forest. This would bind him in place, and to add to the barrage, they'd irradiate him with another magic canceler installed on an airship put on standby above. Once Veldora was weakened to a state of helplessness, a battalion of two thousand magitanks would launch a simultaneous magiccannon volley—and any dragon, no matter how ancient, would surely be vaporized by that.

*And should he somehow survive... Well, even a True Dragon wouldn't emerge unscathed.*

In war, a force calculated their chances of victory based on the intelligence they had accumulated. They had killed a large number of dragons by this point, using the data they gathered to fully prepare themselves. It made Caligulio absolutely sure of victory...and yet, as he addressed the Marshal, his tongue suddenly felt heavy in his mouth.

"S-so... We would deploy a tank battalion, and then we'd lure the evil dragon into position, you see..."

Sheer numbers, he thought, would win the day for him, so he planned to work out the more tactical details once they arrived on-site. The tanks could navigate even the worst of roads, and he had word of a highway built between there and the Dwarven Kingdom, one large enough to make tank transportation a breeze. He therefore concluded that tank deployment wouldn't be an issue, but facing the Marshal, he couldn't just make up his facts.

*I was so focused on building up our war power that I neglected our on-site investigations. This was my failure...*

At least he still had enough of his senses left to work that out.

"How worthless. Besides, your entire concept is wrong on its head. Once you destroy Veldora, what next?"

"...What?" Caligulio replied, unable to grasp her meaning.

The Marshal looked down on him coldly. "Why do you think the Empire never made a move while Veldora was sealed away?"

"B-because we were unprepared—"

"Wrong answer, you fool. We were waiting for his revival so we could settle matters with him in his complete state. Now we can expose him to the full glory of His Majesty. So what will we do if we *destroy* him? Only through defeating and ruling over him will the Empire secure its victory!"

Her words overwhelmed the entire meeting hall. Everyone was dominated by a sense of terror, or doom, as if someone had grabbed their hearts and wouldn't let go.

Gadora was just as shaken by it. *No... Is she serious? After all the time I spent explaining that mentally dominating him was impossible? But...*

Somehow, the Marshal's words were convincing. Something about them made you feel that maybe, just maybe, it was possible. The feeling gave Gadora the taste of an inscrutable sort of horror.

*Yes... Looking back, it's so strange. Who is the Marshal anyway? I've met her in real life, but I never even questioned why I don't know her name. Could...? Could this be...?*

A certain truth was beginning to dawn on Gadora, no matter how much he wanted to will it away. Now he wondered if the Marshal was capable of dominating someone's mind better than anyone else—even he, the greatest sorcerer the Empire ever knew. In fact, he no longer wondered it. He was sure.

Gadora opened his eyes, turning them toward the other side of the blind. She was a graceful silhouette, as seen through the expensive silk-woven curtain, but to Gadora it looked like a monster beyond imagination. In a way, it was like a True Dragon had taken human form—a delusion that Gadora hurriedly wiped from his mind.

\*

The entire Council was frozen, holding its breath.

“In that case, I’d like to offer a proposal...”

The voice of young Yuuki echoed. Being able to speak at all in these conditions was a praiseworthy feat of will.

“Proceed,” a gentle, yet frigid, voice replied.

Yuuki bowed, keeping his innermost thoughts hidden. “I don’t think right now is a good time for our military divisions to try outmaneuvering each other, so I will speak frankly and without reserve.”

With that preface, the meek-looking Yuuki outlined his plan.

First, the Armored Division would stage an invasion from the Forest of Jura in front of them. The demon lord Rimuru’s military forces were gathering on a spot where the forest crossed the Great Ameld River. They were using a lodging town there as their base of operations, building up their war preparedness. The imperial force would advance down a path between the Canaat Mountains and Forest of Jura. This was because there were no paths through the forest’s east side, so going through there would take too much time. Once the Empire reached the main entrance to the Dwarven Kingdom and followed the Ameld south, they’d reach this lodging town, and hostilities would officially begin then.

But there was a problem.

“Wait, Sir Yuuki. We have to go through the forest, or else we’ll draw Dwargon’s attention! King Gazel and Rimuru reportedly have friendly relations, and the two countries have signed on to an alliance. If we do something like that, we’ll be subject to a pincer strike at once!”

Caligulio’s statement was a valid one. Part of the motivation for tackling the forest instead of following the highway along the Ameld was to avoid hostilities with the Dwarven Kingdom. What if dwarven forces came to reinforce Rimuru after battle began? They had already decided that their supply lines couldn’t be allowed to get cut off, but in this case, they’d be stuck between the forest and the river. If they sustained attacks on both sides there, their numerical advantage would be lost. Even with airships, they’d have to form entire fleets to keep such a force supplied.

That was why Caligulio couldn't let this suggestion go unchallenged. But Yuuki just smiled, like he saw it coming.

"Don't worry, Sir Caligulio. We're not aiming for the lodging town; we're aiming for the Dwarven Kingdom. If King Gazel won't listen to our offer, then we can't really call them a friendly nation, can we? There's no reason to leave them around."

"Wha...?!"

Yuuki left Caligulio at a loss for words. The entire Council stirred.

"You want us to attack the Armed Nation of Dwargon?! I-I'm sure we could win, but who knows how many casualties we'd face?!"

"We'd have nothing left to strike the West with."

"There's a natural fortress protecting it, after all..."

All the participants exchanged opinions. It just made Yuuki broaden his smile.

"That's right. The nation's like a fortress. It's so well suited for defense, people thought of it as impregnable until now. But you know we've got tanks, right? Dwargon's been so tough to attack because it's so heavily geared toward magic defense. If we can deal with *that*, the rest is easy, isn't it?"

"Mmm..."

Caligulio had to admit—Yuuki had a point.

Assuming they attacked the Dwarven Kingdom, they'd have to strike the East or Central entrances. If they wanted to catch them by surprise, they'd have to skip the East (on the border with the Empire) and attack the Central gate, which exited into the Forest of Jura. If they could pose themselves as hitting Rimuru's lodging town, then roll the tanks up to the Central gate...it'd block any dwarven reinforcements while simultaneously securing the lodging town for them.

"...I see. That might be a pretty interesting approach."

"Right? And if the dwarves are in trouble, the demon lord Rimuru will kinda *have* to get moving. But we'd have the initiative, and if we set up the battlefield so we could ambush them..."

"It'd give our forces the advantage, yes."

Caligulio nodded. It sounded doable.

"It's probably going to be their advance force stationed at the lodging town, but in the forest, they're still gonna have an advantage, and we're gonna take more losses. But if we can take down the Dwarven Kingdom first thing, then that natural fortress would help keep *us* defended."

There was some deception to Yuuki's pitch. If they were really going to volley some magicannon blasts around, the first shot would likely destroy the Central gate. Even if the dwarves fled down into the mazelike cave corridors, the urban area near the entrance would suffer untold damage. Maybe they'd absorb and rebuild the nation in the future, but it'd be rendered unusable during this war. Caligulio spotted that, but he decided to put up with Yuuki's cajolery anyway.

"I'm not sure it'll go that well, but you do bring up some good points. Certainly, it'd be more uplifting for us if we set a trap and annihilated them all at once, rather than chase them like mice across that accursed forest. After that, we can take our time advancing everyone toward the Tempestian capital."

"Well, before that, there's more to my plan. My Composite Division, as everybody here knows, is more suited for individual, one-on-one battle rather than group ops. I'm thinking, you know, this is the *best* force you could ask for to investigate that Dungeon for us. Like we said, rumor has it that Veldora's guarding the place from the hundredth floor. We need to check out that story, don't we?"

Ah, thought Caligulio with a secret chuckle. *That's his approach?* He didn't believe Yuuki would give up his claim that easily, so this request was predictable enough.

"No need for that, I don't think. If your division ignores the lodging town and travels straight for the monster capital, that'll open up the danger of a pincer attack. No, it's better to allow our force to advance westward and navigate the pathless forest all the way to the Dungeon. I'm never going to believe they can make an entire city vanish until I see it for myself. It'd be more tactically sound to assume the demon lord will be waiting there, with his main force."

Yuuki, faced with this, scowled for just a brief moment. Caligulio was

perceptive enough to notice it.

*Heh-heh-heh... So naive, still. Don't get full of yourself, kid! You can't always get what you want!*

But as he basked in his joy:

"Finally, this is turning into a decent military conference. Very well. You seem confident enough, Caligilio. I'll let you handle the demon lord."

And with that brief statement from the Marshal, the Armored Division's invasion of the Forest of Jura had been approved.

But she wasn't done.

"However, this is still too weak an approach. If we're attacking Dwargon, better to apply pressure to the East gate as well. I'll leave that responsibility to the Composite Division. Commander, I want you to consider your division's formation carefully, as you'll still be handling capital defense as well."

"...Yes, Marshal."

Yuuki considered objecting for a moment but stopped himself. By the sound of the Marshal's voice, he realized, this was an order set in stone. Instead, Gradim, the last remaining commander, spoke.

"P-please, wait just one moment! Are you asking the Magical Beast Division to stay put, then?! I promise you, we can play a starring role in any engagement, so please..."

Gradim looked almost grief-stricken as he raised his voice toward the silk blind. If he was ordered to remain on standby for this operation, the Magical Beast Division—already small in size—would have nothing to do the entire war. Everything would be covered, and Gradim would have no chance to earn any achievements in battle—a tragedy he'd do anything to prevent.

"Settle down, you idiot. I have a role for you as well."

"Y-you do?! And—and what role is that?"

"Take the entire Magical Beast Division and advance northward."

Gradim had braced himself so much for the Marshal's answer that it literally

shocked him. It was just really unexpected. Rimuru and King Gazel were focused on defending their own nations. In the midst of this, they could stage an invasion on two fronts and scare the Western Nations out of their wits when they weren't paying attention. This would let them establish a beachhead quickly in the region, before the Council of the West could react. But...

"Northward?! You want us to cross the Canaat Mountains?!"

Gradim, surmising the intent behind the Marshal's instructions, was deeply shaken. The logic, at least, made sense. Now they'd be deploying in three directions, not two, but the Empire had the power to pull this off. Yet this operation presented some serious tactical challenges. In fact, traversing the Canaats with a five-figure force would make any soldier doubt the sanity of their leader.

But as he hesitated over voicing his concerns, the Marshal began laughing.

"That's right, Gradim. I want you to navigate over the sea and attack the capital of Englesia. The Kingdom of Farminus is still rebuilding—once Dwargon falls, we can crush it anytime we like."

"Wh-what? The sea?! But—but we don't have any large transportation vessels..."

"Of course we do. Don't we, Caligulio?"

Being called by name like this, Caligulio knew he couldn't stall any longer. He resented not being identified by his rank, but now was no time to lodge complaints about decorum. That was how overpowering and coercive the Marshal was.

"I—I think you're right, Marshal. We have the airships developed by our force using the latest in technology. They are run by our Flying Combat Corps, and it'd be possible for them to transport the Magical Beast Division, I believe."

Excitement spread across the Council at Caligulio's response. There was a way to attack the West without running through the Forest of Jura all along. Anyone in the Empire would be overjoyed at the news.

"However, we need airships as our deciding factor in the battle against the Storm Dragon. Thus we can offer little more than transport, but is that

enough?"

Caligilio was talking to Gradim. He figured that he'd retain a hundred of his airships, all armed to the teeth. The remaining three hundred vessels could carry upward of a hundred thousand troops—each one could bear a maximum of four hundred, and once you subtracted the fifty crewmen, that allowed for 350 soldiers per ship. The Magical Beast Division consisted of thirty thousand champions, each with their respective mount, along with their support staff. Even with their required supplies, three hundred airships would be an ample number to carry them all. The ships wouldn't have much fighting power, but transporting the Magical Beast Division was easy enough.

So Caligilio nimbly drew a line in the sand and thrust the offer in Gradim's face.

Gradim, understanding this, groaned a bit as he sank into thought.

It would be an honor for any fighting man to have a chance to fight Rimuru or the Storm Dragon. Letting this honor slip through his fingers seemed like a waste, but the strategy the Marshal offered had quite a few attractions of its own. It was a blitzkrieg operation, the kind that destroyed any preconceived concepts about this war, and with the Western Nations asleep at the wheel, they'd have nothing to resist Gradim's Magical Beast Division with. Success was practically guaranteed; it all seemed to fit together.

Most of all, the West reportedly had a group of champions known as the Crusaders. Each one was a stout fighter, but together, they were rumored to be among the strongest out there in group battle. They were complemented by the Master Rooks, also said to be a menace on the battlefield, and the Holy Empire of Lubelius also retained Hinata Sakaguchi, chief knight of the Master Rooks and leader of the Crusaders. She was the strongest knight in the West, her name known all the way over in the Empire, and some tales claimed she fought Rimuru to a draw recently.

If it was merely a draw, then their "strongest of knights" was both a coward and no match for Gradim. He was ready to lay waste to her platoon of champions, then trample all over their holy city. Already, he could feel his beast blood surge within him.

"Very well!" the Beast King barked. "Give us safe passage to the battleground, and we'll gladly carry out this operation!"

Excitement bubbled up further across the chamber.

"We can win this! I know we can!"

"Victory to us! Victory to the Empire!"

"Hail to His Majesty the Emperor!!"

Already they were drunk with jubilation, visions of glorious success dancing in their minds. Caligulio was ready to excite them even further with a reciprocal promise to Gradim.

"A sea route would keep us from the threat of dragons," he said. "You will have nothing to worry about. Leave the navigation to us!"

This, too, was part of the plan Caligulio considered. Based on the average flight range of a dragon, a sea path would keep them far away from the Dragon's Nest territory. They'd also be protected from the nefarious sea creatures that infested the sea, offering a relatively safe passage to the West. On the other hand, there'd be no way to team them up with a tank force, so Caligulio thought it was too early to offer the plan as a potential option.

Thanks to that, however, he had already done his homework on the idea—and while he didn't expect it to be a factor like this, he found himself looking forward to it.

*Very interesting! We'd bring the Magical Beast Division over on airships, then concentrate entirely on support and supplying. That's how we'd make it look—but perhaps we can make off with all the spoils, too. And having such a large force up north is bound to surprise the Western Nations forces. They'll be rudderless, helpless, with no chain of command and no way to reinforce the demon lord Rimuru...*

The Western Nations, with attention focused solely on the Forest of Jura, would find itself pinned down on multiple fronts. That would make Caligulio's strategy work all the more smoothly. That, he thought, would let him focus on the Dungeon and the Storm Dragon, letting him put up even bigger results than before.

“Do we have any problems with this?”

“...None, Marshal. I will work with Sir Gradim to prepare a workable strategy.”

“Mmm, yes, if we can reach there safely, I promise we’ll fight to the best of our abilities!”

“Okay...and in that case, I’ll give the dwarven king the best show of force we can offer, I guess.”

“Once battle breaks out around the Central gate, that’ll likely bring things around the East gate to a standstill. But—”

“But the dwarves may lose their minds and attack us, you think? Yeah, I’m aware.”

Even when addressing the Marshal, Yuuki could never let go of his trademark sass. Everybody in the chamber, including his fellow commanders, gave him an odd look. *Is he oblivious, their eyes asked, or merely a fool?* Yuuki paid it no mind.

“Very well. In that case, begin preparations at once!”

“““Yes, Marshal!!”””

The order was placed. Without Emperor Ludora stating a single word, the Empire decided to embark on a simultaneous three-pronged invasion. The imperial edict, made in the emperor’s name, came down later that day.

Now the whole Empire was feverish with enthusiasm. After a yawning period of obscurity, the time had come to display their mettle in war.



After the Imperial Council ended, Yuuki breathed a sigh of relief. The Marshal had never spoken at any of their conferences before, but today she took an oddly proactive approach. This would require more than a few changes to Yuuki’s plans, but...

*...Eh, it’s no big deal. My army’s gonna get to deploy pretty close to the imperial capital, like I planned for. The Armored Division, the biggest thing in my way, is mostly gonna be invading the Forest of Jura. I didn’t expect the Magical Beast Division to get sent out—I still have Vega undercover in there. I wonder if*

*the Composite Division is enough to make this coup work?*

His original plans called for Vega to be the primary force behind the coup—and Yuuki's patsy as well, taking all criminal blame should things fall apart. Yuuki's force, of course, would be providing clandestine support—or really, Vega would provide a conspicuous diversion while Yuuki did all the heavy lifting.

That plan would need to be scrapped, but Yuuki reasoned that the general outline could still hold. He figured that fool Caligulio would step up for him, and it looked like he would. Caligulio was more a loyal military man than a born fighter. He was good in a scuffle, but he was too focused on strategy and finding a way to sure victory. He didn't like going on adventures—but he was still greedy. Sometimes, if a prize was worth his time to work for, he wouldn't be afraid to take some losses for it.

Basically, all he needed was a reason. Tempest had lots of money, as well as a new technology to be stolen. Just tell him it's all hidden in the Dungeon, and he'd do the rest. Of course, being *that* obvious with him would lead to doubts, so instead, he just needed to make Caligulio think *he* wanted his hands on it.

Fortunately for him, all the items and intel Gadora brought him allowed Yuuki to make Caligulio do his bidding. Still, though...

"Why're you looking so serious?" Yuuki asked Gadora, currently sitting across from him.

"Well, the Marshal, you know..."

"The Marshal?"

"Yes. She almost seemed in a panic. I was wondering if there was some reason for it."

"In a panic? She didn't look that way to me."

It appeared rather a trivial reason for Gadora's brooding. It wasn't much of anything to worry about, Yuuki thought, but something about her must've given Gadora concern.

"But...yeah. I was thinking this during the Council, too, but she's a real monster, isn't she? I mean, if I run into someone I don't know I can beat until I

try fighting 'em, that says a lot, y'know?"

Yuuki could gauge the strength of most opponents without having to battle them. With the ultimate skill he had awoken to, he could even identify any abilities other people were trying to hide. If a target wouldn't let him do that, it went without saying how dangerous that could be.

"A new Marshal is appointed every time a new generation of Emperor Ludora's family takes the throne," Gadora explained. "In this generation, just like the last one and the one before it, the Marshal always sits by the emperor, protecting him. They're named to the role because they, too, have the power needed to stand at the peak of the Empire. But despite that, there has never been any record of a Marshal speaking out loud on military matters. So why...?"

The clear danger the Marshal presented was a miscalculation on Yuuki's part. But this, too, fell within his assumptions. After all, the demon lord Guy Crimson, the most powerful of demon lords, seemed to have his own history with the Empire. It didn't take someone like Yuuki to realize that something was up with them.

Why was someone as strong as Guy Crimson leaving the Empire alone? What reason would such an arrogant demon lord have for sitting on his hands? The answer, Yuuki thought, was that he was wary of someone in the Empire. And if that someone was the Marshal, he was fully willing to believe that possibility.

*Besides, if this war gets big enough to really upend things, that's gonna lead to some pretty huge events. Then maybe I'll get more insight into the stuff that's still hidden around here!*

Yuuki smiled, trying to stave off his excitement for the future events he pictured.

Gadora just sighed in response—but he couldn't sit there moping all day. So he decided to turn the page and discuss future plans.

"Well, Yuuki, things are going as planned with me. I now have no reason to take revenge against the West, though, so I was hoping to avoid war, but..."

"No chance you're gonna get your way in *that* Council, though. Not after how much you fanned the flames."

"Indeed, I certainly can't deny that."

Gadora was generally a pretty self-centered man, not the kind to care much about advice given to him. If he and his beloved friends were safe, he wasn't concerned about anything else. He might have been a master sorcerer, but he was no god. He never boasted about how omnipotent he was, and he drew a line between what he could and couldn't do. That was why, as his last service to the Empire, he advocated against entering into war.

Demon lords were said to be the enemy of humankind. They were absolute despots, and it was best to never rile them. Gadora didn't, and that was how he made contact with the late demon lord Clayman—and through him, he eventually made friends with Yuuki. It all stemmed from how single-minded he was about destroying Luminism—and the West along with it. He wasn't wrong to take this approach. Demon lords were allowed large, bountiful holdings so they wouldn't foster ambitions for other nations' territories. None of it meant much any longer, but that was why Gadora wanted to stop the Empire from proceeding any further down this mistaken path.

Besides, he had met the demon lord Rimuru himself. He had a very gentle personality—working alongside him seemed like the smartest approach. And Adalmann, his friend living over there in Tempest—well, he looked completely different now in his afterlife, but he seemed to be enjoying himself.

The biggest surprise to Gadora was this nation's fighting power. Even Adalmann, who Gadora pinned as close to himself in strength, was just guarding Floor 60 of the Dungeon. Apparently he had earned a "promotion" to Floor 70, but it just showed how many more people were above him. And that wasn't even counting the officials and aides who served Rimuru.

*You'd have to be a fool among fools to fight that nation.*

Gadora was sure of that. And that's why he believed the Empire was going to be trounced in this war.

He didn't know what Shinji's band thought, but in Rimuru, Gadora sensed something he just couldn't get to the bottom of. That's what inspired him to plead against this war so ardently. His efforts didn't pay off, but at least he lived up to his end of the bargain with Rimuru. He successfully turned the Empire's

attention toward the Dungeon, and now it was time to figure out what he'd personally do.

"I no longer care much about what happens to those who didn't heed my advice. After I have my final audience with His Majesty, I intend to travel right over to the land of monsters."

"That's a pretty frank way to announce your betrayal."

"It's not a betrayal. I simply live the way I want to. And this is not goodbye for us, Yuuki. Should you ever run into trouble, you can always rely upon me."

Gadora was a selfish man, but he was kind to those close to him. He seemed to like Yuuki, and he made that clear now.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, I'll be sure to!" Yuuki nodded, snickering to himself.

"Yes. But still, I'll be the new man in that nation, so I will have to build my trust among its people. So don't expect to start exploiting me anytime soon, now."

"Aw, you're so mean! That's kinda better left unsaid, isn't it?"

"Oh, come now. Someone as brash as you needs it spelled out for him. And speaking of brash, I'd like to give my regards to those jesters, too. Are they out scheming somewhere right now?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I can't tell you where, though, 'cause I think Rimuru would find out if I did."

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! Maybe so, yes. Then I'll refrain from asking, but tell them to count on me if they need anything, please."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

Yuuki grinned back at Gadora. He liked him, too. The way he lived a life so true to himself dazzled him a bit. So after a few more laughs, they shook hands.

"Well, Yuuki, I'll be on my way. Whether it's a coup or something else, I look forward to whatever great escapade you're planning next. *But!*"

"Yeah, I know. If I commit regicide, you'll never forgive me, right?"

"Mmm. So long as you understand that. Farewell, then!"

And so Yuuki and Gadora parted ways.



Gadora's request for a meeting with the emperor was accepted.

*Perhaps I should warn him once more,* Gadora thought as he nervously waited. He wasn't sure if the advice would be taken—but even now, he wanted to give one final piece of counsel to the man he owed such a debt of gratitude to.

"His Majesty awaits," his guide said, and a veiled attendant soon led him down a corridor. From its well-polished atrium, he could see the telltale light-crimson colors of an all-season cherry blossom, its petals never falling off the branches—a symbol of the Empire's eternal existence, it was said.

"Ah, beautiful as always. But the Japanese otherworlders who saw it had quite a different opinion, didn't they?"

"Is that so?"

"Yes. What did they call it? *Wabi-sabi?* The esthetics of that which is doomed not to last—or the like. The beauty of a cherry blossom, they said, lies in its fleeting nature. We all have our own way of seeing things, though, of course. Don't we, Sir Kondo?"

"..."

From beneath the tree, an intense-looking young man appeared.

"I thought I had erased my presence, and yet..."

"That you certainly did. I didn't notice you one bit. Just call it a foreboding, I suppose? The vague...ever so vague...sense of impending danger."

Gadora took out his beloved staff. The attendant had discreetly vanished at some point.

"I can't let you have an audience with His Majesty."

"Why is that?"

"I have no intention of telling you, and you would gain nothing from knowing."

As First Lieutenant Kondo spoke, he held something in his hand—a metallic object, a dull shine running along its oblong form. It was a classic Nambu pistol, the first semiautomatic weapon produced in what was then the Empire of Japan.

“You mean to kill me?” Gadora asked, his eyes sharp and penetrating. Kondo didn’t react.

“Kondo... You—?!”

Just as he attempted to raise his voice further, Gadora fell, a stinging pain in his chest.

He saw it coming. Gadora knew what guns were; he was on the lookout for Kondo’s trigger finger, and his ears were attuned for a gunshot that never sounded. But most of all, this chest pain came from the back of his body. And as he slowly lost consciousness, he added everything up. This wasn’t a bullet wound—it was a knife in his back. Kondo had done nothing. Instead, it was another—

“Why did you do that?” Kondo asked.



"Because this man is dangerous. If we allow traitors in our midst, it will hinder the next emperor's reign."

This other person's voice was familiar to Gadora—but he had trouble believing it. Perhaps, he thought, this was just a hallucination before he died.

"But this man is a close friend of His Majesty's..."

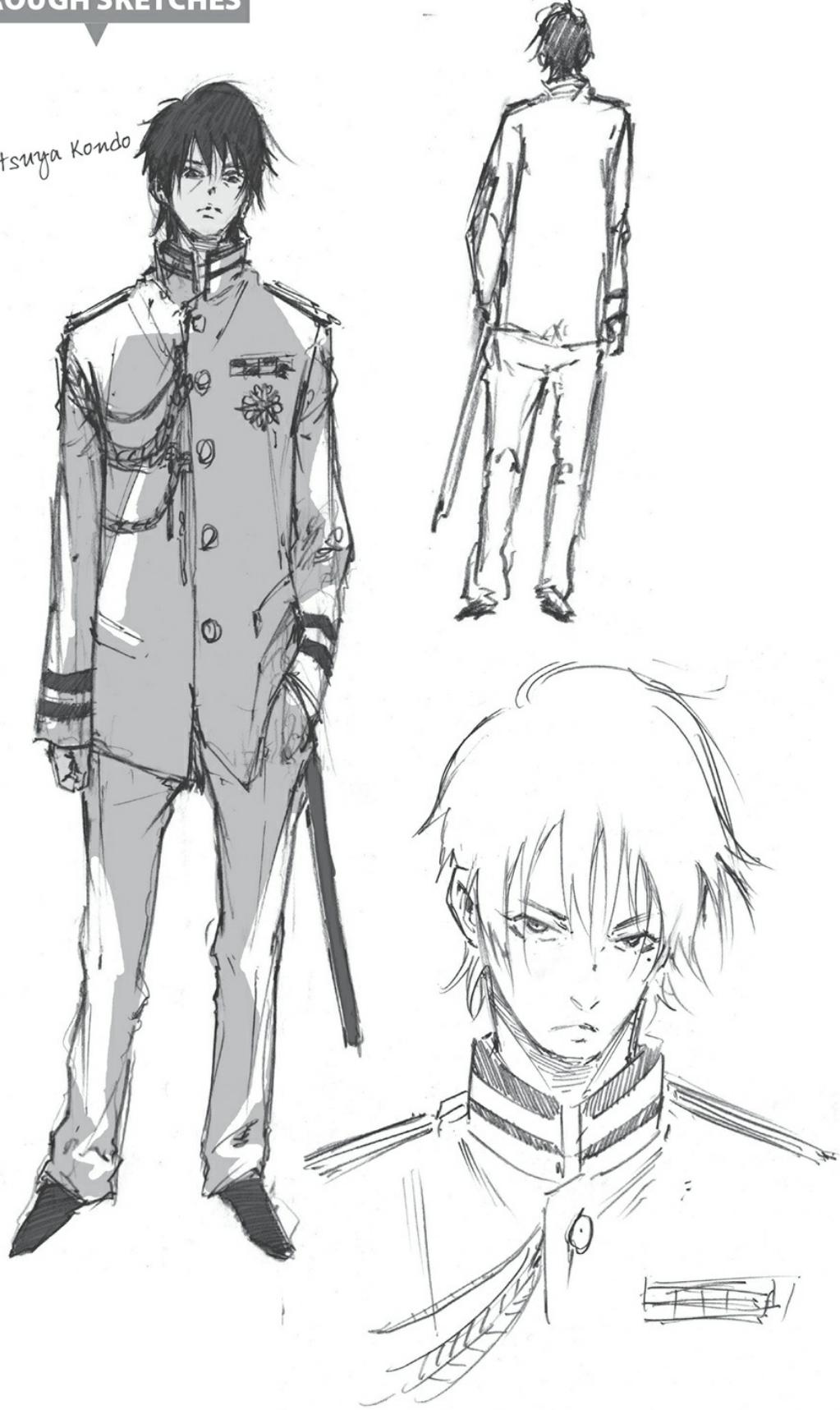
Gadora's consciousness was almost gone. Now he couldn't even hear Kondo's voice. All that awaited Gadora was an assured death.

*Poisoned, too? They spared no precaution, I see. This, too, is my punishment for attempting to betray Emperor Ludora...? But...*

He was guaranteed to die like this. So as the never-withering cherry blossoms danced in the air around him, Gadora made one final bet. He triggered a spell he had put in place beforehand—and then he blacked out.

## ROUGH SKETCHES

Tatsuya Kondo



*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

CHAPTER  
5

TOWARD THE  
OPENING OF  
BATTLE

## CHAPTER 5

### TOWARD THE OPENING OF BATTLE

So after sending Gadora off to the Empire, it was time for some interrogating. No, not for Shinji and his friends. For Ramiris.

She'd said a few things that I just couldn't let slide, and given that she wasn't afraid to play pranks on me, I was sure she was hiding other things as well.

"Huh? N-no... No way. I'm, uh, not hiding anything..."

Ramiris fidgeted a bit. *Clearly* suspicious. She obviously had a secret. But just as I threatened her with no cake for the rest of her life, she began talking a mile a minute.

"What—what do you want to know, Captain?!"

Captain? Whatever. Better let that go without comment. I moved on with my questions.

"So Adalmann's gotten a hell of a lot stronger since I last saw him, but...all right. I can accept that. But what about the other dudes with him? I didn't expect Alberto to whip Shinji's party pretty much solo, and I never heard anything about a *death dragon*. You haven't been messing around with any *other* floors, have you?"

Alberto was now much, *much* more than just kind of a strong monster. He had the physical skills of a special-A Death Paladin and the technical skills to make full use of them. He was already keeping up with Hakuro as a death knight, so how the hell strong was he now?

"Well, Alberto was teaching that kid Arnaud, I think, right? So now they're back down in the deeper floors, testing their strength—"

"*Stop!*"

I hurriedly put an end to this. Alberto teaching Arnaud? What was up with that? Arnaud was a squad leader in the Crusaders—I wasn't sure anyone could teach him much. So why was he the one undergoing training? I just had no idea what Ramiris was talking about.

"Okay, um, well, after Hinata got all angry at Arnaud and the other paladins, they licked their wounds and tried their hand at the Dungeon one more time. The Demon Colossus was still under development back then, so they made it past Floor 70."

"All right. And then?"

"And then those kids lost *again!*"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! And what a sight it was!"

Ramiris was clearly enjoying this; Veldora was nodding and laughing with glee. I'm sure it must've been hilarious.

*Report. A record of battle is available.*

Whoa, really?! Nice one, Raphael! I'll save that for later, but in the meantime, let's focus on Ramiris.

"So how far did Arnaud's team make it this time?"

Probably the dragon rooms between Floors 96 and 99, I figured. There's a bunch of floor effects there as well, so I think they'd give a lot of trouble to human explorers.

"Um, I think it was—"

"They were destroyed by the next boss," Veldora interrupted. "Seeing them cry their eyes out as they fled was simply a joy to watch!"

Wow. Tacky. But...the *next* boss?

"Huh? Was the Floor 80 boss that strong?"

"Oh? Why d'you ask?" said Ramiris.

"I mean, Arnaud's one of the Ten Great Saints. He was as good as Clayman and the ex-demon lords, wasn't he?"

I spotted the answer to my question as I asked it. If you think about it, even

Adalmann or Alberto could probably beat a pre-awakened Clayman. Maybe even post-awakened, actually, if that crazy death dragon was along for the ride.

"U-umm...," Ramiris mumbled.

If I recalled correctly, I named Zegion the guardian of Floor 80. Did he finally evolve from his pupal form and reach adulthood? Veldora mentioned he was training him, and I didn't really get what he meant by *that*, either. How do you train an insect monster? Whatever the Veldora-Style Death Stance was meant to be, I had no idea how Zegion was supposed to harness it. I let Veldora have his way because he seemed to be having fun and all, but maybe I should've put some more serious thought into it.

Zegion had used my own cells to heal his wounds and coat his outer shell in magisteel. Perhaps thanks to that, he had high speed and mobility, and he could also apparently summon his family. Treyni had signed off on everything, so I had no complaints...but the whole concept behind that was to fluster challengers with a quick, nimble insectoid boss after all those slow-moving golems.

"Hey, so what's up with Zegion right now?"

I attempted to further interrogate the panicking Ramiris, but Veldora spoke first.

"Ah, my apprentice Zegion has undergone his complete transformation. Now, with the skills he inherited from me, he is a warrior without compare!"

"..."

"And what's more, Zegion didn't even need to lift a feeler against Arnaud's party! They were trounced by the floor guardian on Floor 79!"

Now the picture was growing clearer. Arnaud met his match against Apito, the queen wasp serving as the boss on Floor 79. Between her hyperspeed and ultimate venom, not even the well-honed swords of Arnaud's Crusaders could touch her. Then, as they told me, the whole party got stung a zillion times by Apito's hivemates, and they ran away screaming.

Crazy. Just pile it on, won't you?

"Tell me this stuff! I got a *job* to do, you know!!" I said, exasperated.

"I know, but it wasn't just us! My master was 'training' that insect, too!"

"Wh-why you...! Accursed traitor!"

"But it's not fair, Master! You're acting like you had no part of it!"

"Nnngh..."

Yeah, I'm sure Veldora got involved. Anyone would, once they realized how much fun this was. Still, though, I felt kind of betrayed. All these people, getting to goof around all day behind my back... Maybe it was a mistake to ever let them handle this stuff.

I felt a twinge of regret now—but something still bothered me.

"Y'know, I've been wondering, Veldora—when you say you *trained* Zegion, what do you mean, exactly?"

He's a bug, right? By "complete transformation," Veldora doesn't mean he went humanoid or something, did he?

It turned out my hunch was absolutely correct.

"Heh-heh-heh... So you finally noticed? You've realized just how wrong you are? I was having fun seeing you do that, so I didn't say anything!"

What did I ever do to deserve this, Veldora...? They sure got me this time.

Delving into the Dungeon records, I had Raphael show me a few images. He was right. Zegion was now humanoid, all slender and chiseled. And...basically, he *was* Razul, that insectoid Shion beat over in Lubelius. He looked so much like that insanely powerful Razul, and thanks to that, he just *exuded* powerhouse vibes.

This rather unusual evolution gave him a chance to learn more battle moves—and as it turned out, the same was true of Apito. She had a shapely, feminine form, and looking at her, it dawned on me: I should've realized something was up when Hinata started coaching her. I thought it was just some mock warfare, but she really *was* training her. And thanks to Hinata's expert battle training, Apito was incredibly refined in her moves. She had been training with Zegion as well, and her technical skills were also just as polished up.

Arnaud's plastering was ample evidence of that, I suppose.

"So then Arnaud's party decided to reevaluate themselves a little, they said..."

Going back to square one, they tackled the Dungeon once more, this time from the very first level. But one of the paladins met his end in Floor 60—at the lands of Alberto the Death Paladin, servant of Adalmann the Immortal King and (a few centuries ago) the strongest of all paladin warriors.

"And ever since then, you know, they've had their asses thoroughly kicked by Alberto."

After whipping their asses the first time, Alberto had taunted them, saying "Paladin? More like pala-*don't*!" That apparently really set off Arnaud, but even after busting out his Ether Break finisher, nothing worked on Alberto. The combination of a lifetime of sword skills and his new monster-based stats made it impossible for Arnaud's party to keep up. His undead body never grew tired, and even if whole body parts were sliced off, he could still recover. It was cheating, really; if you didn't hit the right elemental weaknesses, you just couldn't beat him. Even worse, Adalmann had that Holy-Evil Inversion skill, which only added to his invincibility.

Really, I thought, Arnaud couldn't be blamed for this. With all the magicules Adalmann's team absorbed in the labyrinth, they had simply evolved into upper-level monsters, and Arnaud happened to challenge them right then. Bad timing, really. But think about it the other way—getting to cross swords with the strongest knight of a centuries-old era was an incredibly lucky opportunity to have.

And now, under Alberto's direction, the Crusaders under Arnaud were rotating in and out of the Dungeon to train.

\*

So Floor 60 had turned into something of a death trap while I wasn't paying attention, but...

"What about the other floors, then?"

I could see where this was going. Adalmann and Zegion couldn't have been the only ones transforming like mad down there. And I was right. Now,

apparently, there was a new group in the labyrinth, a team consisting of nothing but the ultimate titans. They called themselves the Ten Dungeon Marvels, and really, I think they could give my cabinet a run for their money.

Adalmann was on the team, of course, as was his assistant Alberto. Apito, with her new moniker of Insect Queen, had joined the Marvel ranks, and apparently Zegion was now the highest ranked among them. And then we had Kumara—evidently, by taking the magical beasts in her nine tails and infusing them into her body, she could assume the form of an adult woman.



"It's time to make the big announcement!" Ramiris shouted, and then she went over the Dungeon's current situation and latest news.

Let's start from the bottom up. Ramiris, keeping her promise to Milim, had carefully raised the four element-infused dragons, all of them successfully evolving into Dragon Lords—the result of being constantly bombarded by Veldora's magicules. Thus we now had a Fire Dragon Lord, a Frost Dragon Lord, a Wind Dragon Lord, and an Earth Dragon Lord deep down. I can't say I was too excited about knowing that, but those were the facts.

And that wasn't all. The full rundown:

Floor 90 guardian: "Nine-Head" Kumara

Floor 80 guardian: "Insect Kaiser" Zegion

Floor 79 boss: "Insect Queen" Apito

Floor 70 guardian: "Immortal King" Adalmann

Floor 70 advance guard: "Death Paladin" Alberto

That, plus a bonus—Bovix and Equix as our Floor 50 guardians. *They*, sad to say, weren't really Dungeon Marvels. Instead, they had inducted Beretta, the manager who made all of this work.

"Personally, I would love to palm off—*ahem!*—I mean, award this great honor to someone else..." Beretta carefully eyed Treyni and Ifrit—now known as Charys.

"Oh dear, I'm afraid I have the extremely important job of taking care of Lady Ramiris," Treyni replied with a beautiful smile.

"Yes, and I am Sir Veldora's only confidant. His care occupies all my attention." Charys was pretty used and abused by Veldora, I felt, but I guess he liked it. Either way, neither were interested in any more work. *Reminds me of a certain butler I know*, I thought as I sighed.

"Sounds like you got a tough job, Beretta."

"Oh, you sympathize, Sir Rimuru?!"

I nodded back, reminding myself just how much of a bond we shared.

As I did, I went over a few other things. First off, who exactly did the Ten Dungeon Marvels answer to? The Dungeon was a facility run by all of us, as both a hobby and a moneymaking venture. Much of it ran on Ramiris's powers, and it'd never function correctly without Veldora's energy. When considering this, I'd think Ramiris, as general manager, would also assume Ten Marvels leadership, but...

"Well, along those lines, I conducted interviews with everyone and adjusted things to their requests!"

Ramiris laid it all out for me. First, Beretta served Ramiris—no change there. The four Dragon Lords were also under Ramiris's authority; they had a contract drawn up and everything, and since Dragon Lords are sentient, they were allowed to execute it.

Kumara had become good friends with the children and enjoyed life here a great deal, so I guess her gratitude for me has gone pretty wild. She had publicly declared that she was my pet, leaving Ranga in the dust. Zegion and Apito also took a liking to me, saying they'll treat me as their lord. Adalmann, well, I was a god to him. This had rubbed off on Alberto, and his loyalty was now with me, through his boss. So those five were mine, so to speak.

Bovix and Equix, I figured, would be better off under Ramiris—they were more hired by the Dungeon than anything else. They appreciated it, I was told, but voiced a desire to serve under me instead. Which... Well, they're both species who believe in power over anything else, so I bet with Ramiris, they *totally* judged that book by its cover.

"No, they didn't! You *named* those two guys, remember? That's more valuable to 'em than any salary they get, so they insisted!"

Ah. That kinda thing, huh? That makes me feel happy, actually. I'll have to drop a few kind words next time I see them.

And so as I was watching those three imperial intruders earlier, I actually had a front-row seat to some pretty startling changes in the Dungeon. "Stunned into silence" is about the right way to put it, but really, it's great to see our guardians get stronger. Still, all these unanticipated evolutions made me a little anxious—a bad habit for someone as timid as myself.

But enough of that. With the Ten Dungeon Marvels in place, an imperial attack would be nothing to worry about. I *did* inform them, however, to try to go a little easy on our challengers from the general public. Otherwise, I thought, it'd be pretty much impossible for your average dude to make it anywhere in there. Why would they want to take on a labyrinth with not one but several demon lord-class enemies inside?

I wanted to be sure Floor 100 was never breached, at minimum, but Veldora could see to that himself. As for the other floors? I'd like to let people hack their way down to Floor 80, at least. We took all this time building it, so I'd kinda like people to look at it. But we could think about that during peacetime.

\*

After getting a rundown on the labyrinth's current status, I went around to each floor guardian. I wanted to get a close look at them all, checking how they'd grown and evolved. The results were beyond my imagination. With *this* much fighting force, I couldn't see how we could possibly lose to the Empire in here.

Then, a few days later, I finally got to experiment on our completed forest monitoring system.

We were seated in our Strategic Military Control Battle Command Center, or the Control Center for short. I talked over the name with Veldora and the gang, and we let our imaginations go wild...but now, I kinda regretted making it so long. I probably debated over it with the wrong people. Benimaru strictly called it the Control Center, so not too many people actually knew the entire name.

This was built next to Veldora's personal chamber on Floor 100, and we set up a passageway to our normal strategy room as well. If we quarantined the surface city inside the labyrinth, this would serve as Tempest's headquarters. In case of war, we were all set...but of course, I'd prefer if we never had to use it.

The results of our magic monitoring system were quite impressive. We had multiple large screens set up, the same sort we used for the battle tournament, and each one showed a different scene. Whether it was the Forest of Jura, our trade routes with the Dwarven Kingdom, or any other important site, we now had all the visuals we could care to monitor. We could even observe the sea

routes in the Kingdom of Farminus, or the peaks of the Canaat Mountains, without any issue.

It operated in a really simple way. Using the physical magic Megiddo that I invented, the system subtly altered and reshaped a large, lens-shaped body of water suspended in the stratosphere, projecting an expanded image of a given target point. Reflecting this image let us transmit its data, like a video. Consulting with Moss, I figured out how to use my own replications, deployed across our territory, as magic invokers. They were connected to me via Dominate Space, producing a data link that was perfectly synced up at all points. These replications were super-tiny in size and had no self-consciousness, so they wouldn't consume energy unless I turned my attention to them. Transporting them over to a given surveillance point was nontrivial, but Soei, Moss, and the rest of their team put in a great effort.

Overall, it was a great system that operated at a low cost. I named this physical magic Argos, the Eye of God.

The output we were currently seeing on-screen was in high resolution, following some Raphael-provided image processing. This let us keep abreast of things from our nice, warm Control Center. This was some really amazing magic. Everyone else was jazzed about it, too—especially Diablo, but I won't go into that.

With this monitoring system complete, I now realized that it provided another key perk. It made it possible to position a Megiddo spell at any point in the images we saw in the Control Center. I tried it out myself, and the results were amazing—I didn't think it'd actually work, so I just lobbed a shot out at Gobta's feet while he was training in our town's main square. He leaped straight up in surprise, and I don't think I'll forget the face he made for a while to come. (I *did* yell at him—“*You let your guard down, dumbass!*”—but I didn't think he was *really* at fault.)

My Megiddo spell had also improved. It had already been optimized once by the Great Sage, but it looked like Raphael wasn't quite satisfied. After some more scrupulous enhancements, it had developed a system where I could keep multiple lens “satellites” in the air at once. Paired with Argos, we could even keep Megiddo activated during the nighttime—it wasn't quite as powerful, but

we could successfully reflect light between satellites to collect images.

Honestly speaking, I was kinda wondering whether we weren't devoting our efforts to the wrong things. We used a high-level spirit to actually generate these lenses, so they'd stay up as long as I kept their magicule supply intact. Raphael handled all the tricky calculations, so everything was super-easy to control—and since it didn't consume anything during daytime hours, we could run it even harder, taking in more light and heat energy and launching Megiddo shots like heat rays.

The sheer scope of these improvements blew my mind. At this rate, I could wipe out a human army without even having to lift a finger.

\*

Upon confirming our experiment's success, I returned to my office. Not long after, showing impeccable timing, Shuna came in and said I had a visitor.

I may not look it, but I entertain a lot of guests—really, that's the majority of my work. Beyond that, there's magic development, brainstorming fun new products, and assigning the right people to the right jobs. That and labyrinth administration, helping Mollie out with stuff... A lot. All work needs an aspect of play to it, after all. But anyway, handling visitors is the most important part of my job, and I try to take it seriously.

The reception room Shuna guided me to already contained Shinji's trio, waiting nervously for me. They were officially going to accept asylum in Tempest, and over the past few days, I'd been grilling them for all their info. This was entirely on a volunteer basis, of course, not an interrogation—they were just being interviewed in different rooms. I let them use their free time however they wanted, so I was sure they'd have time to work out their future plans—and that was what they were there to tell me about that day.

"So have you decided what you'll be doing?"

Shinji's band had trouble deciding whether to find an outfit in Tempest to work for or become freelance adventurers instead. If they kept up adventuring, they could tackle the labyrinth and continue being pretty popular, wealthy figures—but on the other hand, now that they knew the limits of their strength down there, there wasn't much potential for growth. Our Demon Colossus was

stationed on Floor 60, but it seemed likely Shinji's party would have serious trouble against it—and even if they beat that guy, Adalmann's terrible trio was just ten floors down.

It was a dead end no matter how you sliced it, and I could understand if they didn't want to bang their heads against that wall the rest of their lives. Seeing that wall for themselves pretty much tanked their motivation for the job. It was good money, for sure, but wouldn't it turn into a boring rut after a while?

And really, Adalmann and his friends had grown way stronger than I planned for. It wasn't even funny. I never thought they'd grow—or evolve, I suppose—that much, and there wasn't much I could do about that. But whatever. Let's just forget about it—and let's not worry about what the Dungeon's *other* challengers would think, either.

So would they find jobs elsewhere in Tempest? I'd be assigning them a spot based on their talents, and it'd still provide a guaranteed, stable life for them. But with war against the Empire coming up, I was sure they were worried about getting swept up in that somehow. I had no interest in forcing them, but I couldn't guarantee they'd never get involved, either. Better keep from saying too much. I'd just wait to see their decision.

"Right, so after the three of us discussed it, Sir Rimuru, we decided that we want you to let us work here in Tempest. We heard about how Lord Gadora would be serving you, and so we're hoping we can live and work here as well."

Shinji looked nervous. The other two solemnly nodded; I guessed they were all on the same page.

"All right. In that case, welcome home."

"Thank you very much!"

"We'll do our best here!"

"...I'll work hard for you, sir."

And thus Tempest's population increased by three.

Next came jobs.

"So I'm gonna have old man Gadora work as a manager on Floor 60," I

explained. “He’ll research the Demon Colossus, and at some point in the future, I plan to have him possess it.”

That old geezer had a serious thirst for knowledge, and he was super-enthusiastic about the idea. The moment he set his eyes upon the Demon Colossus, he almost started doing a dance right on the spot. Right then he was in the hands of Adalmann, but maybe I could let him be the guardian of Floor 60 later on.

“Now, you guys don’t want to join the war, right?” I asked the trio.

“Um, right,” replied Shinji, looking a bit reticent. “We know some people on the other side, so if possible...”

In that case, instead of hiring them on in my government, I felt it was better to assign them research work in the labyrinth. So I decided to introduce them to Ramiris.

\*

Bounding our way through the Dungeon, we reached Ramiris’s laboratory shortly.

“Hey, Ramiris, you think you can find jobs for these guys in your lab?”

“Ah, Rimuru! You mean the kids from before?”

“Right, yeah.”

Ramiris had been looking for personal assistants, but it was hard to find anyone qualified. I couldn’t let researchers from other nations become Ramiris’s playthings, but the less intelligent monsters wouldn’t be able to keep up with her pie-in-the-sky ideas. She had Deeno, yeah, but he wasn’t enough to put my mind at ease. But now we had Shinji’s trio, and I couldn’t think of a better fit.

“Whoo-hoo! My name’s Ramiris. You guys interested in becoming my new assistants?”

“Umm...” Shinji didn’t know how to react. I’m not sure he realized who Ramiris was.

“Oh, fantastic! Look, Shinji! A real fairy!” Marc shouted excitedly. Maybe it

was his first time seeing one? I don't know how much time he had spent in this world, but if a fairy made him *this* worked up, he must've been a pretty purehearted guy.

"So you see, I'm looking for some capable assistants. I'll pay you for it, too. Whaddaya think? We got some major personnel shortages around here, and Rimuru said that fully educated otherworlders are *totally* the time-saving solution!"

You didn't have to say all *that*, Ramiris. It's true, though—they've got technical skills, flexible minds, and can jump right into the world. I really hoped they'd be interested in taking this on.

"...Well, I'll do it. Research seems a lot more peaceful."

Zhen's certainly honest. And I guess he was the tipping point for Shinji.

"In that case, by all means!"

Ramiris happily flitted around in the air, sticking out her (nonexistent) chest proudly.

"*Hmph!* Looks like *you* guys got a lot of potential. Well, all right! Passing grades for all of you! But you're gonna have to follow *all* my orders, okay?!"

The way she can change her attitude on a moment's notice always surprised me. Where was all the awkwardness from before? It was certainly in character for her, at least.

Leaving the dumbfounded Shinji and his friends in the dust, Ramiris quickly began laying out her offer. Their salary would be three gold coins a month, thirty-six per year, along with bonuses. Of course, Ramiris tended to pay her staff based on her own whims—kind of like myself—so I wouldn't rely too much on that bonus. It sounded like Ramiris was offering them room and board, though. I was sure she expected them to use my own dining hall, but I didn't mind that.

So Shinji and his group had their immigration arrangements settled in short order.

\*

A few more days passed. The gang quickly got used to their new workplaces; now they were serving as Ramiris's right hands in the lab.

I saw no problems there, but now Gadora was a concern. I hadn't had any contact with him since he left for the Empire. He was a stubborn old man, I knew, so I figured he was all right...but I was starting to get worried. I really wished he'd drop me a line.

That thought was lingering as I held a briefing with Benimaru in the Control Center. Video data from my Argos system was on the large monitor. Every viewpoint was clear. I wanted to collect data from within the Empire as well, but for now, I was satisfied with video from our military borders. From those feeds, we could see large numbers of soldiers gathered, keeping a careful watch over the area. Tensions were always high over there.

"No moves today, it looks like."

"Not at all, no. But isn't this magic so useful, Sir Rimuru? This must've been what you were spending so much time researching lately, isn't it?"

We were all alone today, so Benimaru was less formal than usual. I preferred keeping it casual like this, actually, but Benimaru was back to his usual stodgy, stuffy self whenever other people showed up. Not around Soei or Diablo, though. We all had a "partners in crime" thing going that I liked, and sometimes we'd all head over to Englesia to go drinking together.

"Exactly! And the most wonderful thing about this magic is the innovation behind the idea. It offers tremendous effects at a low energy cost. Its usefulness speaks for itself, and the complexity of the calculations behind it ensures nothing goes to waste, like a fine work of art. And that's why—"

"*Enooooough!!* Once you start bragging, you never stop, so can you do that when I'm not around, maybe?"

This always happens when I let my guard down a little. Diablo immediately starts extolling my praises—it drives me up the wall. Yes, my magic's really great and all, but it's really Raphael doing all the hard work. I don't see it as my own skill set, so I couldn't help but feel a bit awkward.

"He's right, Diablo. Restrain yourself a little, or you'll cause trouble for Sir

Rimuru.”

“Nonsense. How can you say that, Benimaru? That’s hardly the case, is it, Sir Rimuru?”

“No, Benimaru’s right. It’s always Rimuru this, Rimuru that with you. You need to tone it down!”

I had to make myself clear with Diablo. It made him collapse on the floor, a shocked look on his face, but that was no big deal.

When I heard Diablo was a Primal Demon or some kinda freaky thing like that, I wasn’t sure what I was gonna do...but if you think about it, he’s always been a weirdo from the start. Even Guy had trouble dealing with him. Try to take him seriously, and you’ll just make a fool of yourself. Now that I knew that, I was done messing around.

“Heh...heh-heh-heh-heh... Yes, Sir Rimuru. Well done. Dealing such emotional damage to me so easily...”

“I’m telling you to *stop* that!”

You see? He never learns. Going a little hard on him is the perfect way to balance it.

But our wholesome little moment came to an end after a sudden report from Ramiris.

(Rimuru, someone just teleported directly into the labyrinth! Based on its signature, I think it’s that old man you befriended!)

(Got it. I’ll head right over to Floor 70.)

I stood up. That alone made Benimaru and Diablo realize something happened—I appreciated that. So I gave them a quick rundown.

“Well, Gadora’s back, but it sounds like something’s up with him. I’m gonna go check it out.”

“Absolutely,” Benimaru replied. “I will stay on alert here, then.”

“I’ll escort you, Sir Rimuru.”

“Thanks.”

It was times like these when I could rely on Diablo. If only he *always* acted like that...but no need to dwell on it. Diablo was a talent but subject to just the *worst* swings in behavior. It saddened me a bit as we headed for Gadora's personal chamber.



\*

We found him in there—in fine shape, as well, despite my concerns.

“*Phew!* I thought I was a goner for a moment,” he said, not looking like he encountered anything more dangerous than a stubbed toe. Adalmann’s group was there with us; Ramiris and Veldora showed up later but left after they saw Gadora was okay.

“So what happened?”

“Well, I tell you, I went to the Imperial Council and argued against the war there, but I couldn’t tip the trend away, sadly. I expected as much, so I decided to go to Emperor Ludora one last time and see if I couldn’t appeal to him directly.”

He made the request for a meeting, which was accepted and scheduled for today. But inside the imperial palace, he said, he was stabbed by someone. This happened not even ten minutes ago. That definitely *wasn’t* all right; I felt guilty for asking.

“Oh... Right. I gave you a Resurrection Bracelet.”

“Ha-ha! Lady Ramiris’s powers are truly amazing. They saved my life, in fact. I thought something like this might happen, so I set up a return spell in advance.”

Judging by how healthy and unstabbed he was, I figured it was something like that. Pretty smart idea. If he could instantly teleport himself back to the labyrinth, the Resurrection Bracelet would save his life, no matter how badly he was hurt. Seeing a real-life example like this reminded me all over again just how effective Ramiris’s abilities were.

Still, though, Gadora’s a pretty nimble guy himself. Setting up spells in advance like an alarm... He taught those tricks to Razen as well, apparently, and I’d want to practice that later on. I had Haste Thought, too, and combining it with this delay thing could produce some even bigger results.

“Who attacked you, then?”

There weren’t too many people in our nation who could kill Gadora. He was always on his guard, keeping up a pretty stiff magic defense, and I didn’t think

he'd fail to spot a sneak attack in time, but...

"Well, the assassin managed to avoid my detection before they struck, so I wasn't able to see exactly who it was. There *is* a suspect in my mind, but I must admit, it's a rather hard-to-believe one..."

He showed me his back; there was a straight tear in his robe. His body was completely healed, but his clothing was still in the same condition. The tear was corroded in spots, too, so it clearly wasn't just a physical attack.

"A single stab to the heart from behind, huh?"

"Your defenses were destroyed by magic, it would seem," Diablo added. "Quite an interesting skill to use..."

It had piqued Diablo's interest, and if so, this was no amateur assassin we were dealing with. I was sure the Empire had someone capable of killing me—maybe it was Gadora's attacker, even, but I ought to have assumed there was more than that.

Gadora himself didn't seem confident enough about his hunch to name a suspect, but he wanted to do some investigating, so I'd leave that to him. I didn't think he was lying, and he honestly seemed perplexed about the whole thing. I wasn't about to trust him immediately, but I figured I'd wait and see what happened.

"Well, I'm glad you're all right, at least. It certainly shows us that the Empire shouldn't be trifled with. Let's all try to be a little more careful."

"You are exactly right, Sir Rimuru," Diablo agreed. "No need to risk our necks further with them. I am sure there is little new information to find, regardless."

Gadora nearly died over the info he got for me, and I had to be satisfied with that. So after a few more kind words, I let him brief me on what he found.

\*

As the old man put it, the Empire was making concrete moves toward war.

Whenever the Empire opened hostilities against another nation, they never bothered issuing a formal declaration of war. The emperor was defined to be the sole, unique presence that mattered, and they didn't even recognize the

existence of other countries. That, of course, was lip service; they had diplomatic relations with the Dwarven Kingdom, for one, and they didn't meddle in their sovereign territory.

If the Empire decided to invade, it only did so after careful, prudent preparation. They didn't declare war; they sent a letter advising the other side to surrender, and only once. If you followed it, fine; if not (as the stories went) the war was on, and they'd no longer show any mercy.

You really couldn't get much haughtier as a nation—or more arrogant. If you're gonna be such a bother, guys, don't expect to make any friends in international society, okay? Not that they participated in it anyway. They hadn't ratified any of the international law enacted by the Council of the West, so once they started a war, all bets were off. Post-defeat agreements? Prisoner handling? Prohibited actions during war? They followed none of those, part of why the Western Nations feared the Empire so much.

Which...yeah, I can see why. At this rate, they might try to justify the mass killing of civilians—and if you lost in war against the Empire, that meant losing everything. I doubted the word *reparations* was in their vocabulary—everything belonged to the Empire, so the losing nation would lose all their rights. If you wanted to reason with them, you had to at least fight them to a draw. We definitely couldn't let up right then. We had to go in strong and cut out the root of all this evil.

Now that we knew the Empire's direction, we switched gears into our own wartime proceedings. Our Control Center would now become a strategic headquarters—just a formality, really, but still an important one. Benimaru and Soei would be on standby there at all times, the latter using his replications to fan across the region for spy ops. That way, we wouldn't have to rely solely on our Argos network, and with Moss's assistance, he should be able to get some pretty accurate intel.

At this point in time, we had a pretty decent advantage.

Basically, in this world, war didn't *really* begin until one army encountered the other. You could use scouts and long-range magic to try detecting enemy movements in advance, but conventional wisdom called for that only when the

two sides were pretty close to bumping into each other anyway. The concept of information warfare was a thing here, but there wasn't another nation on this planet with an enemy-monitoring program as thorough as ours. That's what Hinata and Gadora told me, too, so I wasn't imagining it. It was the golden truth.

"This... Are we seeing this from the air...?" Gadora asked, incredulous.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh..." Diablo chuckled. "This is a product of Sir Rimuru's magic. It requires merely a minuscule amount of magicules to trigger magic from beyond the stratosphere. Only a small number of people could ever detect this magic in motion. One would need a danger-prediction ability on the level of Ultra-Instinct."

"Y-yes... Indeed. I'm fairly confident in my own magic detection skills, but this just seems so *natural*. I never imagined it was the work of any caster at all..."

"Precisely! Even an Arch Demon well versed in magic would overlook such a low-level spell. Truly wonderful. Don't you agree?"

"I do, I do! This magic is simply mind-boggling!"

Diablo, for some reason, was now bragging to Gadora with the smuggest of grins. The old sorcerer was getting more and more excited as he concurred with each of Diablo's boasts.

"Shion?"

"Right away!"

Diablo was going to be nothing but a distraction, so I ordered Shion to isolate him in another room. Now that things were quiet, we got to the business at hand.

This high-altitude monitoring system was just beyond cheating. I mean, think about it. Until this moment, we spent so much time fretting about which route they'd attack from, but now that seemed like a joke. We had a full video feed of not only the most likely routes but our entire border with the Empire, so we'd see everything from the moment they kicked off. It was like playing chess with a blindfolded opponent—they'd only know where their pieces were, and unless you were a real beginner, you wouldn't even lose to a professional. They

weren't just missing a couple pieces—they were at a near-total disadvantage.

And of course, war has no rules anyway. If you win, you played it right.

Having the other side plot an invasion of our territory was scarier than I thought. It meant you'd have war on your own land, with no previous agreements. But I put up one rule in advance:

*"No touching civilians!"*

We, of course, would strictly prohibit ourselves from striking first. If we declared an end to hostilities, we'd refrain from attacking any further. I trusted that nobody would go against this and break the rules.

Now I had the cabinet of Tempest here in the Control Center. Benimaru was our commander, Hakuro our chief adviser. Rigurd was there, along with the heads of the three powers of government serving under him—Rugurd, Regurd, and Rogurd. Shuna and Lilina led the female contingent; they were alongside Rigur, our top behind-the-scenes man, as well as Kaijin and Kurobe. I had Vester and Mjöllmile in there as consultants; Gobta and Gabil had reported in as army generals, and Geld had taken time off from his work to show up as well. Finally, I had invited Testarossa and her two demoness friends—and I let Diablo in, too, figuring he had learned his lesson. He was standing amicably in his usual spot alongside Shion.

I also decided to bring Gadora and Shinji's gang in as witnesses...and a bit later Masayuki, that font of morale for all of humanity, came in.

"Wait a minute. Why am I the 'font of morale' for anything?! Can you stop spouting crap about me like that? Ugh!"

Oops. Guess I was airing my thoughts out loud again. Masayuki looked pretty huffy about it...and for some reason, Gadora was staring right at both of us. Maybe something caught his eye, but I'd ask about it afterward.

That left two more people to mention—Veldora and Ramiris, our support staff. Beretta, Treyni, and Charys were also on standby in one corner. That was about all of them.

Giving a few pets to Ranga on the ground next to me, I looked around at my seated audience.

"I don't need to tell you all why you're here today. We're going to hold a conference to work out our opposition to the Empire. Benimaru and I have come up with an outline of our strategy, but I want to hear your feedback on it as well. Don't be afraid to speak up at any time."

“““Yes, Sir Rimuru!“““

So the conference began.

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Turning toward the screen, I saw it display crowds of imperial forces on the move—these metallic vehicles, whirring along as they ran on treads. They were tanks, and from what the image showed, there were around two thousand of them.

*Whoa! I thought when I saw that. What are tanks doing there?!*

Flustered, I asked Shinji's group for some explanation. Through them, we learned that the Empire was using the knowledge—and science—of otherworlders to develop modern weaponry. They had internal combustion engines that ran on magicules instead of oil, charging up their energy through air circulation—allowing for cooling and magicule supply at the same time. A pretty well-thought-out system, in my opinion. These tanks were also pretty versatile; in terms of functionality, I'd say they easily outclassed the best tanks in our old world.

Gadora told us that the Empire analyzed a magical control reactor found in some ancient ruins and reworked them for modern times. They were also building up a supply of magic stones for fuel purposes, relying on the natural magicule supply for normal operation and the stones during battle. They could run at up to sixty-five miles an hour, and bad roads were no problem for them—they could even float in the air, a little above the ground, although it cost energy.

Frankly, I felt, we had fallen behind. If only we had worked on these... It frustrated me. *Tanks*, in a world of knights... It never even occurred to me. And I had *trains* and everything! I was one step away!

...But would you really develop tanks before *cars*? I didn't think so. I mean, I'd

need to think things over carefully before I even put cars into the mix. They'd be useful, but it was kinda like playing with fire. I was sure everybody would want one, but I didn't think it'd be possible to dole out one to each person. We couldn't tap our energy supply dry, so there was bound to be the haves and the have-nots.

It was a better idea, I thought, to develop our cities so you didn't need cars. With trains, after all, things were a lot more convenient already. But maybe once our rail network was built out, I could develop luxury cars as a kind of hobbyist thing for the rich? Something you'd wanna *strive* to own someday. It'd give people something to dream about, and I figured something high-end enough to be a status symbol would be all right.

But that could wait until the war was over. After all, the tanks weren't the only surprise.

They even had flying ships. It was hard to keep from shouting out, *Are you kidding me?!*

Those things would make transportation so much easier. If you used them in war, your supply problems were a thing of the past. If we could've taken air superiority for our own, I would've been a lot more optimistic. *We need to develop those*, I thought, but it just wasn't too realistic yet. Flying airships weren't something you could wrap up in a day. I think it was doable with enough time, but no development project ever went that smoothly. Every project took shape only with a trial-and-error process.

On this point, I really had to applaud the Empire's R & D department. And hopefully nobody would chide me for thinking, *Boy, it'd be nice if we could seize one of those intact...*

But...man. If only I'd thought a bit more outside the box with my orders for things...but never mind. No point gnashing my teeth over it. But it was something for the future. Once this war was done with, I definitely wanted to start developing some more neat, innovative stuff.

\*

So we saw the current state of the Empire.

I had been briefed on it in advance, but a lot of people in the Control Center were finding out for the first time. They gazed at the screen, mouths agape, not bothering to hide their surprise.

"The total size of the invasion force is estimated to be one million! I guess you can see that, but...I think the Empire's military has been a surprise for us all, but we still have the advantage in this conflict, so don't worry."

The most important element of war was how well you could estimate the opponent's fighting power. On *that* point, we pretty much stripped the enemy bare.

Raphael told me that the total count was a million, and that was a crazy number to deploy, but I didn't think it spelled doom for us. That was simply how much leeway we had to work with.

"Gadora has informed me that the imperial military is composed of three major divisions. One of them is called the Armored Division, and that includes the tank force we see here. They call it the Magitank Force, and we can assume it's the main source of their power."

I explained the inner workings of the Magitank Force to everyone. But that wasn't all of Gadora's info. He had participated in their strategy meetings for me, and he told me everything that was covered. The Empire knew Gadora had deserted by now, so there was a chance they changed their plans, but I was sure the main gist was the same.

They had Yuuki over there, after all, and Yuuki was apparently angling to stage a coup of the Empire. I was sure he was encouraging the other division commanders to not worry about the *surely* dead Gadora—that ought to mess them up. Plus, as Gadora told me, the commander of the Armored Corps, a man named Caligulio, had taken the bait I laid out for him. He believed the Dungeon was full of resources and treasure, and he wanted to seize it before anyone else could. If so, I'm sure he wouldn't want to change out the whole operation at *this* point, so chances were good that he'd take up Yuuki's suggestions. Working on assumptions is a dangerous move, but seeing how Caligulio ran his force, it'd be easy to surmise what his army wanted.

Once I wrapped up my rundown, Gobta was the first to speak.

"Ummm, my force is stationed in the lodging town, but are they gonna be fightin' those tank thingies?"

Very observant. In fact, for someone appointed a commander, this was a life-or-death question. Considering his long, documented history of sleeping through meetings, Gobta was showing some real growth. Sometimes, a guy needs a little responsibility to show his true colors—

"Isn't *that* obvious? The job of your First Army Corps is to smash up this tank force!"

As my emotions got the better of me, Benimaru gave him the news. The shock made Gobta sway in his seat.

"Nobody told *me*..."

Yeah, I get it.

"So... So you mean we need to defend the town with our lives?" he asked, a look of death already on his face. I smiled back at him.

"Of course not! Based on what I know about the tanks' abilities, I think you guys could win if you took the right approach, but who knows how many losses you'd take doing it... That, and defending's always harder than attacking, and your Green Numbers without any battle experience are gonna be pretty fat targets for them. So no, it's not a 'to the death' thing."

I was trying to calm him down. Hakuro, who I assigned to support Gobta, was nodding at this; he must've caught my drift.

"Okay, so what are we gonna do?"

"*That* is the job of a general to work out...but I shouldn't expect that from you first thing. Benimaru, if you could?"

Yes, I was lording it over him, but honestly, I was just as much a military amateur as Gobta. I didn't know much about strategy, so I was leaving the nitty-gritty to Benimaru. But then, I enjoyed making life easier for myself. If Gobta could work hard and mature for me, I'd be able to kick back that much more.

So, hoping Gobta would put in a diligent effort, I listened to Benimaru alongside him.

"All right, Gobta. The lodging town's a vital base for us, but losing it wouldn't be a major concern. If they tear it down, we can rebuild it; if they capture it, we can take it back. The problem is the potential for civilian casualties, but Sir Rimuru has taken care of that. He's already sent out the order for everyone to evacuate to the capital of Rimuru."

Mm-hmm. The moment I knew the Empire was on the move, I had them begin the evacuation. It'll take time, I'm sure, but it ought to wrap up before the Empire arrives.

"Oh, right, there weren't a lot of folks around there..."

"I'm sure there weren't. Your job's to help anyone left in there evacuate to safety. After that, you'll be heading here."

Benimaru pointed out a spot on the large map we had spread out on the conference table. It was the Armed Nation of Dwargon—in particular, its central city.

"Huh?"

"Look at this image. The imperial force intends to split up and invade from several routes. Some of their units are already in the Forest of Jura, but the tank force hasn't moved yet. Based on the direction of their advance, they're clearly following the foothills of the Canaat Mountains. It's not as thick with trees there, so the force won't get bogged down as much."

"Oh... Um, okay..."

"You don't get it, do you? Ah well. Anyway, your mission is to defend the Dwarven Kingdom."

As he spoke, Benimaru moved a peg representing Gobta's force into the Dwarven Kingdom. Then he took another one out, symbolizing the dwarven armed forces, and placed it next to Gobta's.

"You'll be fighting together."

"Ohhh...!!"

Now Gobta got it. His reaction was a mix of surprise and excitement.

This was another operation inspired by Gadora's information; Gazel already

gave it his blessing. As per our agreement, I informed him that the Empire was aiming at the Dwarven Kingdom—and as I promised him, I declared that we'd send him backup. Gazel, to his credit, had picked up on the Empire's suspicious behavior; they had repeatedly asked for permission to march through. He was starting to get sick of constantly refusing them, but he could read between the lines—he knew they'd lose their patience and get moving eventually.

My offer was welcomed by him, and it'd give us a lot of benefits as well. We could always rebuild the lodging town if it was destroyed, but as we saw it, the Empire wouldn't go out of their way to pillage it if no fighting occurred there. If we could get it back soon enough, I saw no problem with abandoning it for now.

"The Empire's traveling through such a conspicuous spot because they wanna convince us they'll invade there. With *this* much of a show, anybody would notice it."

"Oh, so it's one of those 'show of force' things?"

Damn, Gobta. Grasping the fancy concepts and everything. He must've been studying a little bit. I was impressed.

"That's right. This route they're taking is on the border between Dwargon and Tempest. Both countries are going to notice them; it's a great way for them to gauge our moves. If it looks like we're gonna meddle with them, they can use that as a pretext to start attacking. We're forbidden from striking first, of course, so we'd start with a warning. Do you understand so far?"

"Yep."

"Now, if we don't make any moves, the imperial force will cross the Great Ameld River and reach a point that overlooks the main entrance to the Dwarven Kingdom. That's a broad, grassy area without any trees, the perfect place to deploy an army."

"Uh-huh..."

"Once they get that far, King Gazel's not going to stay silent. He'll face up to them with his own forces and try to negotiate. And it's the same way with us. The Emperor will make enemies out of us and the kingdom at that point."

Benimaru moved the pegs around the map to demonstrate.

“Sir Gadora said that the emperor’s wary of being surrounded by the dwarven and Tempestian armies, but as long as they cover this point, that can’t happen. Even if the other side stages a sneak attack from here, it wouldn’t mean anything tactically.”

A surprise attack involves striking the enemy when its guard is down. If the enemy expects it the whole time, it was not only meaningless, but it could be harmful.

“And so instead of that, we’ll assault them from the start. We’ll go right up, and we’ll smash them!”

Benimaru tapped Gobta’s peg against the Empire’s.

“Ohhhh!!”

Gobta sounded impressed. None of my other advisers seemed against it, but what do they think about our forces’ size difference?

“Third Army Corps General Gabil!”

“Sir!”

“Your role is to guard the evacuating residents. Watch from the skies for stragglers or people in trouble and help them out as needed.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Once you guide them to safety, you’ll travel over to Gobta to support him. If the timing works out, you’ll reach him before the Empire can.”

“Our force is the swiftest in all of Tempest. I promise you we will make it in time!”

Gabil looked confident enough about it, but realistically speaking, it’d be tough. I intended to have the trains running full speed to get the residents evacuated, but moving tens of thousands of people took time, and the Empire had frightening mobility.

Based on our calculations (which factored in their legion magic as well), we predicted that their army could advance a mind-blowing forty miles in a day.

Right then, the Empire was stopped against the border. From there to where they planned to open hostilities, there were around 930 miles of terrain to cover. In about twenty more days, the imperial force would reach their destination. This dizzying marching pace was possible because each of their soldiers had undergone body enhancement surgery—or something like that. This apparently let them stay on the move for a week without food or drink, so their maximum fighting speed was even faster than that.

The tanks, meanwhile, could go around six or seven miles an hour without an external supply, and since atmospheric magicules were available day and night, they could take advantage of that to resupply themselves more fully when resting. No point exhausting your force before the war even began, after all. Gadora's guidance along those lines seemed sound enough, so Benimaru and I used his assumptions for our calculations.

"...Thanks to that, the Empire could arrive at this point sooner than we expect. I don't want anyone here to be caught by surprise!"

Upon closing that subject, Benimaru moved right on to the next one.

"So this is where the Empire will break out their main army, but as Gobta said, this is mainly a show of force—in other words, a feint. Their *real* breakout teams are going to move toward here!"

He took out some differently colored Empire pegs and spread them around the Forest of Jura. Their plan was to make us think the tanks were their main force, then place the brunt of their troops elsewhere. This was all plain as day in our monitors, so I couldn't say the idea really wowed us.

"Now, even if things expand past what we're expecting over here, we still have Geld guarding this terrain! Geld, I want you to call your forces back from their stations as quickly as you can."

"Understood. I've already sent the Thought Communication. All my forces will gather up shortly."

Benimaru and Geld were certainly on the same page; just a few words, and everything was set. I knew I could rely on him.

Now Benimaru looked back down at the map. "These forces are likely going to

advance through the forest, trying to stay hidden. Unfortunately, Sir Rimuru's Argos monitoring magic can't reveal everything happening under the forest canopy. That's where Soei comes in."

Soei nodded and stood up.

"The forest is lush with tree cover and difficult to monitor from above. Even if we deploy all our agents, there's too much ground to cover, and they run the risk of being found. So we've decided to rely on Moss instead. He's capable of releasing a large number of tiny Replications and picking up all the information they take in. None of them can fight very much, but losing a replication won't hurt us at all. Using that, Moss is currently monitoring the eastern Forest of Jura. He's informed us that platoons of imperial troops are on the advance in there, and thanks to his surveillance, we can crush each and every one of them at will."

He accentuated the point with a cruel smile. Kind of scary. Good thing he's on our side.

Sure, we could defeat these small platoons all day—but it's the big main force behind them that worried me. Benimaru's strategy for that was to wait until they had gotten themselves assembled to some extent.

"If the imperial force is trying to reach the Dungeon, we'll invite them in and take care of them then. If any remain on the surface, Geld's Second Corps and my main force will hit them hard! That's all."

It was a very simple, easy-to-grasp strategy...but really, I was still worried about our size difference. Nobody had commented on that yet, but what did they think about it? Maybe I ought to have brought it up...

...but as I hesitated, the Control Center rang out with the cries of war.

"All right! If Gabil's joining my team, we're all gonna be okay. Victory's in the bag for us!"

"I'm delighted to hear that from you, Sir Gobta! And I promise you that we'll fight the way a winning army should!"

"I was worried we wouldn't get to join in, but I knew Sir Benimaru would come through. He left us with the greatest honor of all—protecting the

homeland. Trust me when I say we'll make full use of our powers!"

All three of our generals responded to Benimaru's call to arms. Even the nonmilitary folks were excitedly trading feedback with one another. There wasn't a hint of pessimism—even the three demonesses were happily joining in.

But, guys... Again, the *size difference*...

I mean, yeah, I thought we could win this, too. I even felt pretty safe assuming we would. But I was far from anxiety-free—and yet nobody seemed the slightest bit worried. It was weird. Even Gobta was brimming with enthusiasm, his initial concerns now put behind him. He might've had Hakuro as his adviser, but I was still anxious about him.

"All right. So is anyone unclear about any part of Benimaru's rundown?"

I prompted them all, but no one had any questions. Instead, Benimaru spoke for the group.

"Do not worry, Sir Rimuru. We are not at all worried about losing—not because we don't think we'll lose, but because we'll devote every effort to the fight. We have ample enough reason to win, and we have a glorious battlefield waiting. If we lose, it just proves we were incompetent. We weren't the fittest, so we didn't survive."

He gave me a refreshing smile. All the monsters in the room were exuding the same vibe, including Shuna and the other women. They weren't afraid of losing; they were afraid of running from the fight. And more than that—I thought, vaguely at least, I was beginning to understand their feelings. I thought I did, and I decided to do what I could for them.

"Testarossa! Ultima! Carrera!"

"""Yes, sir!"""

The three demonesses immediately reacted. I had an order for them.

"Each of you will accompany an army corps and support their operations!"

"Absolutely, Sir Rimuru," Testarossa replied. "I have Cien taking care of the Council, so until this war is over, I will gladly participate."

"Finally I'm seeing some action! You're in good hands, Sir Rimuru!" said Ultima.

"Hee-hee-hee...", Carrera snickered. "You can expect great things from me, Master. Time to show off every ounce of my powers!"

The three of them looked up at me, beaming. I nodded back and gave out my assignments.

"Testarossa, you'll join Gobta."

"Gladly!" she replied.

Gobta looked significantly less convinced. "You sure about that? This girl's never even fought before. Can she keep up with the First Corps?"

Sheesh. That was a pretty bold statement to make around her. I mean, I didn't know these girls were Primals until just recently so I'm not one to talk, but Gobta's sheer courage just floored me. *She's gonna kill you*, I thought, but I kept my mouth shut. After all, wouldn't it be more fun this way?

"My, I'm glad to be of such help," Testarossa said with a smile, but I knew I wasn't the only one who couldn't look her in the eye right then. Don't worry, Gobta. I'm *pretty* sure she'll accept an apology. Can't wait for Gobta to find out who she really is, though.

By those standards, Gabil had matured a lot. He bowed his head to Ultima.

"I look forward to your support. I still have so many improvements to make!"

According to Diablo and my other sources, Ultima was the most brutal of the three demonesses. Carrera was the most likely to go out of control, but Ultima was still the scariest. I could already picture her following my orders but still keeping an eye on the side paths for some imperial soldiers to torture.

Gabil dealt with her correctly, at least. She seemed to like him a lot, chirping "Okay! I'm looking forward to it, too!" in her cute voice. I know Gabil had been working hard on his habit of getting carried away, and now I'd say it just saved his life. A little daily effort can accomplish so many things.

Geld, meanwhile, had no problem shaking hands with Carrera. They both had a kind of "noble warrior" aura to them. I have to say, though, I did a pretty

exquisite job with these pairings. If Gobta and Gabil had switched places, I think Gobta would've been in mortal danger.

So I patted myself on the back as I gave them all a little pep talk. Nobody really knew who these demonesses were; I put a gag order on everyone who attended the meeting Guy crashed. No point terrorizing everyone for no good reason. I also told the trio to keep mum about it and take orders from the generals so they wouldn't reveal themselves, but I was *so* sure they'd mess it up. It really scared me. Wish *I* didn't have to know the truth about them...

...But ahhh, let's trust them. Unless I told them to, I'm sure Testarossa and her friends would lie low. Either way, though, we had these three pairs in place, and with the demonesses accompanying our corps, I'm sure they could deal with any emergencies. That, at least, relieved me a bit.

\*

"That settles that topic. Anything further to add?"

The rest would depend on the Empire's moves, so they'd just have to play it by ear after that. It'd be important to work alongside King Gazel, so we'd need to hold detailed talks about that—but that was a strategic HQ job. Our generals had their own orders already, so if that was all, I was ready to adjourn.

But one person raised his hand up high.

"Um, could I say something?"

"What's up, Masayuki?"

"Well, uh, I just had a question..."

"Mm-hmm?"

"Ignoring the question of why I'm a general for the moment, the Volunteer Army you gave me—um, I don't think anyone said what its role would be or anything, but...?"

Ah, that? Yeah, I'm sure he has a few questions. Taking a high school-age kid and calling him a general would confuse anyone. Maybe you'd see officers his age back in the samurai era, but I didn't think a kid who grew up during peacetime in Japan could keep up with it. But... You know, it's hard for *me*, too.

I turn around one day, and *boom*, I'm a demon lord. I didn't have any helpful boss giving me a shoulder to lean on, either. Along those lines, I'd say Masayuki is pretty lucky, actually.

"Don't you think so?"

"Don't I think so, what? Can you *please* give me some guidance?"

Oh, right. Thinking all this won't get it across to him. It'd probably sound like a bunch of excuses to him, but oh well.

"Well... You know, I felt kinda bad about pushing a huge amount of responsibility on you at once."

"N-no, um..."

"But when it comes to reassuring the hearts and minds of our citizens, you're the best guy we got."

If we were all monsters here, a war breaking out wouldn't be an issue at all. Their morale would be one hundred percent, and nobody would cause any trouble. Not so with our new residents. They'd be scared, anxious, disturbed, and some might turn to crime, even.

"So it's at a time like this when I want you to exercise your powers and ease everybody's anxieties."

"I see... I think I can help you with that."

Masayuki seemed to understand well enough.

"Ah-ha-ha! No need for modesty, Sir Masayuki! As a Hero, everybody knows—to say nothing of myself—that you'd hesitate to take the side of a single nation! But I hope you'll still lend a hand to assist the powerless, the helpless among our citizenry!"

Mjöllmile's eyes sparkled as he pleaded with Masayuki. He was still misreading the kid's actual powers, but I didn't see any need to correct him. In fact, I had a sneaking suspicion that Hinata had the wrong idea about him, too. *What a bad dude*, I thought as I watched the legend of Masayuki unfold before me.

"...Yes..."

He didn't look too thrilled. In fact, I'd say he was pretty disgusted with the whole thing. I felt bad for him, but I really wanted him to pitch in.

"...So I guess my Volunteer Army will maintain public order?"

"Perfect. As you know, Ramiris will ensure that the damage to our town will be kept to a minimum. When war breaks out, you see, the capital on the surface is going to be quarantined inside the labyrinth."

I told my cabinet about this already, along with other involved parties. I wasn't keeping a tight cap on it, so I was sure the stragglers from our evacuation drills were spreading rumors about it. That was on purpose; I figured it'd help assuage people's fears a little more.

"Hee-hee-hee! That's right! I'm a pretty powerful fairy, y'know, but *that's* all thanks to my master!"

"Indeed. I have lent a portion of my ponderous magicule force to Ramiris, allowing her to engineer this gargantuan feat. Call it a victory driven by friendship, if you will."

It was Ramiris who did the required legwork to stuff the city inside the labyrinth, but it couldn't be powered at all without Veldora. I had to honestly thank him for that.

"Thanks, you two. It's a huge help."

"Oh, is it? Aw, it's no biggie! None at all! You can compliment me more if you like, though!"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! That's right! Sing our praises to the high heavens!"

"Yeah, yeah, thank you very much!"

A couple compliments, and look at them go! But they really *did* deserve it. And even when the city's sequestered in the Dungeon, you'll still see the sky above. A lot of citizens won't even realize anything is different. The Empire won't bring any of its violence to town, and really, I was still astounded by it.

"But you need to remember, Rimuru...," said Veldora.

"Hmm?"

"This isn't too likely to happen," Ramiris began, "but if my master was somehow defeated, and the Empire makes it through the hundredth floor, that's going to eject the town back up to the surface. Kind of the rebound from expending all that effort, y'know?"

"Ah, that's another concern, huh? But that's based on the assumption that Veldora's gonna lose, isn't it? If it comes to *that*, I think the town's gonna be the least of our worries."

If it did, all of us would be fully devoted to the fight. We wouldn't have the leeway to worry about what happened to the city, I'm sure.

"Not that *I'd* ever lose, of course," Veldora boasted.

"Mm-hmm. We got the Ten Dungeon Marvels on the case, too, so I think we're gonna be just peachy!"

Ramiris was right, certainly. I didn't think Veldora would be playing much of a role. But if worse comes to worst...

"There's always Masayuki, too."

"Huhhh?! W-wait! Wait a minute, please! Peacekeeping is one thing, but what could *I* ever do if it came to that?"

We all nodded at Masayuki as he whined about never even leading an army before. Even Mjöllmile, as much as he worshipped the guy, could understand.

"Don't worry, Masayuki," I assured him. "I don't expect you to lead an entire military force. I'm still discussing this with Hinata, but I'm asking her to send an aide from the Crusaders. I'm sure she'll say yes, so you're gonna have an assistant helping you out pretty soon."

"Oh, you will? Well, that's a relief."

"And *also*—!" I added. "I'll have the kids serve as your bodyguards, so they'll keep you safe—um, I mean, *you* keep *them* safe, all right?"

"Wah-ha-ha! Imagine, being defended by the Hero himself! Those children couldn't possibly be safer!" Mjöllmile roared.

"Of... Of course."

Masayuki nodded, even as a bead of sweat ran down his temple. He knew what the kids were capable of, so he understood who was gonna be defending whom well enough. Plus, they'd have Chloe around, and I was sure she could keep them all alive if things got *really* hairy.

So that was everything we needed to talk about. We were fully prepared, but until the end came, there was no telling what could happen.

Besides... Well, it's not like I didn't have any concerns. Chloe, after all, had pretty vivid memories of my grisly death. At least one person in the Empire had the power to kill me—that was an undeniable fact. If they came for me, not even the Ten Dungeon Marvels could stop them. In fact...

*Report. The Ten Dungeon Marvels were put in place precisely for that reason—to reveal the scope of the enemy's powers.*

That's what I thought. At the end of the day, Raphael always put my own safety first, I guess. I appreciated it, but at the same time, I had to brace myself. I had to protect my friends, no matter what. I didn't want any of them hurt thanks to something as ridiculous as a war.

And with that resolve in my heart, I ended the day's meeting.

\*

Masayuki did a good job addressing the populace, it looked like. Apparently, it turned into an “I browbeat the demon lord into swearing he’d defend the city” kinda premise.

“The Hero does it again!”

“What a role model!”

There he was, looking conflicted with himself as he basked in the adulation of Tempest’s adventurers and immigrants. But even his expression got misconstrued.

“My, doesn’t the Hero look *so* attractive when he’s scowling?”

“After all the promises he extracted from the demon lord, the Hero’s still not satisfied yet!”

“Indeed, indeed. Such a modest, reserved leader!”

"The Hero's going to protect this town. Between the demon lord Rimuru and him, I'm not scared one bit of the Empire's attack!"

"Yeah! Just leave it to them, and they'll take care of everything!"

...That sort of interpretation. Now Masayuki's reputation was better than ever, his mental suffering going completely unnoticed by anyone else.

And so as the populace went on with their normal lives, the moment finally came. The Empire made its debut, and our days of peace reached an end.

There, on a hot summer night, war began like a sudden dream.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

EPILOGUE

## THE EMPEROR'S CONQUEST

## EPILOGUE

### THE EMPEROR'S CONQUEST

"You're awake, aren't you, Ludora?"

A beautiful woman with blue hair spoke to the man seated in his wheelchair and dressed in all his magnificence. She was the Marshal herself, the woman who held leadership in the Empire's main chamber.

"I am," Ludora responded. "How did the conference go?"

"We're going on the offensive."

"Brilliant. Gadora was against it, wasn't he?"

"He was. That old man's a realist, after all. Not even otherworlder weapons can resist a True Dragon. That much is obvious. There's no way anyone would fail to notice."

"Hee-hee-hee... I'm sure, I'm sure. But we must stage this campaign nonetheless. I must show the world that I am king." He then added in a whisper, "That is my agreement with Guy."

Ludora smiled warmly, his voice taking on a different tone.

"Now, Velgrynd, from your perspective, how do you think things will unfold this time?"

Velgrynd. The name of a True Dragon, one of only four in the world. A dragon crimson red in color, she symbolized flames in all their scorching glory. She was older than Veldora the Storm Dragon and just as immortal. Her name: Velgrynd the Flame Dragon.

She was the only one in this world who would bear that name.

"We will win," she replied to Ludora. "We're guaranteed to win. We'll expel the dwarves from their burrows, we'll smash the pride of the newborn demon

lord, we'll open the eyes of my indolent dullard of a brother...and we'll make Guy see that the ruler of the world is *you*, Ludora!"

She felt completely at ease being called that—for she was the one, the only Velgrynd. Velgrynd the Flame Dragon, one of the all-powerful True Dragons. And Emperor Ludora was an intimate companion of hers.

"We will? Splendid news. Do you think your younger brother will show up?"

"Yes, Ludora," she replied without a moment's thought. "He will. He always *did* enjoy a party. But...despite being unsealed, he still doesn't quite seem like himself to me. We haven't detected any magic storms, the kind of violent gales he used to summon in his rage...and the aura we could've detected from anywhere on the earth has vanished without a trace. Perhaps he's not fully revived yet?"

"...Then perhaps we can defeat him with my force."

"That would be quite a sight to see. First that demon lord gets full of himself taming my idiot brother—and *then* he deceives my beloved niece. I'd love for him to experience a little hardship for a change."

The pair exchanged a smile.

To Ludora and Velgrynd, the results of this operation hardly mattered. This was just a bet—a game with Guy over who would rule the world. The game had no complex rules. Use your pawns to conquer the opponent's territory, and you win. The world was the game board, and the pawns were monsters and humankind.

At the start of the game, Guy held the monster and magic-born pawns, while Ludora had just a part of humanity. But these had changed hands many times, over many, many years, and now both sides were in a chaotic state. Under what rules there were, it was perfectly legal to seize your opponent's pawns—and to both sides, the most powerful pawns of all were the True Dragons, their partners in the game.

Only the pawns could be moved around; that was the one strict rule. By the same token, as long as Guy and Ludora didn't directly confront each other, anything else was allowed. If the world was destroyed, of course, that was

game over, and neither side wanted that. So they went a little easy on each other, ensuring that never happened.

But now there were some wild cards to this game—Veldora, the last True Dragon in play, and the Primal Demons. These wild cards were outside the realm of the game, and Guy and Ludora were free to either recruit or antagonize them.

The demon lord Leon, Guy's cooperative pawn at the moment, was being threatened by Jaune in his territory. Violet was active in the West, and any false moves could lead to untold damage. Blanc, of course, was stationed in the East.

These demons boasted incredible powers, wholly exempt from the concept of death. It wasn't impossible to eradicate them at the root, but it would require careful, intricate preparations—but instead of paying all those sacrifices, it was best to negotiate and win them over to your side. That, Ludora and Velgrynd believed, was the most advisable move to make against Guy in this game.

If Velgrynd made it a fight, she could destroy Blanc, but the damage to the region would be unimaginable. It wasn't a realistic option, they concluded.

That, and the Western Nations were now starting to move on their own logic—another miscalculation. Luminus, a local god born in the West, had somehow grown herself a monotheistic religion. With her firm rule, she had managed to make the people of the West a single political entity. They knew Luminus was actually a demon lord, but now that her religion had taken hold, it was too late to do anything. By the time Ludora placed the East under his complete control, the West had also united itself. Thus, the game between Guy and Ludora fell into a stalemate.

"The Heroes Chronoa and Granville made it so hard to attack the West. Quite a pain, wasn't it? If they hadn't shown up, I'm sure you would have won by now," said Velgrynd.

"Oh, not necessarily. I'm sure Veldanava put those obstacles down on my road to conquest—a trial, if you will. He always did love his schemes like that."

"He certainly did. My elder brother always was a nuisance..."

They smiled at this moment of nostalgia.

"But now the time has come. All the pawns are on the board, and my moment of victory is near."

"It's finally time to put Guy and my sister Velzard in check, isn't it?"

"Heh-heh... Guy is aiming for this, no doubt. He wants you and Veldora to fight, so he can catch us when we're open."

"That's true, as much as it irks me. If only I were there, I would have taken care of Veldora back then, but..."

She was referring to the Empire's previous failed campaign. If Velgrynd had come out with the imperial force, not even Veldora would have been a threat—but if they chose to do that, Guy would've likely profited from the fallout. Whenever you moved a pawn as all-powerful as a True Dragon, you needed to make every preparation possible.

But now provided an excellent opportunity. The secret agents Ludora planted worldwide had given him all sorts of information.

"It took a long time," said Ludora, "but it was worth the wait, wasn't it? Our greatest obstacle to conquering the Empire is now gone."

Luminus, the one true god, was actually Luminus the demon lord. And now that she was revealed, they could predict her fighting power. The demon lord who served Luminus was also gone now, as was the Seven Days Clergy. And what's more:

"That thorn in our side, Granville, is on his way to the afterlife...and now there are far fewer threats to us in the West."

"You're right. All the obstacles to my conquest have fallen, without me having to lift a finger."

That, they both firmly believed, was a divine sign that only Ludora deserved to stand at the peak.

"So, Ludora, how are you doing?"

"No problems at all. My powers of Armageddon are available at any time."

Armageddon was the ultimate skill in Ludora's possession. It could only be invoked under painstaking conditions, and once triggered, it lay dormant for a

long, long time. The only reason the Empire hadn't moved until now was that Ludora could do nothing but wait, wait, wait until Armageddon was usable once more.

Thanks to their patience, Granville—the greatest obstacle in the way—was gone. It was, in a way, understandable that Ludora was so sure of victory.

Guy, for that matter, had not fully taken control of the demon lords. Nobody would claim they were building much teamwork; each demon lord was pursuing their own path. Their influence ranged far and wide, but to Ludora, they were not a threat.

"This time, we've got the overwhelming advantage, eh?"

"But we don't have much time, do we? I want to win over my stupid brother, even if I have to force the question. That gives us another measure against Guy. And if I can work things out with my sister Velzard, Raine and Mizeri cease to become a problem. So let me ask—do you have your 'ruling' power?"

"Nothing to worry about. If we can focus Veldora's mind on the battle, that provides the window for my Regalia Dominion to seize him."

Velgrynd gave him a soft smile, framed by her cold beauty. "Oh? Then victory really *is* close by."

"Of course it is. Everything is moving as I outlined it."

"Perfect, then. But I worry about your—"

"Don't say it. This, too, is the natural way of things. One's body can be such an inconvenient thing..."

"Ludora..."

"If I continue reincarnating and inheriting my own consciousness and memories, it wears down my soul over time. If I could enjoy a rest period like Gadora, things would be different...but that is a luxury not afforded to me. If I tried that, my *powers* would no doubt be sealed away again."

Then Ludora's powers would be reset. He'd be back at square one, unable to release them at once. And if he let that happen with every reincarnation, he'd never have any hope of beating Guy. This time around, Ludora had waited

patiently for his powers to attain complete form. They were all unleashed now, ready for anything—but he had to severely strain himself to keep that up.

However, this incarnation of Ludora had no concubines, not even an empress. Those were only for decoration in the Empire, yes, but it was still highly unusual. It meant that Ludora had not fathered a son—he had no “spare” self to tap into. And not having a son meant his powers would remain intact. Ludora’s reincarnations were unique; any son born from him would obtain all his powers and knowledge. It was a completely unbroken imperial line—a son didn’t inherit the crown so much as *become* the true emperor.

But this generation had none. And the timing of his Armageddon skill was the cause. If Ludora passed his powers on to a son, the skill would be restricted until he achieved adulthood. The child wouldn’t be able to hold back the recoil this overflow of power generated, something Ludora could do nothing about. Right then, in this generation, all the best conditions were in place. If he ignored this and reincarnated himself into a son, that would cause a delay of a decade or so, and he hated to see that happen.

Velgrynd had another concern as well. After building up his power to its absolute limits, Ludora’s mental fatigue was nearing the breaking point. He was sleeping in shorter and shorter intervals, his physical weariness a constant companion. His current state did nothing but accelerate the wear on his soul. Relief could be found if he gave his power to a son and delayed the launch of Armageddon—but Ludora would never dare. The time was now, and he wanted to settle the score with Guy.

She looked on at Ludora, heartbroken. “How much time do you have left, Ludora...?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I won’t falter until after my rule over the world is complete—I promise you that.”

“Yes... Yes, I’m sure you would say that...”

“There’s no need to look so sad, Velgrynd. I will win this time. Win—and end it all. So quit worrying and just watch as I pursue my conquest.”

Then Ludora smiled his arrogant smile—the countenance of a ruler. A man walking the path of conquest until he ruled all. That was the way of Ludora, the

Hero Emperor.

The sight firmed Velgrynd's resolve.

"Yes... Then allow me to bring down my rains of compassion. It has been far too long since I scattered my tranquil blessings of death. I will banish all those blocking your conquest to oblivion!"

She wrapped Ludora in a gentle, caring embrace, and then they continued chatting to their hearts' content.

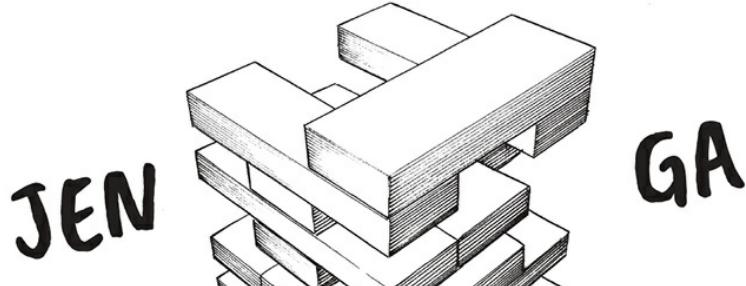
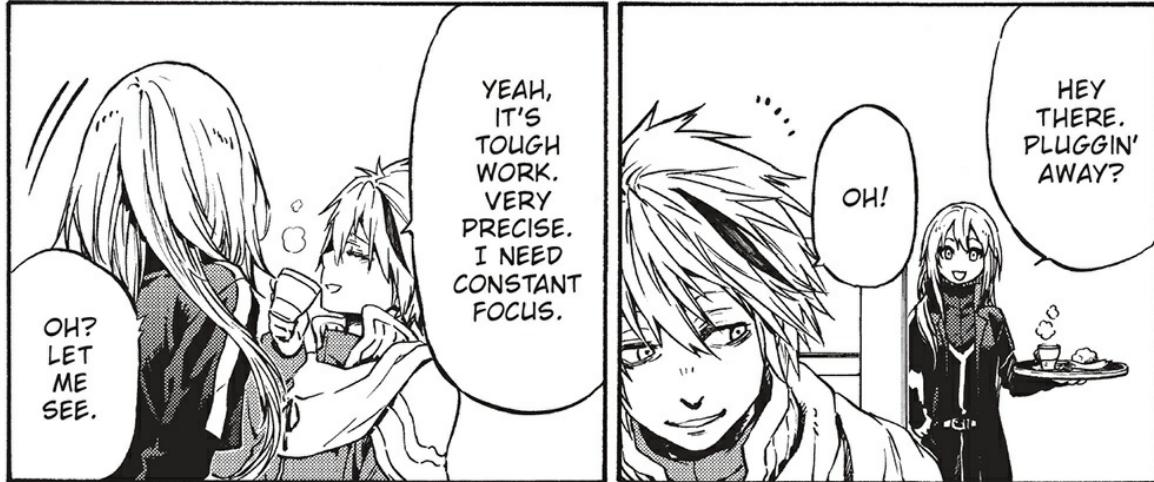
And the next day, a military force like none before in history set off from the Empire to Tempest.



←READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT!

## A Different Level of Focus

Art: Taiki Kawakami



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