



FUSE

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Mitz Vah

# That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

10<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary

**FUSE**

Illustration by Mitz Vah

That Time I Got  
Reincarnated  
as a SLIME







Even after Yuuki and Johann left, Maribel continued to weigh her options. She had all the time in the world. She would draw up plans, lay out the framework, and see this through. She had more than enough pawns at her disposal. And once again...

*This'll be fun. This'll be so much fun.*

...Maribel, the girl who trusted not a soul in the world, got lost in her own reverie.

# That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

(10)

FUSE

Illustration by Mitz Vah



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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 10

FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by Mitz Vah

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TENSEI SHITARA SLIME DATTA KEN volume 10

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First published in Japan in 2017 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

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

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: January 2021

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

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

Other titles: Tensei Shitara Slime datta ken. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen ON, 2017– Identifiers: LCCN 2017043646 | ISBN 9780316414203 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301118 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301132 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301149 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301163 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301187 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301200 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975312992 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314378 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975314392 (v. 10 : pbk.) Subjects: GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

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

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

ISBNs: 978-1-97531439-2 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1440-8 (ebook)

E3-20220930-JV-PC-COR

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PROLOGUE

# THOSE WHO SET THINGS IN MOTION

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

## PROLOGUE

### THOSE WHO SET THINGS IN MOTION

The boy let out a resigned, exasperated sigh.

“You sure look depressed about something. Was there a problem?”

He was asking a man wearing an asymmetrical mask—Laplace, a magic-born and member of the Moderate Jesters. A man that Yuuki Kagurazaka, the boy facing him now, counted as someone he trusted.

“You could say that. I got an invite, so I stopped by to pay a visit, but I’m telling you, my jaw practically hit the floor. I suppose you could say it was a big hit to my confidence—or that I thought we needed to reconsider our plans.”

“Reconsider our plans?”

Kazalim, the ex-demon lord now passing herself off as Yuuki’s secretary, Kagali, repeated the words right back at Laplace.

“Right, right,” a depressed-looking Yuuki replied. “I’m thinking we don’t want to get on that slime’s bad side, if we can help it.”

“So why not retain a close relationship, then? I’m set to explore those ruins before long, so I assumed we would stay on friendly terms for the time being...?”

“No, the plan’s still the same as always. It’s just that now, it’s gotten a lot harder.”

“And why’s that? You keep it cool, don’t make any waves, and nobody’s gonna get hurt, right?”

Laplace was no fool, either. Given how his friend Clayman was no longer alive, he did have a bone to pick with Rimuru—but he wasn’t willing to defy their boss Yuuki’s orders just to start a fight. And Laplace wasn’t alone. Footman and

Teare had the same opinion, and as leader of the Jesters, Kagali understood well enough the dangers of letting emotion drive your behavior.

In this world, the one supreme rule was survival of the fittest. Through their shared experiences, Laplace and his team had learned that nothing good comes from taking reckless action before victory was assured. Not only did Clayman completely fail to obtain his revenge against the demon lord Leon; he even died in the attempt. Thanks to that, even with the former Kazalim returned among them, the Moderate Jesters were right back where they started from. If they decided to open hostilities against the demon lord Rimuru at this point, revenge against Leon would be the least of their worries.

They all understood that, and so the Jesters bade their time, just as Yuuki ordered. But then Yuuki informed them of a problem.

"Well, on that note, I think that's gotten a little difficult for us, too," said Yuuki.

"...Meaning?"

"It's looking like that slime is starting to suspect something with us..."

"Whaa? Hang on, did you do something to make 'im catch you out?" Laplace asked.

"Oh, don't be silly, Laplace! Unlike *you*, the boss would never make a mistake like that!"

"Ho-ho-ho! You're right. I don't know anybody nearly as wary as our boss here. I sincerely doubt he did anything ill-advised."

The eternally careful Yuuki seemed to be suggesting he was the one at fault—but Laplace's response was quickly shot down by Teare and Footman. That was the sort of respect Yuuki had earned from the Jesters.

"Calm down, guys," rebuked Kagali, their leader. "It's no mistake Sir Yuuki here made. The slime was quite cautious indeed, as it turned out. Facing up to him myself, I could tell there's nobody else like him. He made me feel like my whole body was being watched—like I couldn't let my guard down for a moment. I couldn't fully suss out the force he has to work with, but he's a formidable one, no doubt."

Having gone toe to toe against Rimuru once before, Kagali was able to instinctually feel the danger the slime presented. He wasn't even Leon's equal in terms of strength, but that ability to see and react to everything in the world was a threat, she felt.

Yuuki nodded at her. "No, I think that slime—the demon lord Rimuru—I think he's a menace. One of the leaders of the Council was there, one of our main sources of funding, and he met his intellectual match pretty quickly with him. He's crafty, he's careful, and he's merciless against his foes. Normally, he's kind and gentle, but get him riled up, and there's no controlling him, you could say. And since I tried and failed to use that man, it's little surprise I'm under suspicion."

He shrugged.

"Well, yeah, Boss, but whatever he thinks about ya, he ain't got no evidence, does he? So just go with it and play it normal, and he can't do nothin' about that, right?"

"There's no physical evidence, no. But you know, I'm the one who leaked the fate of Shizu to Hinata, and that's some pretty damning circumstantial evidence, I bet. Plus, at the very end, he rounded up all his people to discuss their future direction, but I guess Rimuru chose that meeting to round up all his suspects, too. It's pretty fair to assume that our cover's been blown."

"Oh my..."

The group looked on, distressed, as they listened to Yuuki's rundown. Kagali, unsurprisingly, was the first to recover—given her demon lord roots and experience with life-or-death situations, she'd always be the quickest on her feet.

"Fair enough, but it was bound to happen sooner or later, wasn't it? That slime truly *is* a threat. So how should we revise our plan, Boss?"

"Well, we'll stay on the quiet side, like before. As long as Rimuru has nothing damning against us, I doubt he'll decide to get openly hostile. He might look like he's playing it all by ear, but he's actually a pretty meticulous leader. I'm sure he's worked out everything he stands to gain and lose."

"All right. Him telling us about the ancient ruins was probably his way of feeling out how we'd react, then. His way of saying *Try anything funny, and I won't go easy.*"

"I think you're right. People have a way of changing their minds on you. They even have a saying for it—*Yesterday's foe is today's friend*. So if we can make him think that now's not the time to fight, no matter what's changed, I'd call that a victory for us."

Yuuki looked around at his companions, gauging their reactions.

"So we're gonna stay buddy-buddy with 'im?"

"We could easily make him do our bidding, but if that's your take, Boss, very well."

"How stupid are you, Footman? We're having all this trouble because we *can't* do that."

"Nah, nah, I get where Footman's comin' from, y'know? It'd annoy anyone if some new guy treats you like dirt. Thing is, maybe we could win in an all-out war, but they even got Veldora on their side. I don't see much point inbettin' against the odds right this minute, you get me?"

"Exactly. So it's best for us to quit overthinking this and just follow our orders from the boss and our director!"

"Isn't that what they asked us for from the beginning? And I've got no problem with their takes, either."

The three Jesters seemed less than enthused but were still in agreement with their bosses' general direction.

Once he was assured of that, Yuuki nodded at Kagali. True power in the Western Nations was largely claimed by two factions—the Holy Empire of Lubelius (and the Western Holy Church they backed) and the Council of the West, the parent organization of the Free Guild (not to mention the Rozzo family that ruled the Council's core). Now Tempest, governed by the demon lord Rimuru, was part of that mix. And now that he was fresh from the Tempest Founder's Festival, Yuuki had come to realize just how foolish it was to rile Rimuru.

*I was a little worried, though. If I declared that I wasn't going to fight Rimuru, would these guys be willing to meekly accept that?*

The thought occurred to Yuuki, but it appeared to be baseless. Kazalim might've acted differently, but losing to Leon once had taught Kagali a little prudence. The Jesters had been working to realize their ambitions for years; to them, patience was already a virtue. To Yuuki, it didn't seem like any of his faithful companions were hasty enough to thoughtlessly go out of control.

"I'm glad to see that," he said with a smile. "Now, I think I'll let you take over the work I had assigned to Damrada."

"Huh? Meanin'...the classified goods?"

"What?! Leaving that work to us?"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Are you sure, Boss?"

This instantly unnerved the three Jesters. Yuuki kept smiling at them.

"Mm-hmm. You can handle that, right?"

"Oh, you're on, Boss! Yer just worried that we'll go outta control and start a buncha crap, aren'tcha? Well, no way we're gonna. Even if we think we can win in a fight, we ain't gonna so much as lift a finger, I swear to ya!"

"Right, right! Even Clayman lost his cool at the last minute, after all... If we made the same mistake, I wouldn't be able to rib him for it in the afterlife."

"True enough. Acting from a place of anger only leads to mistakes. As the Angry Jester of this bunch, that's something I'd be particularly prudent to remember. The demon lord Leon swore revenge against him someday, but I think that 'someday' will need to wait."

The trio each reassured Yuuki with their own choice of words. He gave them a light nod.

"You've matured more than I thought," Yuuki muttered, before recalling something else. "By the way, the mention of classified goods reminded me—Rimuru brought the children I took in over to Tempest, didn't he?"

"Ah yes, the ones Shizue Izawa prevented us from reaching—"

"Right, those. He had a built-in excuse, wanting them to see the festival and all, but thinking about it, he really *does* suspect me, doesn't he? Which is fine. I just can't get what he said off my mind."

He paused for a moment. The children were growing stronger and stronger. That was no doubt because of what the demon lord Rimuru did to save them. And while he said it was a secret, he let on to Yuuki that he wanted the kids to learn more about the spirits within them.

"He kind of glossed over it the last time I asked, but..."

"Perhaps they've gotten so strong that there's no glossing over the subject any longer."

"Well, who knows? I got all excited, thinking he had some kind of scheme in mind for them. But there's no doubt that he's using their elemental spirits to neutralize the magicle counts in them."

One could never leave their guard down around the demon lord Rimuru. A scheme, Yuuki thought, could easily be in play. He shrugged.

"True," Kagali said. "And Shizue Izawa was an elementalist capable of wielding high-level flame elemental. So is it possible, then, to use spirits to take the 'failed Heroes' that weren't fully summoned correctly and utilize them for their intended purposes?"

This seemed to ring a bell with the Jesters.

"Ohh! Is *that* what Leon was after? He seems to be collecting otherworlders from failed summonings. You think he could raise 'em into fighters?!"

"Ah, now I remember! Ifrit used to be in Leon's service, too, wasn't he? Clayman ordered his armies to attack him several times, but Ifrit killed them all off."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! And now he's using the same method to create more elementalists like Shizu? Then perhaps he deserves to receive those classified goods after all."

They excitedly talked among themselves. *Footman may be right*, thought Yuuki. But that left a few things unexplained.

The classified goods were, in fact, a group of children that had been subjected to failed summonings. Even now, in an undisclosed location, these summonings were taking place again and again—within the Western Nations, while Shizue Izawa was never informed. More attempts, of course, meant more failures, and it was Damrada and his team in the Cerberus group that retrieved them—as they could never be allowed to become public knowledge. They were marked as test materials, but there was another purpose meant for them. That purpose was the demon lord Leon. And Leon's order was to gather “otherworlder children under the age of ten.”

*Hmm... Is Leon trying to build more power for a war? That sounds convincing, but why not do that himself, then? And by the way he's leaking new theoretical summoning techniques to the Eastern Empire and Western Nations, it seems like he's got other goals in mind. Better keep an eye out.*

Yuuki couldn't reach a conclusion yet. Thus, he was forced to stick with the pact Leon signed with them and keep up their current obligations.

Yuuki frowned as he gave the Jesters his orders.

“All right. I'll leave the negotiations with Leon to you. If you can determine whether he's trying to improve his armies or has some other purpose, try to figure it out. Misha is handling negotiations with the Rozzos, so take the goods from her and get moving.”

“Roger that. No problem!”

“Yeah, yeah! I'll do my best!!”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Very well.”

Kagali smirked at her enthusiastic group. “Just don't get so excited that Leon figures out who you are.”

“Listen, be as careful as you can, okay? We don't have the capacity to take on Leon as well right now.”

The trio nodded at Yuuki's reminder. Laplace and his cohorts were no fools. His trust placed in them, Yuuki began to explain the details behind his plan.

\*

With the Jesters given their orders, it was now Kagali's turn. She turned to Yuuki, dour-faced.

"So what should I do?"

She was asking about the expedition into the ruins. But *ruins* was a misnomer. Really, it was a city that Kagali and her acquaintances knew well.

Back when she was still the demon lord Kazalim, Kagali had constructed a defense system for a city that used the most advanced of magical techniques. That city was the so-called ancient city in question. Its name was Amrita, and unlike the surface zone protected by the system Adalmann was part of, Amrita used a combination of a golem army and intricate, Kazalim-woven spells for its defense. Even Viola, the masterpiece Clayman crafted with the skills he inherited from Kazalim, was only slightly above average compared to the golems guarding the ruin.

That ruin of Amrita, a ruin with such an impervious defense system, housed—in essence—the true hidden value of the Puppet Nation of Dhistav.

Why were a bunch of ruins like Amrita guarded by such advanced defenses? To learn the answer, one has to go far back into the past.

Long ago, a city of magic, once ruled by the elves during their heyday, fell thanks to their own foolishness. After riling the anger of a non-demon lord—the Dragon Princess Milim—it was wiped off the face of the planet in a single night. These formed the ancient ruins that are now referred to as Soma.

The surviving elves swore to rebuild Soma someday—but they never did. Unable to resist the violent rage of the Chaos Dragon, the most horrid of monsters born of their own hands, they were all but forced out of their homeland. The Chaos Dragon was a Catastrophe-level threat, not as powerful as one of the natural-born True Dragons but still nothing the elves could have ever handled.

Thus, the surviving elves scattered across the land, each taking their own path. The unlearned peasant classes, lamenting their sudden misfortunes, relied upon the elven leader; those with more strength and intelligence cleared out space to build their own nation. Some of them simply fled, blending into the background. Thus, thanks to only a small handful of people, the elves' glory

days were over.

Now the dark elves, accursed by their own sin, set off for new and distant lands, hoping to escape Milim's watchful eye. Kagali—the demon lord Kazalim—was among them, one of the few members of elven royalty to experience Milim's rage and live to tell the tale. Not a demon lord yet at the time, Kazalim built a city in the region he eventually found himself in, modeled after his homeland. It was his way to leave everything elven technology produced intact before it was gone forever.

That city was Amrita, the capital of the Puppet Nation of Dhistav.

Kagali shook her head, driving the memories from her mind.

"Amrita's defense system is still active. Could we use it to lure Rimuru into a trap?"

Based on their previous promise, Kagali would be joining him as they explored the ruins in Clayman's domain. If she was asked to direct Rimuru into an ambush, that would be simple for her. Besides, the only *real* threats in Kagali's mind were Milim and Veldora. If she caught Rimuru alone, she thought, she'd be able to do away with him. She had no doubt she could activate the defense system, at least.

But Yuuki didn't waste a moment to reply.

"That sounds like a neat idea, but you realize the demon lord Milim might be joining you, right?"

"Well... I think we can work something out. If it's simply activating the system, I can do that without coming under suspicion."

Kagali, or Kazalim, had already had a nation destroyed under her feet. Yuuki worried about whether that still traumatized her, but she didn't seem to pay it much mind. She had transformed from an elf to a dark elf, then to a walking dead and demon lord. Any hang-ups she had about Milim had been fully conquered in the midst of that. Did that mean Kagali thought she had a chance against her? No. It wasn't impossible so much as it was suicidal.

"All right! In that case, have at it. I doubt it'll defeat him, but I was just thinking we need some data on how well Rimuru can actually fight."

"You think he can handle all that?"

"Oh, no doubt. So *please* don't do anything that might reveal yourself, all right, Kagali? I know he's suspecting me, but right now, you're neither a friend nor a foe to him. Be careful that you don't give him any kind of information."

"I know, Boss."

They smiled at each other.

"Great! In that case, we'll all go make contact with Misha."

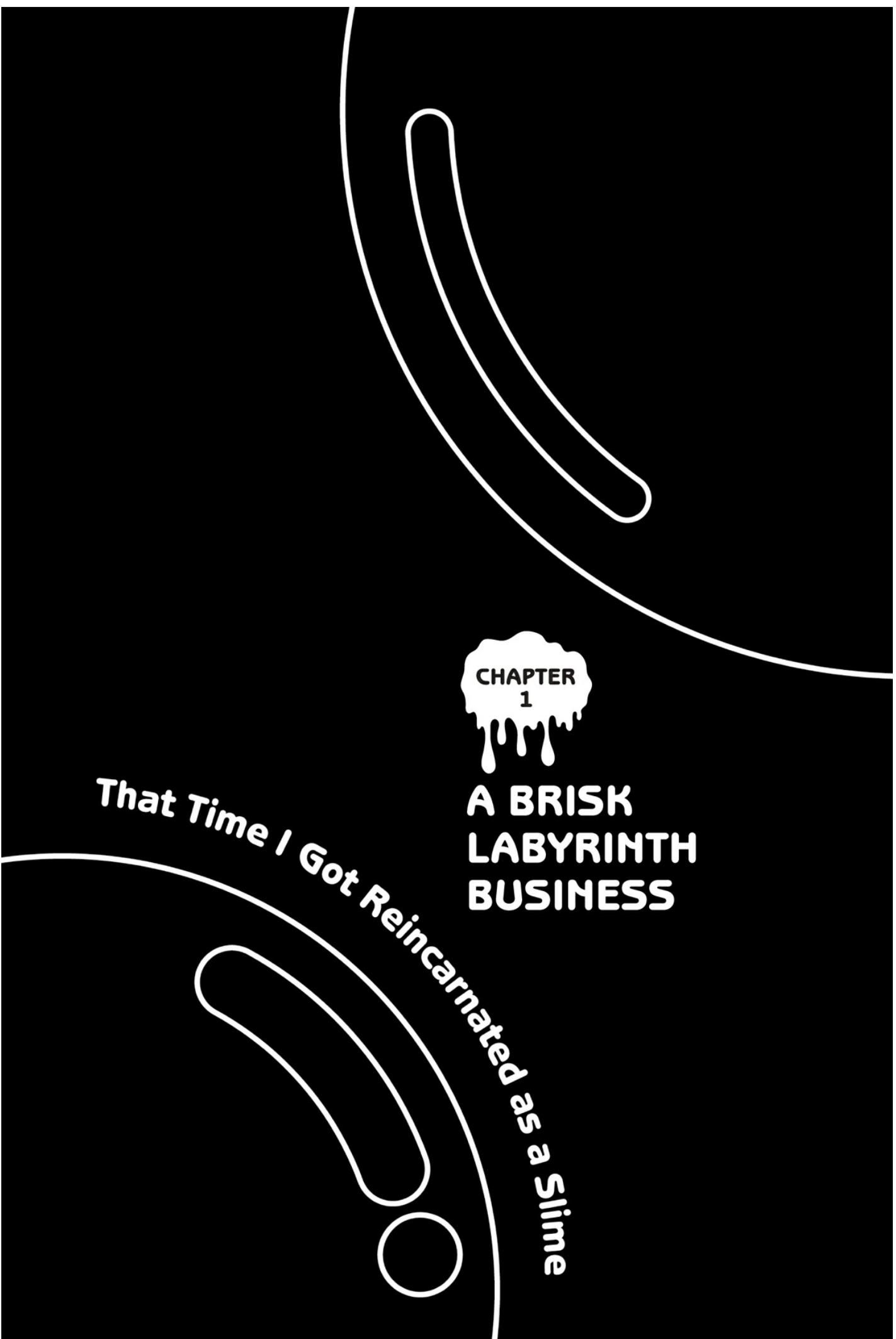
"And I'll stay here and keep preparing. So what will you do, Boss?"

"Me? I'm planning to contact Damrada and expand our bases of operation in the East. That way, if something happens, I can always flee over there. But first..."

"Oh, so you *are* scheming somethin', then? You're tellin' us to lie low, but you're out pullin' who knows what?"

Yuuki snickered. "Nothing like that, Laplace. It's just, you know, I'm thinking I should play whatever cards I have in my deck. I haven't given up on ruling the West, after all."

He grinned—and then, as they sank into the darkness, the magic-born quietly began to set their plans in motion.



## CHAPTER 1

### A BRISK LABYRINTH BUSINESS

The Tempest Founder's Festival had ended in a resounding success. Those hectic days of preparation and festivities were now a good ten days in the past.

Our VIP visitors, as well as the common folk who visited from neighboring countries, were already gone. The same was true of Fuze and the king of Blumund; they had hurriedly made their departure, promising to discuss matters once they had returned home. Gazel, the dwarven king, had left in a similar rush to build the science-and-technology research team he was planning to send my way.

Meanwhile, Elmesia, emperor of Thalion, was nice enough to purchase one of the lodging houses in the swankiest district in town, near our reception hall. She had a teleportation circle installed in one of its rooms, ensuring she could visit anytime she wanted. That's the rich for you. When they buy into something, they go *all the way*. I still remember the superiority-laden smile Elmesia gave the clearly jealous Gazel—chances are he'll march right back to Dwargon and have their treasury authorize the cash to purchase one of our villas.

Maybe I should be thanking Elmesia. Even better, she agreed to continue employing our local people working there, under the same conditions. Rigurd was handling all the details—arranging for regular cleaning, meals when Elmesia was staying, and so forth.

"Of course, next time I pay a visit, I'll do so by transferring my consciousness into a homunculus. That might prevent me from enjoying myself to the fullest, but—"

"Your Excellency, we cannot allow such selfishness!"

Once again, the mere fact that Elmesia left her nation's boundaries sent shock waves across Thalion. Not that it was any of my business, but in Erald's eyes, it

must have been unbearable. Simply mobilizing the Magus, the top-level knight forces protecting Elmesia, presented huge national-defense concerns, apparently.

"Ah, I see. Would that apply to Elen, too...?"

Elen, being Erald's daughter, was elven herself, although her ears were the regular, rounded human sort.

"No, Elen can visit in person. Homunculi have their flaws, after all. Spending too long in one can have adverse effects on one's own body."

"Your Excellency! Please do not reveal state secrets such as this!"

As Elmesia had let me know on the sly, Elen had been using certain potions to change her appearance and travel the world unhindered. This alarmed Erald enough that he apparently assigned a small army to stay in the background and guard her unnoticed.

By the way, it turned out that her companions, Kabal and Gido, were both Magus members, too. Shocking, I know. So after all that whining about deploying the Magus outside the country, he assigns two of them to guard his own daughter? Erald's *such* an overprotective father.

"Really? But they didn't look like anything impressive to me...?"

When I ran Analyze and Assess on Kabal and Gido before, they seemed unremarkable in terms of strength. But when I asked about it, Erald just frowned.

"This is also confidential, but fair enough. Their abilities are actually being restricted by the magical rings on their fingers. Their restraints are lifted only when Elen is in truly, *truly* mortal danger."

That was kind of a surprise. So Thalion's magical tech was a level beyond what Analyze and Assess told me? That said, my Analysis skills back then were a far cry from the accuracy I enjoyed now. Maybe I'd notice the concealment this time around. For that matter, maybe I should stop resting on my laurels just because I analyze something once. Next time I see those guys, they're definitely being scanned again.

"Please take good care of my daughter, then."

"Okay! See you later!"

With that, Elmesia and her crew headed back for Thalion, riding a ship pulled by a Dragon Lord for protection.

By comparison, the demon lord Luminus had it easy. With her vast magical force, she could cast Spatial Motion as much as she wanted, so she just *poofed* her way back home. Apparently, she'd contact me later about the musician exchange we talked about.

Hinata, meanwhile, was still in town, watching the kids study at our church and helping out with battle training. Right now, we had no really suitable teacher for those children. Hinata had been busy keeping the peace in the Western Nations with her paladins, but now we'd be helping out with that, taking over the southern portions, and that opened some time in her schedule.

"If you like, would you mind helping the kids a little? I'm good with magic and everything, but I'm not so hot at teaching."

"Sure. This town's been added to my list of Warp Portal destinations, so I can watch them when I'm free."

She gladly accepted the offer, and believe me, I was elated.

I never had any intention of giving the children back, really. Now that I had my concerns about Yuuki, I figured it'd be better to keep them away from the Kingdom of Englesia for a bit. That's why I brought them over to Tempest, and luckily, the festival was a good excuse for that.

Their school transfer had already been arranged, which was a blessing in disguise, since it was getting hard to provide much guidance for them in Englesia's academy. Now that I had Combined them with their elemental spirits, they had grown to be pretty darn strong. They were too much for any normal teacher, and it was about time they had a real instructor watching them.

Yuuki himself mentioned that paladins were a good match for spirits. I kind of inadvertently turned the conversation toward the spirits as we spoke, but looking back, he must've known about my plans from the start. I think I was intending to keep that a secret—

*Report. You were keeping it a secret.*

Y-yeah, I sure was.

And my blabbing it seemed to have rankled Raphael a bit.

I mean, c'mon, it was *gonna* come out either way. You're focusing on that too much. No need to get too worried about it.

.....

Right. Sorry. I had already heard some disquieting things about Yuuki, but I blurted it out anyway. Maybe part of me really wanted to believe him. But I made him privy to things he didn't need to know about, and I regretted it now. I'd need to be more careful next time.

Thus, I would be taking responsibility for the children's care—and given the situation, Hinata's assistance was a godsend. Through the festival, the kids had really taken a shine to Hinata, and I had no problem with her taking the job. But Hinata as a teacher, huh? Maybe I should join the class, then.

So I was seated alongside the rest of the kids as Hinata coldly glared at me.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know, just observing..."

"Well, you're in the way. Go."

"Um, okay..."

And so I was unceremoniously kicked out of school. A real shame.

In the midst of all this, we'd been all wrapped up from the festival for about a week's time. Things were calmer on the streets again, and the townspeople now had more time on their hands.

So I decided to perform our test launch of the Dungeon now that we had finished fine-tuning it. More than a few adventurers were excited about exploring it; we had already gotten a large number of requests, and I wasn't about to disappoint them.

It was the start of a busier time than ever for me.

.....

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On the first day of our Dungeon's soft opening, problems erupted after only a few hours. It turned out that the challengers were a lot more inept at tackling it than I thought. This was something I predicted when we first revealed the Dungeon at the Founder's Festival, hence why we lowered the difficulty level. But everyone was taking so much time advancing through the chambers—making me realize that something needed to be done soon.

There were no traps in the first floor. Any naturally occurring monsters who might show up were ranked F at the most—total wimps with no real fighting skills, creatures your average villager on the street could pummel. I designed it to help people get used to the labyrinth's atmosphere, so all it really contained were rooms with treasure chests and monsters guarding them. But I had already removed the traps Ramiris set up, so if you wanted to reach the next floor, you couldn't count on a handy pit trap taking you there—you needed to make a map.

Even with everything involved, I figured the first floor could be conquered in a day of holing up in there at the most, no matter how slow you were. But in the past three days, the number of parties that made it to Floor 2 was zip. Even Basson's team gave up after getting hopelessly lost on the first floor—they had already experienced just how big the labyrinth was, but I guess they didn't bother taking any measures against it.

It was really just exasperating, but if anything, Basson was on the more decent side. *Some* of the parties were getting killed by the D-ranked monsters I had as room guardians. In fact, not some—a *lot*. The common theme was people lured by the treasure failing to notice the guardian creatures lining the rooms. I bet even the skeletal archers I had in there were surprised. They had all these adventurers sprinting toward the chests, giving them the chance to shoot them in the backs over and over again.

We're talking a complete lack of fundamentals. No risk management. But at least *those* fools were smart enough to form groups. Because just when you think you've run into the biggest idiot, another one comes along to show that

you're nowhere near rock bottom yet. Yes, some were even tackling the whole Dungeon solo. That's beyond reckless and well into the realm of hopeless.

You wouldn't encounter too many monsters on Floor 1; as mentioned, random encounters were restricted to F ranks only. But even F-ranked monsters could be a threat if you had a big enough group of them. I guess. I mean, I wasn't entirely sure about that, but to *them*, they were a threat.

Seriously, if you're tackling this solo, even finding a place to rest was a challenge. Nobody was keeping guard for you. You'd have no chance to get some shut-eye. And even an F ranker wasn't completely helpless. Some of them weren't shy about attacking sleeping humans, so letting your guard down spelled death. I wondered if the solo questers had some ingenious scheme to handle this, but no—I don't think they really thought it through at all. It was hopeless, and they all were whisked out of the Dungeon without anything to show for it.

Clearly, at this rate, they'd never be able to survive the deeper levels. Floor 2 saw more random encounters in the corridors, including E-ranked monsters. By the time you make it past Floor 5, I think you'd be seeing D rank, even. If they're getting tripped up at *this* point, any D-ranked monster would've mangled them with one swipe.

Among the more head-scratching cases were people who quit for the most pathetic of reasons—they had no food and got hungry. Save points were located on every tenth floor, and every fifth featured a safe, monster-free zone with drinkable water. We also amply warned people to bring a decent supply of food with them. But no. The other adventurers must've looked at the example Basson set for their own preparations, but clearly that was not enough. Adventurers tend to be proud people, I suppose, and they definitely weren't into listening to instructions. A fair number of them didn't even bring any rations along—maybe they felt safe, knowing they could be resurrected, or maybe they overestimated their own strength. I don't know, but regardless, they couldn't find their way back to the exit, so no wonder they started starving.

Clearly, they had it coming.

And I mean, I get it. I know people want to retrieve as much as they can from the treasure chests here. But if I was seriously intent on killing my challengers in this labyrinth, I don't think anyone would conquer it in a hundred years.

Still, most of this first wave of customers were broke bodyguards and mercenaries looking for a quick buck, none of them with much exploration experience. No need to panic yet, I thought, as I watched things unfold for three days. But in the end, not a single party made it to Floor 5's safe zone. I could barely stand to watch.

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We made money from their admission fees, at least, so it was no loss for us. *But if this keeps up, it'll kill adventurers' enthusiasm, and we'll lose any shot at repeat traffic.*

I figured we needed to reevaluate things from the ground up. This was far beyond expectations. I just wanted to bury my head in my hands.

So I called for an emergency conference.

This consisted of Veldora, Ramiris, Masayuki as an observer, and me; I also invited Mjöllmile as the main businessman behind the Dungeon. Once everyone was present, I spoke first.

"Well, it's been about three whole days since we opened the labyrinth, but I think it's safe to say the results have been unsatisfactory. Or really, just crap. If we want this to be any fun at all—um, I mean, if we want our user base to keep coming back to the labyrinth, I think we'll need to give them some guidance."

The way things were going, I wasn't sure anyone would even reach Floor 10. Everything about my plans for this place was in stasis. My conclusion: We needed to offer at least a little bit of strategic help for our users, or we'd never get anywhere.

"Indeed! Rimuru is right. At this point, I'd need to wait until the end of time for anyone to reach me."

"True, true. And I want people to see all my masterpieces below Floor 50. I think people deserve some hints!"

Along those lines, Veldora and Ramiris were in agreement. Masayuki was still thinking—or really, just standing there confused. I guess he wasn't too sure why I called him here. The invite came kind of suddenly, so I couldn't blame him—but he was bound to get into the swing of things soon. *I'll call on him, then.*

I turned my eyes from him to Mjöllmile, who looked pretty excited about getting to meet Masayuki the Hero. Maybe that's why he so eagerly spoke up once he noticed my gaze.

"May I offer my impressions?" Mjöllmile asked.

"Anything's welcome," I said. "Give me your worst."

He nodded. "You mentioned offering hints, but I'd like us to approach that with a soft touch. It's still only been three days, and our challengers so far have all been from the lower ranks. We've asked the Free Guild to invite more seasoned adventurers for us, so I think we'll see more rated C and above from here on."

"You think that'll work out?"

"I do. I have trouble figuring out Sir Yuuki's motivations sometimes, but he's always true to his word. He's been sending magical communication to advertise to Free Guild offices worldwide on our behalf."

"Yeah, it'd benefit the Guild, too. Anything else?"

"Yes, I've been using my own connections with other merchants. We've been reaching out to more talented bodyguards, as well as their friends. According to the feedback I've received, we've had quite a good reaction so far."

Relaying the news and gauging the results were both key. I had asked Soka, leader of Team Kurayami, to work with Mjöllmile and help him on those fronts. The two of them had led the labyrinth presentation together. Mjöllmile was always good when dealing with people, and they had quickly broken the ice. I was glad to see there was no discrimination involved there.

Soka's team was now following Mjöllmile's instructions—and actually, Soei

was as well. At the moment, Soei was tracking the movements of Duke Meusé and the people around him, but when that didn't occupy him, he was meant to help advertise my nation a little. Now rumors of the Dungeon were spreading even to little country towns, places not big enough for a Free Guild post.

"So you don't think it'll be too late if we wait for some more talented challengers to travel here from afar?"

"Exactly. We've only just kicked this off. In my personal opinion, we shouldn't expect instant results! Better to settle down and focus on our long-term future. And once the noble ranks worldwide begin to invest in us, we can expect to see challengers ranked B and above before long."

Mjöllmile certainly sounded passionate. Masayuki gave him some appreciative nods, which made him visibly grin. He must've been bursting to show off to the Hero.

But he did have a point. Maybe all Veldora's and Ramiris's complaining was making me feel a needless sense of urgency. Even Basson's band was rated B as a team. With their current equipment, the individual members would rank about a C or C-plus at best, not exactly outstanding. Once we started seeing single party members ranked B or above, I figure they'd be used to labyrinth work without too many hints. Money bought you safety in this maze, so even if we didn't walk them through every step, I'm sure they'd be able to figure things out through their own experiences.

"Right. Guess there's no need to panic, then."

The labyrinth was generating a lot of interest. There were magic crystals, as well as other materials, to harvest from fallen monsters. A lot of people would enter the labyrinth as a way to earn a little spending money, no doubt. And the nobility was even more eager to dive in, it seemed, including some very sensible ones who'd enlisted adventurers back home to go conquer the Dungeon for them. Those kinds of adventurers wouldn't let greed steer them off course—they'd fully prepare, set up goals, and execute a plan of action. They'd be the minority, for sure, but we figured their numbers would grow in time.

"So what should we do now?" Veldora asked.

"We have a front desk set up in the first floor. Maybe we could offer some

guided experiences?" I said.

"Experiences? What d'you mean by that?"

Ramiris wasn't the only confused-looking one.

"I mean," I explained, "we could set up a training area that lets you test things out a little. Teach people about traps, have them train in battle with monsters, those kinds of things. That's a lot more meaningful than just giving out tips, isn't it?"

I'd also like to set up a gym of sorts, to help us train all the new Tempest recruits we've seen lately. It was impossible to get accidentally killed in the labyrinth, so I think it'd be pretty useful to have.

Then a rather unexpected person offered their agreement.

"In that case, maybe you could offer some courses in conquering the labyrinth, too."

It was Masayuki nonchalantly chiming in. I looked at him, surprised.

"Oh, should I not have butted in?"

"No, no, you're fine!"

"Ah, well, good. This is a topic I could contribute to a little bit more, so I thought I'd speak up."

He grinned. He was adapting faster than I thought, but then again, he always *was* bold like that.

"What kind of classes, though?"

Would we have a big band of adventurers sit down in our meeting hall? Setting up times to give a rundown on the labyrinth seemed worthwhile.

"You know, kind of like video game tutorials."

"Tu...torials? What are those?"

"It sounds like a dessert. Is it good?"

Veldora and Ramiris pounced on the unfamiliar word. I assumed Veldora had the vocabulary to know it, but maybe not. Languages in this world translated

pretty well in my mind, but that auto-translate function only worked if both members of a conversation had a common understanding of the topic.

If Veldora didn't know what it was, Ramiris certainly had no chance. So Masayuki and I had to explain the concept of a game tutorial.

"I was picturing something like an obstacle course."

"Yes, like Rimuru said, I think it's important you experience some of the basic moves you're expected to know before you enter the labyrinth. If we offer quick rundowns on the basics and divide it into missions, I think that'll help adventurers retain knowledge better..."

Adventurers wouldn't gain much from lengthy lectures. A training ground available to all wouldn't see a lot of use apart from the hard cores. So went Masayuki's logic—and why he thought a mission-based structure was a good idea. Before being admitted inside, challengers would get to complete a simple set of missions, ensuring they had the barest knowledge required to challenge the labyrinth.

Veldora and Ramiris listened on, looking more and more convinced.

"Yes, that may just work. For my part, allowing this cavalcade of fools to tumble in and die simply bores me. Let us grant them a training area, so their skills can be at least somewhat up to snuff."

"Yeah, I think so, too! 'Cause if Milim saw this, she'd be so angry that she'd send all these challengers up into the clouds!"

They seemed all for it. And so did Mjöllmile.

"And perhaps after this 'tutorial,' we could offer them a line of Tempest-brand weapons and armor to try their hand at. And if some challengers are facing more difficulty deeper down, a set of tougher missions could perhaps be of some benefit?"

This was some really helpful feedback. In fact, maybe we could even release a guidebook. It'd help advertise the town. It could be fun to have some qualified writer tackle that task for me.

Regardless, this lack of labyrinth experience was killing our challengers'

efficiency. Let's give them at least a few instruments to work with. Otherwise, we'd never find anyone capable of handling Floor 50 and below, when the difficulty *really* started to ramp up. Plus, for people who really wanna get serious, we could even offer a few "experiences" that get down to the nitty-gritty of Dungeon survival.

Of course, the *real* Dungeon began at Floor 50, and at first, we planned for Hinata's Crusaders to be our main customers for those levels. For now, at least, we couldn't expect much of anything from our adventurers, so Ramiris and Veldora would need to be content having the paladins to toy with.

Thus, we decided to renovate Floor 1 into a general training area. I also made sure to provide a separate entrance and exit for our new soldiers, in addition to the one for Dungeon challengers.

"Yes, that does sound like a good idea. Right. I'll make it this instant!"

Ramiris was ready to start work, and since we were all in agreement, I was about to wrap up the meeting. But:

"Oh, wait a second, please. There's something else I've noticed."

Masayuki spoke up again, his eyes sparkling.

"So right now, the only inns and taverns are in the safe zones, right? Don't you think we ought to offer them on each floor instead? And it's kind of a pain if there's no toilets or anything. If you can connect different spaces together anyway, I think it'd be nice to set up a door near the stairways to each floor or something that leads to these facilities. Some adventurers aren't even bringing a sleeping bag with them, so even if you charged a premium, I think you'd get a lot of customers, you know?"

What?

*Is this kid a genius?!*

And toilets, huh? I no longer had any need for them, so it completely slipped my mind. All this useful feedback was flooring me. I turned to Ramiris; she confidently nodded back.

"Yes, Masayuki! I'll take that advice, too!"

"Ah, Sir Masayuki, your observational skills astound me. Such insight!"

"Mm-hmm! I'll get rid of the safe zones and set up a door leading to a rest stop near each stairway!"



It was kind of like setting up a vending machine selling toilet-paper packets at high prices next to a train-station bathroom that had no paper on hand. Unfair? Yes—but extremely effective. Masayuki’s insight really *was* sensational.

“Well,” I said with a smile, “if you have any other thoughts in mind, don’t be shy about sharing them.”

Masayuki pondered for a few moments, no doubt recalling all the video games he’d played.

“Hmm... Could we maybe have a portable save point you can only use once? I was lucky enough to make it to Floor 10, but now that you’ve removed the trapdoors, I think it’s taking a lot more time to reach that point. This isn’t a game to the challengers, so I think the time commitment involved is making things a lot harder as well.”

Yes... That’s fair, too. I had to agree with him. The way things were, a journey to Floor 10 would take several days. With his previous idea, we had stumbled upon the notion of making money off extended stays in the labyrinth. Maybe we should think more along these lines?

“Mmm, yes, that child is on to something! I was thinking the very same thing. Humans are such fragile little creatures, so we need to offer a bit of a helping hand.”

Veldora was the first to offer agreement. And who was the very person who designed this hellscape of a dungeon for fragile little humans anyway?

“Well, I can certainly set up disposable save points! But wouldn’t it be more profitable to have adventurers stay at inns?”

So implementation wasn’t a problem. Man, whenever the topic turned toward money, Ramiris was sharp as a tack. I was surprised she had something useful to say.

“No, Lady Ramiris, not necessarily. We should actually price them on the high side. If they don’t have any pressing business, they can always stay at an inn, but I think a lot of people would need to regularly report back to their patrons or whatever. That, and I think some people would want to carry them around as extra insurance, in case something unexpected happens in the labyrinth. It

could help sell our return whistles as well.”

Mjöllmile was keen on this, too. I think he sensed a business opportunity. And he was right—you could use them in many different ways. If you were spending several days in the labyrinth at once, you may want to know what’s going on outside. Plus, the idea was to attract mercenaries hired by the nobility going forward, and they may need to file regular reports with their bosses.

And also...

“In my case, my companions beat him pretty easily for me, but the save point on the tenth floor’s protected by a powerful monster, right? I think a lot of people would want to use a save point *before* they challenge that guy.”

I nodded deeply at Masayuki. To a gamer, saving before you tackle a boss—or a floor guardian, in this case—was common sense. I recalled moments when I skipped that vital step before the final boss, only to lose several hours’ worth of play. Sad accidents like that can be laughed away because it’s only a game, but how frustrating would it be if that happened in real life?

“Right,” I said. “Thinking about it, maybe we’re being a little too unkind.”

Veldora and Ramiris nodded their agreement at me.

“Boy... Ah, right, your name was Masayuki? The advice you provide is quite helpful, yes.”

“Yeah! I’m really amazed! You sure *are* an otherworlder, aren’t you? Just like Rimuru! It’s gonna be great working with you, Masayuki!”

Somewhere along the line, Masayuki had been accepted as a peer.

“Now, there’s no need to spoil anyone past Floor 50, I don’t think. But in the floors that won’t entertain too many veteran adventurers, I think it’d be a good idea to at least go a little easy.”

And now Masayuki was advising them as a full-fledged labyrinth administrator. That adaptability is probably his greatest asset of all, I think, and I had no objections to his take.

“All right. So let’s set up a rest stop before the stairway on each floor. When you reach it, you can pay a fee or something to gain access to part of Floor 95.”

"And we'll set up an inn and tavern down there?"

"Right, right. I'm not gonna open up the elven lounge to the general public—that's still members only—but we could easily set up something similar for adventurers. And don't forget—we'll charge a premium for it!"

"Hee-hee-hee! Oh, I understand, believe me, I do."

As a rule, prices are high in tourist sites. There's a soda and coffee vending machine at the summit of Mount Fuji, but you're gonna be paying the equivalent of five bucks for a soda. There's nothing like eating a cheap box lunch at the peak, but while something like that's never gonna be gourmet cuisine, if you purchase it on the mountain itself, you can bet it's gonna go for four-star restaurant prices. So it's a given that the facilities inside the labyrinth will be pricier than their equivalents outside.

Now the little town we had going on Floor 95 would be more useful than ever.

"But can you really craft disposable save points like that, Ramiris?"

"Absolutely no problem there! Easy-peasy! There are these things called Recording Crystals, and they're fine for disposable use."

The item Ramiris produced was actually quite handy. You could use it anywhere in the labyrinth, and it worked exactly like a regular save point. Add yourself to a Recording Crystal, and the next time you die, you'll be able to restart from where you saved. If you use a return whistle to exit the Dungeon, the next time you go in, you'll pick things up from your Recording Crystal. That held true even if the structure of the labyrinth itself changes—you wouldn't reappear in the exact same location, but you'd get transported to the nearest safe place, kind of.

"We can sell *those* at high prices, too, indeed."

"Well, actually, I'd like to distribute those a little more widely."

"How about we mix them in with the rarer items in treasure chests?"

The discussion was humming now.

"Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha! Now I have more to look forward to!"

"Oh, I wouldn't expect anything to change *too* quickly, but I *do* think we'll see fewer challengers give up."

Even Veldora and Masayuki were excitedly joining in. This was working out well. We were tackling our problems, addressing them, and debating together to come up with solutions.

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Right. That was certainly a worthwhile meeting.

Floor 1 would now house a training area to help people learn the ABCs before tackling the Dungeon, as well as a place for general announcements. We'd provide virtual "missions" for visitors to try out, helping them acquire the minimum knowledge necessary to survive. They were free to undertake this training—or not, as the case may be. Forcing the challengers into it wouldn't help much. All the risks fell on their shoulders, besides.

We would also set things up so that you couldn't die in the first floor, either. You never know; we might get some crazy adventurer in here causing problems, and I don't want our staff in any danger. Besides, I wanted people to experience for themselves what death was like in this space. We'd made it so you were instantly revived on the spot, so maybe it'd be a fun place for kids as well.

For the more advanced challengers, we'd also prepare a room for battle training against a few different types of monsters. We'd put bracelets on the monsters we captured for the purpose, so they could be revived again and again—that way, people could learn how to fight and polish their battle skills. In addition, there was a large gymnasium-style area for the use of our nation's new soldiers. Maybe, on occasion, it'd be fun to capture a whole bunch of monsters and stage a large-scale group battle in there.

Things would begin in earnest starting with Floor 2. But from there until Floor 4, we got rid of all the insta-death traps and downgraded the rank of the monsters wandering the halls from E to F. The rooms would have just one D-ranked creature, and in the chests they guarded, we'd toss in Low Potions and other useful labyrinth-conquering tools. Equipment and other high-market items would begin appearing on Floor 5.

So we worked on adjustments like these, recalibrating the Dungeon's overall

difficulty. That should help people advance a bit faster starting tomorrow. Video games hold closed beta sessions all the time, after all; maybe launching without a rehearsal wasn't such a great idea.

...I mean, we *did* do some testing, but our test party was six people from Shion's Team Reborn, so the feedback we got wasn't particularly useful. They had no trouble storming all the way down to Floor 40, before we had the tempest serpent serving as that level's boss wipe them out. Thanks to that, I had the mistaken notion that the labyrinth's difficulty level was just right. The traps and minion-level foes were no sweat to them as they breezed their way downward. Based on Team Reborn's progress, we figured everything was okay—with a little experience, folks would be hitting Floor 50 soon, no doubt.

We needed to select our testers a little more carefully. Shion personally trained the members of Team Reborn, and I guess they're far more talented than I thought. But we could tackle that later.

"So does that round out the issues? Anything else to bring up?"

I lobbed out the question, already happy enough with this discussion. Everyone had pitched in, and I figured we were done for the day, but...

"Can I say something?" Mjöllmile asked.

"Oh? Something else?"

"Yes. More to do with labyrinth administration, but..."

Ah yes, something about advertising or revenues? I had my concerns about that as well. It was only day three, of course, so I wasn't expecting to rake it in yet. But Ramiris's eyes were practically shining at the mention of the topic. It's almost hilarious how money-obsessed of a fairy she is.

"Ha-ha! We've only just started making back our investment," Mjöllmile said with a laugh, as if defending himself against her. Then his expression grew more serious. "No, I wanted to report to you about our advertising. In order to attract the nobility's attention, I've calculated the amount of the reward purse we should offer. What do you think about a hundred gold coins?"

Oh?

"And that's gonna be paid in...?"

"We'll use one stellar gold coin, of course."

Glad to see Mjöllmile's reading my mind on that. I had learned from our mistake last time; I needed to get our hoard of stellars changed out. And a hundred gold coins would be about...what, around a hundred thousand dollars?

"That's not too little, is it?"

It was a fortune to your average peasant, but it didn't seem like enough to motivate a noble who's probably swimming in money. Sure, adventurers can pick up magic crystals and rare items along the way, but a hundred gold didn't seem quite enough for all the effort.

But Mjöllmile simply grinned at me. "Hee-hee-hee! I understand your doubts. But I've spread the word that this reward would be given to whoever can make it past Floor 50. We'll award it to the first party each month to achieve the feat. Manage it solo, and you earn the entire purse; work as a party, and you'll divide it up among yourselves. And that's not the only reward..."

As he explained, he had also attached prize money to the boss monsters on every tenth floor.

On Floor 10, that would be a black spider, a B-ranked creature. The first five teams to defeat it would receive three gold coins. Floor 20 housed an evil centipede, rated B-plus, spewing Paralyzing Breath across a broad range—pretty decently strong. The first five teams to beat *him* got five gold.

Down on Floor 30, we had an ogre lord, another B-plus, along with five of his henchmen. Unlike Benimaru and his kin, these were unintelligent creatures, violent and acting strictly on instinct. Their physical strength was astonishing, though, and they were capable of team warfare to some extent, so tackling them with a fully equipped party was a must. Beating them earned you ten gold, and again, we'd award it to the first five winning parties.

After that, things begin to get *serious*. Floor 40, as planned, housed an A-minus tempest serpent, boasting extraordinarily powerful Poisonous Breath that could instantly annihilate an unsuspecting party. Even an A-ranked adventurer on Gaiye's level would have serious trouble defeating it solo. Taking

the serpent down was worth twenty gold coins, awarded to the first three parties who managed it, but I doubted we'd be giving out that prize *too* often.

Meanwhile, on Floor 50, I was planning to have Bovix and Equix take turns serving as floor guardian. They had evolved into magic-born ranked above A, so only a small handful of fighters stood a chance. Make it past that floor, and you earned the big one-hundred-gold prize—a big step up but merited given the difficulty spike.

"All right. That's actually a pretty well-thought-out plan. It oughtta make for some good advertising, too. Do you think it'll help encourage the nobles to compete with one another?"

"Precisely, my lord. Announcing the prize winners each month will encourage competition. And challengers can only win a prize once; they can't be awarded the same prize multiple times, so we can keep things from getting *too* competitive."

Makes sense. If you could only get it one time, there was no motivation for people to "farm" bosses strictly for money. This ensured the same small group of people wouldn't hog all the prizes each month—and since each award had a strict maximum, we could count them as fixed costs in our accounting.

"So do you think we can make a profit doing that?"

"That will not be a problem, no. Based on preliminary calculations from the past three days, I think we could even afford to increase the prizes a little."

Compared to our earnings, it was pocket change, but the prizes would help encourage competition and speculation among challengers without hurting our bottom line. It was a brilliant strategy. Besides, nobody was going to zoom past Floor 50 anytime soon, so I figured our payouts would be on the low side for a while to come.

"In fact, if anything, perhaps we could have Sir Masayuki beat Floor 50 and play that up in our advertising..."

"Huh?!"

"With *your* mettle, I'm sure it's only a matter of time, Sir Masayuki."

Aha. That Mjöllmile, always looking for another angle. He seemed to have the plan pretty well worked out. Let's have him keep with it.

"Ooh, I like that. It'll boost Masayuki's reputation further, even as it advertises our Dungeon for us. Let's deploy that once things slow down a little, maybe."

"That's just what I was thinking as well. How nice to see we are of the same mind, Sir Rimuru, *heh-heh-heh...*"

"You're always sharper than me at this, *deh-heh-heh...*"

We exchanged self-satisfied smiles.

"Um, if I could interject..."

Masayuki looked like he had something to say. I pretended not to hear.

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But Mjöllmile wasn't done there. In fact, he was just getting to his main topic.

"Now, Sir Rimuru, along those lines, I'm thinking about a potentially even larger project!"

He flashed an evil grin, champing at the bit to reveal his news. I was starting to like that smile a lot. It was proving reliable.

"I'm all ears, Mollie. Go ahead."

I gave him a friendly smile of my own.

"As I see matters, if we *really* want to impress the nobility in the local area, I think we should announce that anyone who survives the bottommost floor will earn a hundred stellar gold coins!"

"...?!"

"Oh-ho?"

"What?!"

"Um, how much is that in yen?"

Maybe about one billion? And with the cost of living as low as it is here, it might be worth even more.

"Pretty bold, huh, Mollie?"

"Hee-hee-hee! Such a generous reward should motivate any reluctant challengers to spring into action. They're all bound to hire adventurers to conquer the labyrinth."

And that means even more money would be changing hands. The more people gather someplace, the more prosperous it gets. If we can drive people's interest, potential customers who weren't interested before may hop on just so they're not left behind.

"But—but that's a lot of money!" Ramiris shouted, looking concerned. But the confident Mjöllmile wasn't perturbed.

"And *who* was the master of this labyrinth again?"

He gave Veldora a glance as he lodged the almost-taunting question.

"Heh-heh-heh... Kwaahh-ha-ha-ha! It is I, Veldora the Storm Dragon, the very precipice of the draconic races!!"

Veldora made no attempt to hide his opinion of himself.

"Huh?! Veldora the Storm Dragon? That name sounds familiar..."

Masayuki looked a bit pensive about something as Mjöllmile villainously nodded.

"Yes, I'm fully aware of that, Sir Veldora. And I'm also fully aware that not a single soul is capable of felling you in battle."

"Of course not. Mjöllmile, you are truly an intelligent man! Kwah-ha-ha-ha!"

"Heh-heh-heh... No, no. I'm simply leveraging what I've learned observing Sir Rimuru."

What? Me?

As Veldora and Mjöllmile shared an echoing laugh, I thought over his proposal. We were offering a hundred stellars, a ridiculous amount—but that required conquering the final floor. In other words, beating Veldora. Nope. Not gonna happen. It seemed almost like a swindle to me, but it wasn't a lie, either. Besides, we still weren't sure right now whether anyone would even make it to

Floor 100.

"Yeah, I do think our labyrinth is well-nigh unconquerable."

"Right, right."

"That's bleedingly obvious."

"Precisely. Floor 50 is one thing, but the difficulty beyond that is simply unimaginable to me. We have literal dragons! Where will you find an adventurer who can slay a dragon?"

Mjöllmile looked a little floored. The concept even exasperated someone as bold and driven by greed as he. Our labyrinth was well defended, to say the least.

"I doubt we'd ever have to pay out those hundred stellars."

"No. That's the whole idea. This is just bait for the nobility, so I humbly believe we can be a bit lavish with the figures we throw around. I understand the paladins will be trying their luck, but I *do* look forward to seeing the results."

He left it unsaid, but I'm sure he didn't think they could reach the bottom. I agreed with him. The money figure shocked me at first, but thinking about it with a cool head, we didn't have to worry about anyone actually claiming it.

"Mollie, let's go with it. Make it happen!"

"Very well, my lord."

"And try to get as many people coming here to take the challenge as you can."

"Let's tout it up as much as possible, then! We could call it the Demon Lord's Challenge!"

Would that work as advertising?

...Actually, wait a second. If I was going to keep calling myself demon lord, there was a good chance that reckless, suicidal people would keep on trying to fight me. It was a pain to deal with each and every one of them—so why don't I let them take a crack at me if they conquer Floor 100, or something...?

Yeah. Let's go with that.

"In fact, tell everyone that if they beat the challenge, I'll give them an opportunity to fight me. That applies to you, too, Masayuki, so if people tell you to take me on, try to change the subject or something, okay?"

"All right. Because honestly, I have no intention of fighting you at all. Thanks."

"Oh, I know. Well, Mollie, you have my official permission. Have at it!"

"At once, my lord. I'll just excuse myself, then."

Mjöllmile is *so* dedicated to his work. Once the conversation died down, he stood up, offered each of us a quick bow, and left the room.

We could have ended the meeting there, as we all watched him go, but Masayuki looked concerned about something. Curious, I decided to inquire.

"What's up? Something on your mind?"

"Well, about fighting...I guess people think I'm taking a wait-and-see approach, but I really *am* gonna have to do that fight sometime soon, aren't I...?"

Fight...? Ah, the promise he made during the tournament?

"You mean against Bovix?"

"Yeah... After what I said in front of that huge crowd, I can't really escape it. But if I fight him, I'm absolutely gonna lose..."

I'm sure he would. Masayuki's unique skill was about as unique as they came, but it wouldn't be much help in actual combat. Although maybe it would be, come to think of it. It let him win without fighting, after all.

But we *would* need to consider that Bovix battle. The crowd truly believed Masayuki could win, and so did Mjöllmile for that matter. Masayuki wasn't shy about playing himself up in the arena, either. It was too late to say never mind.

"Maybe you could train with our kids while Hinata is here?"

"That sort of thing would kill me! All I want is to live in peace, you know?"

He smiled briskly as he stated that rather sad fact. I thought at one point that he needed someone to teach him a lesson, but as a kid who came from Japan at

the most peaceful point in its history, of course he wasn't gonna be this belligerent wild man. I'm not unlike him, if you think about it.

"Well, I can't have you lose either way, so let me think about that a little."

"Will you? Thanks, Rimuru!"

"Sure. Just give *me* a hand when I need it, okay?"

"Of course!"

Masayuki was being cooperative, and his reputation was helping me out a lot right now. If Bovix beat him, I stood to lose a great deal. It was a thorny problem, but we'd have to do something about it. I could try to reason with Bovix, but that didn't seem fair to me. *I'll work on it.*

We chatted for a little while longer before I wrapped up this emergency meeting. The adjustments to the labyrinth were completed before the end of the day.

\*

So we excitedly continued our watch over the Dungeon.

Personally, thanks to the things Masayuki pointed out, I felt like the labyrinth had gotten a lot easier. But considering Mjöllmile's warnings, I didn't think it had gotten *too* easy or anything. How would people react?

First off, of course, there were always idiots who didn't bother listening to the instructions. They just breezed right along, ignoring the missions completely. They didn't get far into the ensuing floors, of course, but they just kept on trying, nonetheless. What drove them to do that? Their employers? Their pride? No, the answer was nothing so noble. They had a more calculating reason than that.

When we debuted the labyrinth, the Rare-level sword that Basson's party grabbed from a treasure chest was apparently a truly excellent piece in their mind. I guess they saw it in a much different way from me.

Rare, in this world, referred to superior magisteel-forged gear that had evolved to exhibit unique capabilities. The magisteel our nation produced was made by taking the magic ore from our high orcs in the mountains and exposing

Veldora's magicules to it. Simply storing it inside the labyrinth made the process happen by itself. This gave us an easy supply of high-quality steel, and we could liberally use it in our own weapons and armor.

Unlike the gear circulating around the Western Nations, we could craft items made out of nothing but pure magisteel. The difference came down to the materials themselves, so even the swords distributed to our regular forces could be classified as Special in make, several times better than the equipment most labyrinth challengers ran around in. Kurobe's workshop apprentices handled equipment production for our army, a good dozen of them or so by this point, hammering away daily under Kurobe's careful instruction—and even their gear was equivalent to Special, a level above the Normal stuff sold across the Western Nations.

Now their goods were being placed into our treasure chests. The production failures were disposed of, and things deemed worthy of actual use were brought into the labyrinth. We had a wide range of quality in this gear, and some of it really was excellent. Basson had gotten his hands on something that only barely qualified as Rare. You usually had a hundred-to-one chance at one of those, and as odds went, maybe it was an enticing offer for a lot of people.

By the way, even items from Kurobe's workshop dismissed as failures could be appraised at the Rare level. They may look like quality pieces on the surface, but if Kurobe called it a failure, it was a failure. "There's a clear difference," he'd tell me.

So I looked into this a bit more, and it led to a discovery. Even with gear in the same class, there can be individual differences in capabilities—something Kurobe had picked up on and used to craft his definitions of success and failure.

I decided to compare two Rare-level swords, one from Kurobe and one from an apprentice. The difference was obvious, something I noticed only because my Analyze and Assess skills had improved. If Kurobe hadn't pointed it out, I'm not sure I would've picked up on it.

Different how? Let me give an example. Let's say I made a copy of one of Kurobe's works. The results, of course, would be in the same class—but like I said before, I can't completely copy all its capabilities. They may look the same,

but what I produce is still an inferior copy. That's the difference.

Maybe this happens because I don't have the blacksmithing skills of Kurobe. But what I can say here is that even weapons come in different levels. Maybe a weapon seller would never notice, to say nothing of an amateur, but I feel like I can tell the difference between these levels now.

To someone who stakes their life on these weapons, differences in capability are important.

In this world, you never knew when monsters might attack you. High-quality weapons and armor were a kind of lifeline. Kurobe's presentation during the Founder's Festival must've generated a lot of buzz, enough to create a deluge of requests for the goods we'd exhibited. We were still considering how to handle that, but the plan was to make a decision after investigating the market more.

The Rare equipment dropped by the boss on Floor 10 was the best that Kurobe's apprentices could produce right now. They were inferior to Kurobe's own work but still on the upper end of what's generally available worldwide. Adventurers naturally want quality, of course, and I could see why Basson was so delighted. Even Normal weapons, after all, could fetch over ten times the usual price if they were good quality. Once you got into the Special realm, that was more like fifty times. Rare? Obtaining one was a matter of luck more than anything. There weren't many around to find, and realistically speaking, money can't buy them.

So it made sense that people were clamoring to enter the labyrinth. And Basson and his gang were even advertising for me at the taverns—"Heh-heh! Look at this, all of you! A sword just as wonderfully powerful as I am!" and so on. The fact that the Floor 10 boss dropped Rare gear spread like wildfire among the challengers, then the merchants, and then around the Free Guilds of every nation. In an instant, people hoping to strike it rich were beating a path to our labyrinth—and that's what led to where we are now.

I do have to thank Basson's band for all the free advertising, but you can't just run in and grab Rare equipment like it's a trip to the convenience store.

Thus, the people who refused to take our guidance began to lag behind those who completed our missions before tackling the labyrinth. If you had a little

intelligence, you'd know it pays to listen to our instructions, after all—and as more people seriously took up the missions, training on the first floor began in earnest. Now we had challengers taking what they'd learned and fully preparing with it, helping our own budget with the equipment they purchased near the front desk.

Then, a few days after we rebalanced the Dungeon, we began to see parties reach the fifth floor. Floor 2 was vast but simple, and the traps up to Floor 4 were more like jump scares than anything really malicious. So long as you kept an accurate map, making it to Floor 5 was actually pretty easy. This seemed acceptable to me.

Floor 5 downward was more of a test of ability. The traps got more hazardous, and monsters ranked D and above made their debut—but the treasure chests also held more valuable items. I wanted our customers to really pound those floors, doing their best to conquer them...but alas, it really was a challenge for most.

To put it simply, fatigue began to be an issue. Keeping a constant watch for monsters is an easy way to mentally exhaust yourself, I suppose. Many people retreated back to the last stairway to take advantage of our rest space; the inn on Floor 95 was doing fabulous business, so that much worked out as planned.

Around when our challengers began to strike a presence between Floors 5 and 8, we started to see adventurers arrive from the world's Free Guilds, following the rumors. Some of them were seasoned adventurers bearing contracts from noble sponsors, and before long, the whole town was getting busier. With this second wave livening up the old guard, the race to conquer the floors grew frenetic—and with these serious contenders, we also began to see people try to cheat their way to glory.

Yes, people decided to sell maps of the labyrinth in broad daylight. A lot of people (myself included) had no sense of direction, and in a labyrinth, all the strength in the world couldn't help if you kept getting lost. So I could understand the demand...but I really wished people would have formed parties and assigned mapmaking duties to members instead.

So following an announcement posted in and out of the labyrinth, we began

to change its inner structure. The challengers were livid, of course, and we got lots of complaints—but I’m a demon lord. I’m not beholden to them. I needed to show them early on that maps were meaningless unless you made your own. If anything, I was being kind to them—if they *didn’t* make their own, they’d find it impossible to adapt if a change to the labyrinth rendered their maps useless. Call it tough love.

As a rule, we changed the labyrinth layouts once every two or three days. Completing a single floor took at least a few hours; there’s no way you’d reach the save point on Floor 10 in one go. Thanks to that, the layout changes were a pretty big success. The challengers gave up on selling and buying maps, instead taking a more serious approach to the labyrinth. It seemed like some people plunged in right after a layout change to whip up a map to sell anyway, but I decided to let that slide.

We were pretty happy about the anti-cheating measures. But we sure couldn’t let our guard down. The Free Guild adventurers may’ve gotten a late start at the labyrinth, but some of them wielded Automap, the elemental magic spell that gave them a skillful advantage in exploration.

Free Guild members really *were* in a class of their own. They were used to fighting monsters, so they were battle-honed and ready for combat. They also knew how to divide tasks among their party members, which I appreciated. Basson’s party was all about fighting, but now we saw groups with each member picked to carry out a particular role—fighters to handle the monsters, explorers to handle traps and mazes, and gatherers with a wealth of knowledge to tap. Balance was the watchword with these parties, and it really struck me how adaptable they all were.

So the adventurers quickly completed the training missions and dived into the Dungeon. Those with ruin-exploration experience were masters at trap removal. They didn’t sprint for every treasure chest they saw. Compared to the bodyguards and mercenaries we saw first, they were quite careful—demonstrating an even more professional performance than I imagined. Seeing them execute such a clear understanding of the rules, I started to think we shouldn’t have reined in the Dungeon after all.

So just a few days after the second wave arrived, someone managed to beat

Floor 10. Now the challengers were really on a roll—learning from their predecessors' mistakes, painstakingly devising countermeasures, and starting to make real, constant headway. And once someone figured out how to handle this trick or that monster, word spread fast about it. People started to imitate the winning formula. I bet people were selling their advice, too. No stopping them, I suppose. If maps were a nonstarter, I suppose information comes next. I really had to hand it to them—and really, the more enthusiastic everyone was, the better.

And the town was starting to see the challengers' progress as a kind of spectator sport to enjoy over drinks. The shops, the inns, the taverns—rumors spread everywhere, packed with tales that delighted and thrilled.

Among them came word about one party appearing out of nowhere to blaze down the labyrinth at a previously unheard-of speed, a stout and well-balanced group of ten. The first thing they did was add themselves to the save point on Floor 10. One of them joined a party who had already made it that far down; he then put his info in the save point, used a return whistle to go back to the entrance, and then headed down with his own party.

I was anticipating this and had no issue with it, but the speed they proceeded at astounded me. In just three days or so, they had defeated the boss monster on Floor 20. They had talent, no doubt—each one ranked around a B individually, but maybe B-plus as a group. All ten of them showed great teamwork, too, so in terms of real strength, I bet they could earn an A-minus.

But if they're going *this* fast, there had to be some kind of trick behind it. I mean, they kept on selecting the shortest routes through each floor, every time...

*Understood. Elemental interference detected. An elementalist is utilizing Elemental Communication.*

Oh, that...?

An elementalist is a magician capable of harnessing the power of elemental spirits. One of the tricks up their sleeve is Elemental Communication, allowing them to listen to the words of those elemental spirits. If they can talk to wind and earth elementals on a deep enough level, it seems, those spirits will guide

them down the correct path to the stairs—and since an elementalist could tap that, a twisty maze of passages was no sweat to them.

Those dirty, dirty elementalists! But sadly, this was fully within the rules. After all, there's no guarantee the spirit you tap into will always give you the correct path. Besides, there were precious few elementalists in the world, so I didn't even consider that kind of workaround. As far as I was concerned, this was a perfectly valid approach, one I shouldn't bother trying to counteract. If anything, I should praise them for coming up with it.

The party's rapid advance continued anon. Part of our procedure was that whenever a party conquered a new floor, it was announced across town; thanks to that, the party members quickly became household names. The crack team of explorers were collectively called Green Fury, their mystery elementalist serving as leader, and before long, they were rapidly approaching Masayuki's Team Lightspeed in popularity.

Just as we hoped, the labyrinth was now hosting serious talent. No doubt we'd see more young challengers visit town with dreams of fortune and glory. The labyrinth—currently enjoying a steadily growing audience of challengers—had become a well-oiled machine.

\*

We took this opportunity to gather again. It had been ten days since we reorganized the labyrinth, so I wanted us to confer and talk about any problems that had come up. Unlike before, everything was going great, so the mood was lighthearted—natural smiles all around.

“Ah yes, Masayuki, was it? I always thought you had potential, but now I see you are a mighty man indeed!” Veldora seemed very chipper today, and the moment we were all together, he was heaping Masayuki with praise.

“Oh, you think so? Um, thanks...” Masayuki didn't seem sure how to respond.

He looked at me, as if to ask “*who is this guy?*” I did introduce them to each other last time, but Masayuki was kind of nervous back then. I could see it if he didn't remember him.

“I think I introduced you before, but—”

"N-no, um, people just started talking and stuff, so..."

Oh, did we?

*Understood. As the subject Masayuki Honjo stated, no introductions were made.*

Oh. Guess my memory was pretty hazy, too. *Can't blame Masayuki then, I thought.*

"Ah well, let me do that now. This is Veldora, a good friend of mine. He's serving as the master of the labyrinth's hundredth floor."

"Indeed, 'tis I, Veldora, and I gladly accept you as one of us, Masayuki. Welcome!"

To Veldora, Masayuki was part of the club already. He flashed him a friendly smile. Then Masayuki's face visibly whitened.

"Ummm... By Veldora, do you mean the Catastrophe that killed the entire army of Farmus...?"

*Oh, right, that was the rumor we spread around. I don't mind telling Masayuki the truth, but it's kind of a long story and there's no pressing reason to. Let's just go with this.*

"Yeahhh, he's kind of a big shot, so try not to rile him, okay?"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, but I am a generous soul indeed, so it takes a great deal to anger me! And if you provide me with sweet treats to eat, I would not hesitate to offer you my protection!"

There he goes again. I rolled up my notepapers and swatted him with them. Punishment complete. Discipline, you know; it's important.

It must have surprised our local dragon, because he shouted "What are you doing?!" and so on for a bit, but I still had Ramiris to introduce.

"And this is Ramiris, a fairy and someone you could call the ruler of the labyrinth."

Masayuki had been muttering things like "So I wasn't imagining it..." In the midst of this, but my voice helped him regain his composure. His eyes turned to

Ramiris, flapping in the air.

"Oh... You're a fairy, Ramiris? And you built that entire amazing labyrinth? That's really great."

The compliments were more than enough to get Ramiris going as well. "Whoa! Hey, I *like* you! In fact, I'll gladly name you my underling. And Rimuru! Did you hear that? He said that I'm really great!!"

She was kicking the air in my direction, visibly excited as she bragged. God, lay off. If I played along, she'd only get worse. Ignoring the dropkicks she applied to me, I tried to move things forward.

"Yeah, yeah, congrats," I replied. "If Masayuki wants to be your underling, have at it, I guess."

A Hero serving as a henchman for a demon lord. Whatever. But this must be hopelessly confusing Masayuki, right?

"Uh... Who *is* Ramiris, exactly?"

"She may not look it," I said, matching Masayuki's quiet whisper, "but she's a demon lord just like me."

"Wha?!" he exclaimed, frozen as the beaming Ramiris approached him. Our voices were hushed, but not enough for her sharp ears, I guess.

"Heyaaa! That's me, Ramiris of the Octagram! Good to become officially acquainted, Masayuki!!"

"H-huh? Ramiris... You're a demon lord? And Veldora's a dragon... W-wow. *Really?*"

Masayuki...

The thought of dealing with a demon lord and Storm Dragon all this time dazed him. I guess I should have explained things fully before making the introduction. That's on me...but Masayuki *had* to take some of the blame here. *He's* the one who acted all cool and collected at our last meeting. That's why I assumed he knew them already. It was his nerves of steel that allowed him to keep his composure. I didn't realize he was clueless this whole time...



They say ignorance is a sin, but sometimes it's your greatest asset. Masayuki had been accepted by a dragon and demon lord, and he never even realized it. Once again, I couldn't help but marvel at his luck.

It was Mjöllmile who finally threw Masayuki a life preserver.

"Lady Ramiris, please, none of that. Why, Sir Masayuki would hardly even know how to respond, would he?"

Since he was such a fan of Masayuki, I suppose Mjöllmile assumed that conversation was a joke—Ramiris making unreasonable demands, and the kind Hero unsure how to react. I figured Masayuki's response would've disillusioned him, but I guess that's the Hero's skill at work.

...Or maybe not. Somehow, it seemed like Mjöllmile really believed in Masayuki from the heart. Seeing it, or maybe even feeling it, Masayuki smiled.

"This is Mjöllmile, my trusted adviser and the head of Tempest's financial department. Kind of our minister of finance, I suppose."

"A pleasure to meet you again, Sir Masayuki."

"Ha-ha-ha! That's kind of you, Mjöllmile."

"Oh, no, I'm just an upstart from the underground..."

"Well, as you said, I'm afraid I can't join with you right now, Ramiris. I've already promised Mikami—um, I mean, Rimuru that I'd give him my support."

Masayuki lightly bowed at Ramiris.

"I'll bet," Mjöllmile said. "Sir Rimuru *does* have a way of taking advantage of people!"

What had I ever done? And Ramiris was ready to join him.

"Well, if that's how it is, so be it! You're so cunning, you know that, Rimuru?"

"Hey," I nonchalantly replied, "first come, first served."

Then Veldora started bragging for some reason.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! You won't find many people as dependable as Rimuru. Ramiris, I think you'll have to give up on ever getting ahead of him. But let's

hear from Masayuki now! We need to proceed!"

I had my qualms about what everyone here thought about me, but—ah yes—we were still making introductions. It seemed kind of moot, though. Everyone already knew *his* name.

"All right. Masayuki, you go ahead."

"Okay," he said with a nod. "I think some of you are aware by now, but my name is Masayuki. I come from the same world as Rimuru, and now we're working together. People call me a Hero, but please don't let that cloud your judgment."

He gave his introduction facing all the others, back straight. I felt like he wanted to tell them he called himself a Hero just as a joke, but with Mjöllmile looking straight at him, I suppose he opted against that.

Highly adaptable as always, he was already back to his usual composed self. Defiant, you could say. They may have met last time, but he was capable of being all smiles with Veldora and Ramiris, which took guts. He really *was* someone special. Maybe it wasn't his unique skill Chosen One having its effect on the people around him—maybe a lot of it was just his own personality. I didn't think there was any way he could wield *this* much influence with a unique skill alone.

*That*, I thought as we wrapped up the introductions, *we could try verifying later on.*

We were all seated. Our last meeting was something of an emergency confab, but this time, things were less urgent. We were all at ease.

"I have to say, Masayuki, you sure *are* something. We owe all our success to you!" Ramiris started excitedly shouting the moment she was seated.

"Let's not forget," Veldora added, "Mjöllmile has done much for us, too. As you said, perhaps we were right not to simplify the Dungeon too much!"

I agreed with them both. Putting our minds together like this was what provided success, no doubt about it.

"Oh, I'm just glad I could help."

"Yes, and I hardly did anything myself. None of this would be possible without all of your powers!"

After that round of pleasantries, we discussed the state of the labyrinth.

Sales were going great—really great. It made Mjöllmile laugh, although all the work made him cry. Plus, the people visiting town were staying in our inns, enabling the innkeepers and the nearby taverns to run a booming business.

"Here is my report," Mjöllmile said as he took out some papers. Veldora and Ramiris seemed interested as well, so I made some copies and passed them around. I figured I'd quickly skim over it to see if there were any problems at hand, leaving the detailed number crunching to Raphael.

Right. Let's see what we have here. It's times like these that I'm glad I can go into human form. I could read through papers as a slime, of course, but for office work, being human was far more convenient.

According to the data on the report, things had gone smoothly with our labyrinth since our adjustments.

"Looks like our advertising worked well."

"Oh yes! We're astonishingly busy every day," he said, eagerly nodding.

Veldora and Ramiris looked at the report, whether they could understand it or not. For the most part, it was a ledger of our most recent statistics, but there were a few special topics covered as well.

One of these was the Adventurer Cards—the Guild membership IDs that could be used as admission into the labyrinth now that Mjöllmile had received Yuuki's approval to do so. These cards were magic in nature, keeping track of the bearer's vital signs and retaining that data in a record, which was quite convenient. They allowed for seamless labyrinth entry, just like how you'd use it at your Free Guild post, so it was easy for adventurers to get to grips with. Hardly any bodyguards or mercenaries weren't Guild members, either, so the implementation went pretty smoothly.

For the moment, the labyrinth's admission fee was three silver coins a go. The cards were manufactured by the Free Guild, saving us from production hassles. Our own nation provided basic cards as well, at the cost of ten silver—and while

most challengers were Guild members, we occasionally sold these cards to people, too. Between all of that, we were raking in a lot of money just from admission alone.

The report also contained details on the three Ramiris-produced items in the labyrinth. Your first Resurrection Bracelet cost nothing—a freebie so you could see how useful they were. After that, you had to pay for them; but at just two silver coins, they were quite reasonable—especially considering they not only resurrected you but also healed any of the wounds you incurred that led to your death. After debating it for a while, we decided to keep the price low as a service to our audience. (By the way, we had a warning announcement play if you reentered the labyrinth without wearing your Resurrection Bracelet. If you got yourself killed in there, that's none of my business, but it'd still leave a bad aftertaste in my mouth if that happened.)

To make them easier to buy, the bracelets were sold right next to the front desk, where we had the dead resurrected. Between that and being a pretty indispensable item, they were selling like hotcakes, definitely the most popular out of the Dungeon's three items.

Return whistles, meanwhile, allowed a single person to instantly zoom back to the surface, a godsend if you got lost. This was insurance for a lot of parties, so it was priced on the high side—thirty silver per whistle. People tried to cheap out on these and just rely on Resurrection Bracelets instead, but I wouldn't exactly call that smart. Yes, you would be whisked back to the entrance that way, but you could lose your equipment and stuff as well. You'd keep whatever armor you had on, but anything that slipped out of your hands at the time of death was gone for good. Nobody's literally carrying booty while in a fight, of course; you'd probably drop it in the corridor for the time being. Losing that stuff could make for a pretty hefty penalty. Few people would take that risk just to get back to the entrance, so there was a pretty decent demand for whistles.

Finally, Recording Crystals weren't selling as well as we hoped, but we *did* see some clients purchase them in large quantities. At one gold coin a pop—close to a thousand dollars—they were luxury goods, no doubt. And why not? They let you basically turn back time whenever, and wherever, you wanted. And since a lot of people would be focusing strictly on the bosses, letting them go for cheap

seemed kind of dangerous for us, so we priced them sky-high instead.

Still, I thought there was a demand for them. In the deeper levels, the difficulty really ramped up from floor to floor; the save points on every tenth floor could very well seem like a trip across the continent. Thus, I figured it'd be a while before we profited from them, but even in these shallower levels, some people were still using them.

We were also experimenting with renting weapons and armor out to people, but that hadn't turned a profit yet. These were Kurobe-crafted goods, pretty decent quality, and since many people rented them after dying and losing their main weapon, the feedback from them was excellent. With the right word of mouth, I think we could see demand rise soon.

So by and large, things were going well—but just because we were succeeding now didn't mean we could let our guard down. Right now, we needed to be more prudent than ever before.

The party at the forefront of the Dungeon was continuing to do well, going deeper and deeper without anyone dropping out. They were drumming up enthusiasm among the other challengers, too, people who kept coming back after messing up. That improved our sales, a cycle we needed to keep going. If we can convince people that it's worth coming back again and again, then even our initial goal of at least a thousand admissions per day seemed surprisingly attainable.

"So, looking at Mollie's report, I'd say we're a pretty resounding success right now. But we can't rest on our laurels. If you've noticed anything, don't be afraid to speak up."

I wanted everyone to be at attention as I got the ball rolling. Ramiris was the first to react.

"Me!"

"All right. Ramiris?"

"You know the elementalist using Elemental Communication? Boy, I sure never thought about relying on the spirits for info like that! But I can interfere with that, if you want. What do you think?"

"Interfere, huh...?"

I *did* want to put some obstacles in their way, but it seemed kind of like a coward move to me. The approach this party took was completely orthodox, so getting all evil with them felt like we'd be going against the spirit of the rules. This isn't a war, or a competition or the like.

"But it's not like the spirits are being forced into it, are they?"

"No. If they're providing *that* much support, clearly the elementalist must have a great relationship with them."

"Better not interfere, then. I'm not into that kind of thing."

"Roger! I figured you'd say that, Rimuru."

Ramiris was quick to back down. I suppose she wasn't much for it but thought it best to bring it up anyway.

"No, it is not good to lie. But, Ramiris, why not create an elemental-free zone? That Elemental Communication; it works by listening to the smaller spirits that've taken root in the area, no? And it can't work if the spirits aren't there, yes?"

Oops. That's some surprising stuff coming from Veldora. He's normally so useless to me, but sometimes even *he* says something intelligent.

"Rimuru, why do you look so surprised?"

And he's *sharp*, too.

"Oh, no, I'm just impressed as always with you, Veldora," I said, a little shaken. "That's a really good opinion!"

"Yes, is it not? My vast expertise has saved the day once more! Kwaah-ha-ha-ha!"

Good thing he's so gullible.

"Well, Ramiris?"

"Sure, I can do that! I'll just ask the spirits to relocate for me. Without any conscious spirits in the vicinity, Elemental Communication can't do anything at all!"

I guess that could work. Maybe, thanks to Veldora's proposal, we could do something about elementalists after all.

"Great. Let's do that. See, this is exactly why I think brainstorming like this is a great idea."

"Yes, quite so. You see, my vast wisdom is—"

"Okay, next. Anyone have any other observations?"

I couldn't let Veldora get further carried away. Time to move on. It wound up being Masayuki who spoke next.

"Do you think defeated monsters could drop items for the explorers?"

Monsters leaving items behind—common in video games but kind of enigmatic from a real-life perspective. And our monsters already left crafting material and magic crystals. Wasn't that enough?

"Why do we need to do that?" Veldora asked.

Masayuki's answer was simple. "Huh? Well, I mean, healing potions are, like, surprisingly expensive. High-ranked adventurers use 'em all the time because they can afford to shell out for them, but most people would rather run away from a battle than risk getting hurt. That, and if you die in the labyrinth, you're resurrected without any of your injuries, so a lot of people just 'nope' out of there instead of using any of their potions. So I'm just thinking, why not have monsters drop Low Potions or something when killed, so that everybody has access to them?"

Hmm... It was a valid point. Our nation's potions served as advertising, and their usefulness to us was starting to expand—but they didn't come very cheap, no. In fact, sales were starting to stagnate a bit because of the price. Within Tempest, Low Potions cost four silver coins; High Potions were thirty-five, and Full Potions, while not offered for direct sale, would probably need to be priced at over five hundred silver, or five gold coins, if we did offer them. Meanwhile, the cheapest inn in our city cost three silver a night without meals and five with a bath and dinner. A nicer room, used by passing merchants and the like, averaged around ten silver plus meals.

On the other hand, a D-ranked adventurer earned, on average, about fifteen

silver coins after a day of work in the labyrinth—maybe twenty, if they worked in a party for more efficiency. That was good, for now; enough to live day by day on, but not enough to prepare for any kind of emergency. The treatment they'd need if they were sick or badly hurt—or any kind of social safety net, really—would be out of the question. Plus, they needed to maintain their weapons, buying new ones if they broke and saving up for better-quality goods.

In short, low-ranked monster hunters lived a hardscrabble life. If they wanted a better one, their only choice was to polish their skills. And in a life like that, four silver coins was a painful investment to make. They need to put money aside for admission, of course, and I sure get it if a potion just isn't in the budget for them...and yeah, I know they're gunning for a treasure chest with a major find inside, but it's not like whatever they discover will make them filthy rich.

"That's common in games, yeah. I understand what you mean, Masayuki, but...the monsters are naturally generated within the labyrinth, so I think it'll be hard to have them carry items..."

It'd be a mistake to excessively spoil our visitors, giving them something they didn't ask for in the first place. I'd like to do something to help, but I think they need to be able to support themselves first. That's what the Free Guild is there to assist with. From our nation's perspective, we can't really provide welfare to people who don't even live here. It's not exactly pretty, but you need to be strong to survive—

"I think we can do that," Ramiris casually commented, just as I was mentally throwing in the towel.

"Really?"

"Sure. Just have them swallow the item right after they're born!"

If *that* was possible, it opened up a few possibilities. Maybe we could populate the treasure chests with more useful items and let the monsters drop the junkier stuff for explorers. Junk or not, it'd still be a source of income for the lower ranks—and going forward, I'd like those lower ranks to have something to live on. In a perfect world, people are rewarded for their efforts, and I wanted to make that happen as much as possible.

"Well, no problem, then. If it'll help people gain more of an income beating monsters, I bet it'll make them try even harder for us."

And it'd have the side effect of boosting the trade-in monster-derived materials, as well as providing another attraction for our nation. And once we have some more money to work with, we can divert some of that into welfare programs. I don't know how much we can do about illness, but serious injury? We could assist with it. If Japan can have universal health care, it's not a dream for Tempest to have *something* like it. A system like this is something we'll want to implement at an early stage in our nation's development, lest people call it unfair. If possible, I'd like to see that happen sooner than later.

The problem is to figure out who, exactly, we'll call citizens of Tempest. Labyrinth runners, passing merchants, and people like that aren't, naturally. Maybe now is the time to register all our citizens and make the ownership of rights clearer to everyone. Tempest is a developing country right now, so we welcome any and all immigrants, but once our nation matures, there might be movements to ostracize noncitizens from our borders. A nation is, in a way, a large cooperative entity—nobody can live alone, so we form communities to help one another survive. We don't need parasites latching on to our nation, and I didn't want to embrace anyone who didn't have a sense of belonging here. It's hard, after all, for people with different thoughts and principles to coexist in the same community.

Basically, if a citizen belongs to a nation, they have a duty to work for the sake of it. In turn, they can receive certain services from that nation. That being said, people have the right to not belong to any nation, free of civic duty and retaining full, unfettered freedom. If you want to be part of Tempest, come on in; if not, you're still a welcome guest, but I can't provide you all the services a citizen would receive. We'll need to define the difference soon, and I think Rigurd and I need to have some detailed discussions about this.

...See? I can think about serious stuff sometimes, too.

"You think so? In that case, maybe we could mix in some unfamiliar potions—or weapons and armor whose capabilities are unknown? Like, so you won't be able to determine if they're high value when you find them?"

Oh, right. We were still in a conference. I hurriedly considered Masayuki's suggestion. Hmm. I think I see what he's getting at.

"Ah, like, un-appraised tools and equipment that you can't use until you get them appraised at the entrance?"

"Yeah, yeah! I mean, I guess you can't really drink a potion if you don't know its effect."

"Oh, maybe some people would. And if we mix in some poison flasks, that'd be another labyrinth trap for us. It'd help warn people about making item appraisal a habit, too. Let's go with that."

"Cursed equipment might be tough, but magic weaponry would be pretty neat. Like, you think something is a piece of junk but appraise it to reveal its true colors."

"That's good! You can't throw away junk then, and you'll also need to exit the labyrinth to have it appraised."

Masayuki and I, with our video game knowledge, were getting excited over this. The idea of actually implementing it was thrilling, and Ramiris and Veldora, overhearing us, seemed to be getting into it.

"If you want to hide the true nature of something, my illusory magic ought to come in handy!"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Ah, how lovely it is to see challengers jump for joy, only to be agonized by doom later. Now things will be even more exciting!"

Yep. Definitely into it.

"Hmm... Yes, and since junk equipment will take up valuable space, people will want to sell it in town in short order. That ought to boost return whistle sales!"

And now here's Mjöllmile with some more reality-based feedback. And he was right. Anyone would hesitate to toss out un-appraised weapons and armor. Planting that thought in people's minds would make those people camping out in the labyrinth in search of big finds reconsider their strategy. And since we're charging admission, the more people going out and in, the more profit we

make.

Plus, we wouldn't be the only ones having fun here. There's something attractive about the term *un-appraised*. Your heart can't help but race as you wait for the appraisal results—real pulse-pounding excitement. Something you thought was junk transforms into treasure before your eyes...and even if it turns out to be junk after all, you'll still treat it as your own. We don't need to have a ton of "jackpot" items like that, but along those lines, I think we could certainly mix in some more Low Potions and the like. That'll help support the lower-ranked customers, although we'll have to fine-tune the ratios of trash to treasure.

"All right. Well, it's about time we get to work."

"Time to push a system update, huh?" Masayuki replied.

Given that we came up with all that only just now, "it's about time" wasn't too appropriate. But our last "system update" went just fine.

"Sounds good to me!" Ramiris nodded, as if she knew what we were talking about. I flashed her a quizzical look, and she quickly averted her eyes. I suppose that little sneak was just trying to ride along on the wave. Mjöllmile looked confused, and Veldora was back to his usual shrill laughing, but I didn't mind. Masayuki and I looked at each other and nodded.

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The following evening arrived.

My days were now full of serious work. They were usually spent inspecting projects around town—no, it wasn't just a leisurely walk, I promise—and each night, I'd receive reports in my personal office. Rigurd was handling a lot of my affairs, but a fair number of them still required my personal approval, so I had an office set up in our government building for that.

"Sir Rimuru," Shion said as she handed me a sheaf of papers, "here's your report from Sir Mjöllmile." She was a hard worker—almost like a real secretary. Kind of surprising.

"Yes, thank you," I said, trying to sound all haughty as I accepted the report. Mjöllmile was already getting started on what we discussed at yesterday's

meeting.

“Everything’s going well,” I muttered.

“I am delighted to hear,” Diablo said, nodding.

“In hardly any time flat, our tavern sales are up ten percent. I guess it benefits all our citizens if the low-ranked adventurers have more money to work with.”

“Indeed. It’s just as you read it, Sir Rimuru.”

Diablo nodded again as he gently poured some tea for me. It’s not at all like I had read it, actually, but it was pretty much what I hoped for. I couldn’t be happier. Diablo was overvaluing me, like he always did, but it didn’t bother me this time.

I took a sip. “Huh? This tastes different. Did you change the leaves?”

“Did you not like it?”

“N-no, it’s good, but...”

It wasn’t displeasing at all—maybe just a tad stronger on the bitterness than usual.

“I-I’ll replace it at once!” an apparently panic-stricken Diablo said. But he really didn’t need to. It was just fine; no problems to speak of.

It’s just that Shuna always brings her A game when it comes to preparing tea—Wait a minute...

“Hey, is this...?”

“Yes, your chief secretary insisted on preparing it herself. I tasted it to ensure it wasn’t poisonous.”

*Um, okay?*

That’s a surprise, seeing Shion prepare tea this good. The even greater surprise, though, was Diablo actually cooperating with her.

“I never thought you’d go with Shion on that.”

Poison doesn’t work on me anyway, so I assume Diablo was simply taste testing it, but that made it even more of a surprise.

"I had no other choice," he replied with a smile. "Sir Benimaru was balking at being her taster every day. It was my first experience ever feeling ill, a chance I'm glad to have had."



I really don't think that's a necessary experience—but this time, I definitely needed to thank him. Shion looked really happy, after all.

She's really grown, huh? Once upon a time, her home-cooked cuisine was more hazardous to your health than the deadliest of poisons, but now here she is getting tea just right. No magic or skills or anything! Her violin performance during the festival was another surprise—I'm being wowed all the time lately. It truly felt like an emotional moment to me.

"Diablo...thank you."

"No, no..."

"And Shion? Well done. You did great!"

"Y-yes! Thank you very much!!"

Next time, I think I'll have Shion pour my refills. It *was* a little overly bitter, but I was happy.

Then I recalled that I had never delivered Diablo his promised reward.

"By the way, I still owe you a reward, don't I? You did an excellent job with the Farmus invasion, and here I've been giving you menial labor ever since you got back."

"No, no, it's my hope to be of service of you, Sir Rimuru..."

"Well, yeah, but..."

I had given Hakuro some vacation time. He was off happily training somewhere with his daughter Momiji. Gobta, I took to our special elf-run club down on Floor 95. He didn't *quite* deserve a membership card yet, but I intended to dangle that as a carrot for his future endeavors. (Of course, he was still off god knows where with Milim at the moment. Veldora grumbled a bit about wanting to toughen him up, too, but I hope he doesn't. That's just being cruel by that point.) For Gabil, I had a new research facility built, beyond the door that Veldora guarded on Floor 100. He'd be the head of this laboratory, with Vester as his second-in-command. Gabil would be overseeing what had grown into a pretty large research team, so it was a fairly big promotion.

So along those lines, I had given what I thought were appropriate rewards to

everyone. Not doing anything for Diablo, someone who worked so hard by my side, was out of the question.

"In that case," Diablo said as I thought this over, "there is something I would like your permission for."

He always had the greatest knack for reading a room like that.

"Go ahead. Say it."

"Very well. I was thinking that I would like someone working under me to handle my more miscellaneous duties."

"Oh, like making tea?"

I knew he wasn't a fan of that. I couldn't blame him. Why would a demon as powerful as Diablo willingly brew tea for a slime? Even I thought that was a bit bonkers.

"Ah, no, not that, Sir Rimuru! Taking care of your personal affairs is one of my most vital responsibilities! I am talking about miscellaneous tasks like razing nations to the ground—someone I could perhaps send in my place to handle that. I, personally, will always be by your side, Sir Rimuru."

He smiled as he said it.

.....Come on. That's *real* work, not "miscellaneous tasks." But to Diablo, I guess taking care of me was more important than waging wars. *I really don't get what's in his mind sometimes.*

"Ah. I see. But I can't have someone with *that* kind of power working under you..."

Someone with the intelligence and muscle to take down an entire country? It'd have to be someone like Benimaru or Soei. I wanted to make Diablo's wish come true, but this was asking a little too much. However, it turns out I was jumping to conclusions.

"No, no, I have no intention at all of standing above Sir Benimaru or anything of the sort. There are some old acquaintances of mine I am considering, so I thought I would invite him."

So he wanted to hire some people? I didn't have any problem with that.

"That sounds fine by me, but will you need some money?"

I imagined he would, which is why I asked, but Diablo smiled and shook his head. "No, I doubt they would be interested in money. In place of that, however, they will need some manner of vessel to serve as their physical bodies."

Ahhh, now I get it. If this is an acquaintance of Diablo's, it's probably gonna be another demon.

"All right. Is it okay if it's something like what I gave to Beretta?"

If Diablo insisted on a human corpse, we were gonna have problems. Things were a bit different now from when I first summoned him.

"Yes, I'll ensure they don't complain."

Then fine.

Ramiris was just bugging me, in fact, about providing physical bodies for Treyni's sisters as well. I said yes, since they could help us run the labyrinth. Maybe I should craft a few extra bodies while I'm at it, just in case.

"That's fine by me, then, but is that the only payment they'll want?"

"That is not a problem. But I think that the protégés I am considering each have a staff of their own as well. I was thinking about bringing them on, too. Is that all right?"

As breathlessly confident as always, I see. It's like he never once considered the thought of being turned down.

"I can't pay them, but would they care?"

"If you can provide them with physical bodies, they will gladly serve you, Sir Rimuru!"

He was so sure of it. And if he was, I had nothing to say. *But there is one thing I better ask.*

"So how many people are you expecting to serve you?"

By his manner of speech, I was picturing a small handful, but I needed to know how many bodies I should prepare to make.

"Well, I was thinking perhaps several hundred; a thousand at most."

"That's a *lot*!!"

A thousand at most? And they're *all* demons? What kind of doomsday army was he tryin' to build?!

"What, are you trying to have a war by yourself?!"

"No, no, I'd hardly expect them to battle me. Even if they did, I doubt it would be a hard fight for me."

And so deadpan about it, too. Where does all that confidence of his come from?

"Are you...gonna be okay, though?"

"Yes, perhaps there is no need for such a large number. Very well. I will carefully choose among them and dispose of the unnecessary—"

"No, I didn't mean that! I'm asking if *you're* gonna be okay!"

Diablo gave me one of his happy smiles. "There will not be a problem," he declared.

Well, now it just seemed ridiculous to worry about him. For all I knew, Diablo may very well be stronger than me. If he says it's not a problem, there was no point in me protesting.

"All right. I'll prepare a thousand vessels for you."

"You will, Sir Rimuru?"

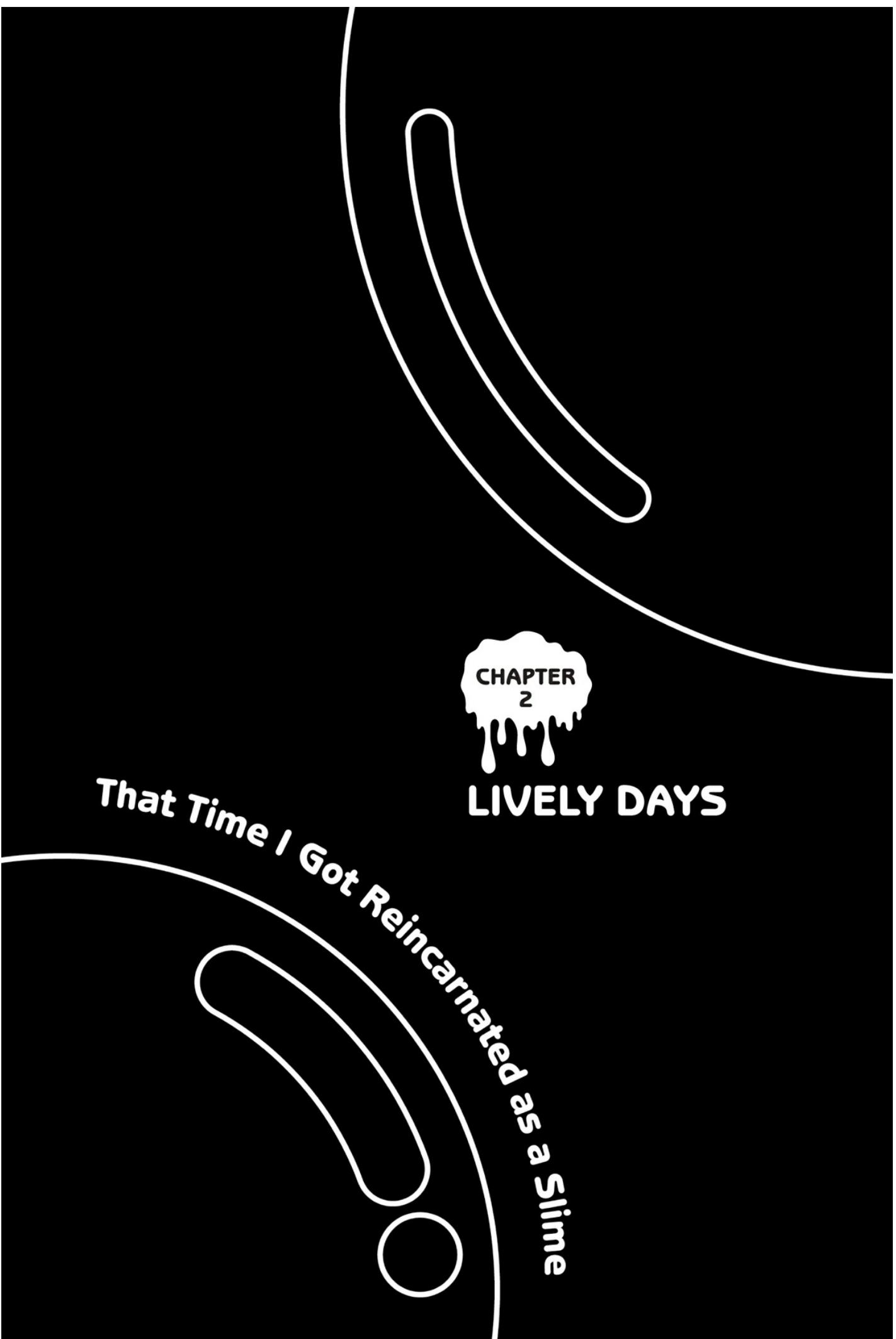
"Sure. I need to reward you anyway. So try not to get yourself hurt doing this, all right?" I didn't think I needed to worry, but I went ahead and said it anyway.

Diablo bowed at me, overcome with emotion. "Very well, then. It pains me to say this, Sir Rimuru, but I hope you will forgive my absence for a period of time as I prepare."

Part of me just wanted to say "yeah, yeah, yeah" to him. "You can leave things to me for now. Get going."

Shion sounded like she was showing someone she disliked the door. I could kind of empathize with her. She must've been feeling the same way I did.

Wasting no time to strike while the iron was hot, Diablo decided to head right out on his journey. To be honest, I was a little anxious about having Shion be my only secretary, but—hell—Shuna was there for emergencies, and I doubted anything too hairy would happen. Such were my thoughts as I saw Diablo off with a smile.



## CHAPTER 2

### LIVELY DAYS

A few days after our previous meeting, a party finally made it past Floor 30.

This was Masayuki's team, and just as he had worked out with Mjöllmile, they were making their way down the Dungeon at a steady clip. It was fixed, I'll freely admit that, but what the general public didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Besides, with his Chosen One skill, Masayuki can make some pretty big screwups and still look squeaky-clean to everyone around him. I couldn't ask for a better advertising partner.

So we held a big announcement inside the labyrinth that the orc lord guarding Floor 30, as well as his five henchmen, had been slain. The results were electrifying. Cheers erupted from the inns and taverns people gathered at.

“Maaaa-sa-yuuu-ki! Maaaa-sa-yuuu-ki!!”

You could hear it all across town, and Masayuki reacted to the chants with a casual smile. His expression was stiff, to say the least, but to the crowds, it must've looked like a radiant smile. Once again, Masayuki's fame and popularity had risen to the stars. Some shops even held “Masayuki the Hero Thirty-Floor Commemoration” sales. With all the excitement—and all the merchants whose eyes sparkled at the potential profits—things were, to say the least, lively.

Now we were holding another meeting in the conference room we had built in the labyrinth.

“Ah, the populace loves you more than ever, don't they, *Hero*? ”

“Rimuru, can you not pick on me, please? It's hard! ”

I thought my choice of greeting would be a fun way to break the ice, but he really did seem overwhelmed.

“Truly an excellent performance! Magnificent! Stirring! ”

Mjöllmile couldn't help but join in. He really meant it, too, making Masayuki snicker a little. Now I see. If *this* is how everyone reacted to him, I could understand how that would get tiring.

"I really didn't do much of anything, though."

"Oh, there you go again! You're such a modest champion, Sir Masayuki."

I doubted Masayuki was being modest at all. An ogre lord ranks a B-plus as a monster, and its henchmen would all be B level, too. One B-ranked monster could threaten the existence of a small village, and here we had a small group of such monsters, so beating Floor 30 requires serious talent...but Masayuki's team emerged from that battle without any major issues.

The Mithril Armor I gave Jinrai did a lot to boost his defense, so the party's strategy involved keeping the monsters' attention squarely on him—an effective one, as it turned out. The rest of the party was pretty decent, too, focusing their attacks to unlock some pretty powerful magic. Bernie's elemental magic, Jiwu's spirit magic, and Masayuki's Chosen One-based buff effect all worked together to raise their abilities to their peaks.

Masayuki said he didn't do anything, but—really—he played a huge role just standing there.

"Still... Not that it's for me to say, but we couldn't ask for much better advertising. Having Rare equipment from a distinct series show up in the chests is quite attractive to a lot of people."

"Right? I came up with that one."

Equipment that unlocked special effects if you completed the whole set—that was an idea I discussed with Kurobe, and the memory of that discussion inspired him to make a test set, the so-called Ogre Series. The gold box inside Floor 30's boss room awards you with one random item from that set, which was really a diabolical way of going about it.

There were five weapons—an ax, sword, bow, saber, and knife—and five pieces of armor—the helm, breastplate, gauntlets, gaiters, and boots. (No shield included.) What you got was completely down to luck—you were guaranteed an Ogre Series item, but you didn't even know whether you'd get a

weapon or a piece of armor.

Plus, keep in mind, there was no guarantee you'd see a series piece drop. The gold box the boss guarded was programmed to drop Rare items 2 percent of the time. Even if you beat the ogre lord once an hour, that box would still only contain twenty-four items a day—you'd be lucky to see a Rare drop every other day, at that rate.

It's the perfect drop rate, in fact, to encourage the gambler side of people's psyches. It's human nature to want to collect 'em all; if you obtained a piece you already had, you could always trade or sell it. Now people had yet another reason to tackle the labyrinth.

"And we picked up the Ogre Greaves."

"Yeah, and if you can find all five armor pieces, it'll grant you Magic Interference, which is a powerful Anti-Magic skill. Real effective against the boss at Floor 40, *hint, hint*."

It was the same effect boasted by the Scale Shield I gifted Kabal a while back. That shield gave you the effect by itself, but with the Ogre Series, you needed the whole armor set to unlock it. That's the difference between a Unique piece of equipment and a Rare one. And to be honest, the Ogre Series was made from the magisteel we salvaged from the by-products of processing the shield-like scales of Charybdis. This meant it was already a powerful magic blocker, effective against the tempest serpent's Poisonous Breath, and I hoped people were excited about collecting them.

"Oh, really?"

"Uh-huh. So the tactic I'm hoping people adopt going forward is to collect the whole set before taking on the next boss."

With Masayuki's team conquering Floor 30, we had now formally announced the Ogre Series. It wouldn't be long before the information spread worldwide, and I'm sure it'd energize even more would-be challengers to try their own hand at the labyrinth.

Parties were allowed to be up to ten people in the Dungeon. No matter how strong a group of monsters you found in there, if you had a party of adventurers

ranked B or higher, there was nothing they had zero chance defeating. It'd be a trial-and-error process ahead for them, I'm sure, but if they think of it as training for group battles against monsters, I think it'd be good experience for them. I definitely want them to build up their equipment for the floors beyond, besides.

Everything was going to plan. We didn't miss a thing.

"That's your idea, huh...? So you think we need to complete the series?"

"Well, that's a good question. The Mithril Armor I gave Jinrai is a Rare piece as well. It's got no special traits, but it provides better defense than the Ogre Breastplate. You *could* just keep pushing and beat the tempest serpent that way, maybe."

The serpent was a tough foe, but there'd be only one of it. Tackle it with a party, and your strategy would probably involve keeping a decoy healed while the rest of the gang fought. That would be Jinrai with this group, and I figured he'd be up to the task.

"All right. In that case, we'll keep going down."

"Gotcha. Good luck, okay? Because you're the best pitchman we got!"

"Jinrai and the others are a lot more enthusiastic about this than I am, but yeah. I think having monsters drop items is kinda adding to the fun, too. It's always exciting to discover a chest, but..."

The simple idea of having monsters drop items turned out to be *absolutely* the correct thing to do. Some monsters—skeletons, for example—didn't have any materials to harvest, and their magic crystals could often be low quality and worth pocket change. The stronger an explorer you were, the more of a pain in the ass monsters like that became to deal with, but now things had changed. The creatures that parties used to reluctantly mow down were now getting actively hunted again.

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With monster materials circulating more than ever in the marketplace, I couldn't ask for better results.

Giving labyrinth-generated monsters items was actually pretty simple. The

dryads, led by Treyni, helped us out with that, taking newly born monsters and having them swallow the items. That sounded tricky, given that monsters may appear anywhere in the labyrinth and you can't track them all. In fact, though, there was no need to.

The flow of magicules in each floor was supplied with special pipes. These pipes were set up to run through certain rooms from Floor 5 downward, rooms that subsequently would have lots of monsters born in them. Monster lairs, you could call them. To manage the labyrinth, Treyni and the dryads would place the items I specified in each of these rooms; the monsters would swallow them up, and then the dryads released them into the maze at large.

Tracking all the monsters generated in the labyrinth was a pain, but one greatly reduced by only having to watch over the monster lairs on each floor. Monsters who self-generated in the regular corridors wouldn't carry any items, but that wasn't a problem—we didn't need every single monster to drop something anyway.

Thus, we had a reasonably efficient way to enable monsters to carry items around on each floor. I originally envisioned the monster lairs as a kind of trap, but now they were more like administrative pens. Of course, you might see a hapless party tiptoe into these rooms right when they were packed to the rafters with monsters...but hey, it adds to the tension! It's all part of the charm for everyone—you never know what you may find around the corner.

"And the appraisers are working around the clock! We're charging one silver per appraisal, but there's pretty much a line at all times."

From slain monsters, you may find flasks of fruit juice or milk, magically treated to keep for several days, plus a few Low Potions mixed in. Some of these drinks might go bad after a while, of course, so an appraisal was a must. We also threw in some of the failed efforts from Kurobe's apprentices, junk that we then bought off them for cheap. This might sound like we were taking a loss on them, but they're kind of like crane-game prizes—reinvesting our profits in order to attract more customers.

And speaking of prizes, we had to have some jackpots, of course. Occasionally, we'd mix in a masterpiece from Kurobe's assistants. This, of

course, generated a ton of buzz, with people going around town showing off the Special sword or whatever that they picked up inside the labyrinth. It really added that addictive touch we were hoping for; now, like ants to a hill of sugar, we were seeing people come back again and again.

So we had booty in the treasure chests, monetary rewards for beating every tenth floor, and plunder from the monsters themselves. A lot to attract repeat business with.

Thus, it was fair to say that the labyrinth was going well. It was perhaps inevitable that more people were showing up in the town.

“And Floor 95 is just *packed!*” effused Ramiris, the others nodding their agreement.

Yes, the new inn on Floor 95 was already a big success. Each floor had a conspicuous room before the stairway containing a rather unnatural-looking door reading INN on it. There was a bell next to each one; explorers rang it to call for a labyrinth manager who’d explain what lay beyond the door and how they could take advantage of it.

One silver coin was required to open it, not much less than admission to the labyrinth, but to regulars, that wasn’t going to be a big outlay. The majority of people who heard the manager’s spiel wound up paying, after all. And there was a good reason for that—the ever-changing labyrinth structure.

Thanks to all the corridors and such changing every two or three days, it was much trickier to conquer a floor than its size suggested. Few people could advance through a huge map without getting lost, and we had measures in place to prevent elementalists from relying on Elemental Communication too much. It was now a challenge to find the shortest route through a floor, and as a result, you really couldn’t reach the save point at every tenth floor in a single day. Thus, until now, parties were forced to camp out in the corridors.

“I’ve never slept in an open corridor before like that, actually.”

“Oh?” I turned to Masayuki. “How was it? Seems pretty fun.”

“Hah! Maybe for you, Rimuru, but if you’re sleeping on cold, hard stone, you’re gonna get terribly sore and maybe bruised up. The other two guys

besides Bernie and me seemed pretty used to it, but..."

Not even Jiwu, a woman, objected to roughing it like that. But to Masayuki, sleeping in shifts to keep a lookout for monster attacks was nothing short of hell.

"Ah. Sounds rough."

"Can you give me some *actual* pity, please? Because I never wanna do *that* again, that's for sure."

I suppose it *would* be an ordeal for most modern-day kids, whether you were an otherworlder or not. You could secure a treasure-chest chamber or some such and set up camp there, of course. But you'd still need someone keeping watch, since some monsters constantly wandered the hallways without rest. In those circumstances, providing a safe place to rest was unexpectedly popular.

There was also the question of what to do with the equipment you found inside. Discarding it would be a waste, since—as we planned it—there may just be a rare find among things that might seem like junk at first. But between your sleeping kit, a few days' worth of food, and backup equipment, you had only so much room to spare.

When space is of the essence, food is often the first thing to go. If you ran out of stores, you'd have little choice but to retreat, although some monsters left behind edible goods when defeated. Water could be procured with magic, so a lot of people made do with the barest minimum of sustenance. If you were at the end of your rope, you could always die and get transported back with your Resurrection Bracelet—that cost you your items, but it beat struggling with starvation.

Along those lines, people were starting to reconsider the merits of the return whistles. Since they let you return to the surface with all your items, more and more people were starting to purchase them.

Thus, a consequence of the labyrinth's new emphasis on dropped items was that people tended to carry less food around than before. So what if we had an inn available down there? If you're well enough to reach a stairway, the inn was there for you, obviating the need for food or a sleep sack and making your pack a lot lighter.

Yes, if an inn were available, a lot of people would naturally want to take advantage. They provided safe rooms for three silver coins, the same as labyrinth admission; between that and the access fee, you had to pay double or triple the price of a regular inn to stay there, but at least you got a meal with it.

Those three coins gave you access to a building divided by gender, filled with capsule hotel-like rooms just large enough for a bed and little else. I'm not going to talk this place up too much—your money didn't get you luxury. I was having some treants run it for us, and the work was carried out by new staff as an on-the-job education program. Cleaning, laundry, cooking, customer service—our hires would get to practice all of that here, and if they make the grade, they'll be able to find work up on the surface.

Despite the rustic conditions, the inn still found its clientele. Your money bought you safety in the labyrinth, after all, and nobody was about to complain about that. We also provided a few extra services for additional fees. Clothes laundering: three silver. Access to a large open bath: three silver. Equipment cleaning and basic repairs: five silver. That sort of thing.

These services were all kind of popular, actually. Extended rounds of fighting in the labyrinth could make you a bloody, sweaty mess, after all. The bath was also a big hit, which I figure is because women might be more sensitive to people stinking up the place. Either way, it was all at exorbitant prices compared to the surface, so our profit margins were through the roof.

You were allowed to take a break in this space without getting a room, speaking of which. Simply having access to a bathroom you wouldn't get ambushed in was a huge attraction. Masayuki suggested I look into that, and when I did, I found that was, well, a pressing concern for everyone. There were no flush toilets in the labyrinth, and since you were on the razor's edge between life and death for much of your journey, you often had to resign yourself to some wet trousers, or worse.

The labyrinth itself never needed cleaning, though. The generated monsters cleaned everything up for us—in particular, the slimes in the labyrinth ate anything. Human waste, the remains of dead monsters, you name it. Monsters of that rank popped right back into existence after an adventurer killed them, so hygiene wasn't a concern, at least. Plus, every time the labyrinth layout

changed, Ramiris cleared out any useless garbage strewn around, ensuring the Dungeon remained in remarkably spotless condition.

Of course, this didn't mean people were comfortable with dropping trou and doing their business in the middle of a monster-laden hallway. The labyrinth management didn't want their maze to look like an open sewer, and our challengers weren't great fans of that, either. If they got attacked by monsters in the midst of a bathroom break, it'd probably make them want to cry—yelling "Time out!" didn't work against monsters. You'd need someone keeping watch for you, for number one as well as number two, and I know I'm speaking for at least some of you when I say that going to the bathroom in an open hallway while encircled by your friends is the perfect formula for performance anxiety.

Maybe a quick whiz would work—well, maybe not. If a monster caught you with your fly down and you had to fight like that... Or, even worse, you put it back in and had to piss your pants during the battle—*ugh*. I don't even want to imagine it. You'd probably just want to march right back home, but then you'd have to go tromping around the city of Rimuru with a huge urine stain on your pants, like you lost a bet or something.

A man *might* be able to cope with this; I can hardly imagine how a woman would handle it. For some, death might be better than the humiliation. And considering that lots of adventuring parties were mixed gender, toilet-related practicalities were another incentive for people to use our inn.

By the way, some people tried to solve this problem with magic. Certain "household magic" spells like Clean Wash and Health Management can help you maintain normal bodily functions inside the labyrinth. Health Management, in particular, allows you to manage the times at which your body needs to eliminate. There were certain limits, of course, but you could use that spell to hold it in for around three days without issue. Unless you were the type of maniac who didn't care if he sprayed his waste all over during battle, this was a must-have spell for adventuring.

Still, Health Management didn't work forever. If you were gonna wander around the maze for extended periods of time, relying strictly on magic was risky. Thus, it came to pass that even sorcerers and the like saw fit to call upon the inn's services.

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So labyrinth management was all systems go for now. Mjöllmile couldn't have looked more pleased with himself.

"It's going along perfectly well," he said. "We're seeing a rising trend in our profits. Even subtracting the expenses incurred with the item drops we're distributing, I'm beyond satisfied with our margins—I'm looking at around ten percent right now, from our original investment. My goal is twenty percent, and if we can attract more customers, I think we can make that happen."

Hmm. So about what we figured, overall. And since I was having him report the items we provide at their sale prices instead of our own costs, we were actually making more profit. That and we weren't paying a salary to the townspeople involved with the work, so all of that was going straight into our coffers.

"It seems like we could start investing more into it."

"If we do, it'll be a while longer before we see government-scale profits, but I think we could get in the black before an extended amount of time."

If profit was all I cared about, we could just sell what we created at high prices. But as a nation, that wasn't enough to survive. There were people in town involved in many kinds of work; we needed to make sure it was divided up appropriately, so they could do their best at their jobs. That's why I thought it was important to set up an environment where everyone's satisfied with their work. As the ruler of this nation, it was job one for me to provide work—or really, a purpose in life—for everyone who lived in it.

"Yeah, but I feel bad about them working for free..."

"Well," Mjöllmile said with a grin, "if you factored the average salary in Blumund into our figures, we have more than enough of a budget to pay that to our employees. Whether they'll accept it is another question..."

To a merchant like him, free labor must have been unthinkable. I could understand that. You didn't exactly need to ponder the subject deeply to see the problem. We *were* providing food, clothing, and shelter, and everyone seemed happy enough with that...but it didn't seem like a good work

environment at all like this. I *did* want to compensate them all somehow, in time, but Raphael was doing a perfect job of managing them, so nobody had lodged any complaints about their treatment. Nonetheless, I decided I'd better bring this up with Rigurd and my other officials shortly.

But even as my subjects happily worked for nothing, one of my other acquaintances was much more faithful to her own greed.

"Um, by the way, is *my* payment gonna be all right?"

Ramiris nervously gulped as she asked the question. All this talk must've made her think I was gonna stiff her. She didn't have to worry; I keep my promises. So I signaled to Mjöllmile, who then nodded with a smile of his own.

"You have every reason to expect it," he proclaimed, trying to sound as important as possible. "I think we can pay you quite a figure, in fact!"

Ramiris gave that a satisfied grin. "This is it!" she exclaimed.

"Huh? What is?"

"My era—the era of Ramiris has finally arrived!"

Had it? Because I wasn't so sure. But Treyni, bringing some tea in, warmly smiled at Ramiris as she guffawed at this. I always thought Treyni was overprotective of her—love can be smothering like that—but I wasn't about to get involved in their affairs.

"Do *I* receive any of this payment?"

Oh, now *Veldora's* interested in money? That's the last thing I need...but we *do* owe him one. I gave another nod to Mjöllmile.

"Yes, of course, we have a payment prepared for you as well. Would you be satisfied with the same amount Lady Ramiris is set to receive?"

Mjöllmile and I had worked this out in advance. Veldora, after all, was acting as the "master" of this labyrinth—not that he had to *do* anything, really, but it was his magicules that kept the Dungeon environment running. His converting magic ore to magisteel for us, in and of itself, generated huge profits for Tempest. I didn't think it right to try to cheat him.

"Ah! Wonderful! I knew I could count on you, Rimuru. I see that I'll always be

safe in your hands.”

“Don’t go wasting it, you two.”

“Of—of course not!”

“Y-yeah, of course not! I know how to save money!”

Knowing how, Ramiris, doesn’t mean much if you don’t do it. But they both looked pretty gratified, so I opted not to rain on their parade.

“Ha-ha-ha! Of course, they’re free to squander at least a little of it. Money, after all, is something you save because you know how much fun it is to use!”

“Ooh, yes, yes!” agreed Ramiris. “That’s *such* an astute insight, Mjöllmile!”

*Mollie, if you coddle Ramiris like that, she’s gonna run with it. Treyni is a great example of how not to handle her.*

“I suppose so, yes. And I have experience working at that *takoyaki* stand. Now I see what a noble thing work is, as well as how vital money can be. Rimuru, you worry about me far too much!”

*You’re one to talk. I was the one who arranged that whole damn takoyaki stand for you, and Mjöllmile pulled more than a few strings to make it happen. All you did was grill up the damn things!*

I had to mentally restrain myself from saying all that. There’s no better teacher than experience, I suppose. Let ‘em do what they want. Even if it blows up in their faces, as long as they learn something from it, we’re good.

“So, Mjöllmile, how are things looking outside the labyrinth?” I asked.

I knew things were moving fast around town, but how were things really going? I was curious.

Mjöllmile smirked at me. “Brisk indeed! That’s the only word for it. The festival is long over, but really, we haven’t seen any major drop in our population. We now have a pretty steady clip of merchants going in and out, and I think that’s going to be quite stable for the time being.”

“Would you say the town is starting to function as a stopping point for trade?”

"Precisely. Merchants are starting to come see me so they can begin to do business here. They're not going through intermediaries all the time, either, so Sir Rigurd has a rather full schedule these days. From Free Guild members to big-name merchants from the Western Nations, they're all inquiring about opening up shop here."

Sounds better than I thought, then. The Founder's Festival was meant to prime the pump, and in terms of attracting people, it was a big success. Now the labyrinth I'd made for fun was building a good rep of its own, winning favor with all our visitors. After that, all we had to do was fine-tune things to keep the money flowing. I wanted people to challenge the labyrinth, earn money, then spend it on our nation's goods—not just our inns and taverns, but weapons, armor, and other consumables.

I'm sure our merchants from other nations would play a big role in that. The Free Guild purchases monster materials, then deposits the money with us. Foreign merchants would bring us rare and exotic goods, no doubt—and at the end of it all, our town would be livelier than ever. Give it enough time, and people the world over would know just how fine this nation's goods are. We've got a lot of exclusive things to offer—rare foods and liquor; all the cuisine Shuna was developing; the gear from Kurobe's workshop. Even Kaijin's apprentices were helping flesh out the selection. That wasn't even all of it, and the selection was only going to grow.

Word about all this could easily spread by now. Even without advertising, we'd have no problem attracting customers—and at the end of it, people the world over would accept us and see us as necessary. I was sure of it.

What's more, some of the gear made in Kurobe's workshop was on sale as "special merchandise" at certain shops. The gear circulating in these shops was doubtlessly going to generate attention—and while different stores dealt in different levels of quality, if you had the money, you could buy it for yourself, although anything from them rated Rare or higher would be available for purchase only on Floor 95.

I'm sure some people might doubt this gear's capabilities, but that wasn't a big problem. We've got a place right by here, after all, that lets you test out what you bought. We rented it out to people in the labyrinth, even, although

not too many people had taken advantage yet. It'd only be a matter of time, either way, before they used that gear and began talking up how good it was.

Little by little, we were building trust in our nation. Trust is more important than profit. I'm not about to go into the red for the sake of trust, but as long as we stayed in the black overall, I'd call that a success. We're not in this to make money; we're in it to get our nation accepted.

"Sounds like exactly what we aimed for. Even if Tempest's a monster nation, if merchants can see profits, they'll come for us. The labyrinth's seeing more and more visitors, and I think we can build a relationship with the Western Nations, too."

Mjöllmile nodded. "Smooth sailing, indeed. And yes, more and more visitors are coming. People know it's a monster nation run by a demon lord, and they're still coming. Just as you surmised, I think it's safe to say that people are trusting us."

He was in firm agreement. But he's a funny guy, that Mjöllmile. He said "us" just now. From that, it seems to me that despite being human, he's fully looking at matters from our perspective. I'm glad for that.

We can't earn trust overnight. Trust is gained in drops and lost in buckets—that's the truth. And maybe we're stimulating people's greed to bring them here, but there's no easier thing to connect to trust. If you think that someone can address and satisfy your desires, that's the same thing as earning their trust. Mjöllmile's a good example of that; we're connected by a desire-based trusting relationship.

Do good work and receive just profit from it—that's really important, I think. And, of course, it's no fun if that's a one-way street. You need to look at the other side of the equation and figure out if you can trust them. Right now, we've got the perfect environment for training ourselves on that. We've got a teacher in Mjöllmile, and I'm gonna study as much as I can under him.



Then I paid Ramiris and Veldora their salaries. They both seemed satisfied with the amount. I told them not to squander it, but have they thought at all about how they'll use it? The question weighed on my mind as we kept

discussing matters.

"Hey, um, do you think we could set up a space for my personal use?"

"Sure," Ramiris replied to me, "but what for? You wanna do some research, too?"

"No, it's more about development in my case. I have a few ideas in mind that I want to try building."

In terms of research, Kurobe was way ahead of me. His workshop was in the southwest part of town, along with the workshops of those apprentices he'd deemed worthy of going independent. That district was seeing weaponsmiths from all over now, hearing the rumors and building their own forges and repair shops to compete.

It was a full-fledged industrial zone by now, and as a result, it was getting hard to keep new discoveries made there a secret. The atmosphere was more convivial among those artisans, amicably sharing in one another's neat new stuff, so classified project development wasn't possible. Instead, my order for Kurobe was to develop new weapons and armor that nobody could imitate.

Besides, when conducting research, I didn't actually need a physical space. I have the good professor Raphael with me. What I *did* need, though, was a development facility to implement the blueprints in my mind.

"Sure thing! I'll get it set up today."

Ramiris was eager to please.

So now the hundredth level on the bottom began with Veldora's grand hall and continued on to rooms housing a plethora of research facilities. In terms of keeping the space defended (not to mention preventing leaks), I couldn't ask for someplace safer. In fact, it was impregnable. Let's use it for really important R&D from now on, then.

"But what are you tryin' to make down there, Rimuru?" Ramiris asked me.

"It's a secret."

"Huh? But I really wanna know! You're always cranking out all kinds of crazy things, so..."

"Indeed you are," said Veldora. "There will be no secrets between you and me!"

Oh, great. Who decided that? And I knew full well Ramiris and Veldora were doing this and that behind *my* back, too. But they were always so persistent with things like this, and I didn't have the energy to try to deceive them, so I gave them an answer.

"They're bodies. I've been thinking about providing physical vessels for Treyni's sisters."

Plus the ones Diablo requested, of course. If I needed a thousand, painstakingly carving them by hand wasn't gonna happen. I needed a setup that allowed mass production.

"And give me as much space as you can, by the way, okay? I want to try out a few different things."

"Comin' right up! Anything for my faithful underlings!"

Ramiris was emphasizing the "underling" part, but she agreed, nonetheless. Heh-heh... Good thing I let her in on part of my plans. Now I'll have the space to try all sorts of things. Up to now, I didn't have the time to make the things I came up with; now I could start implementing some of those ideas. The thought made me grin.

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I spent the next few days setting up my development equipment and tapping Raphael's full abilities for the first time in a while and copying all sorts of things within my Stomach. Any tech I wanted to pass on to future generations couldn't rely on this, of course, but I didn't intend to share it with anyone anyway, so all inhibitions were out the window.

Then I heard someone calling me from behind the door. Eesh. I was just getting into a groove, too—

*Report. You have not communicated with the outside world for several days. There is a possibility that something has happened.*

Come to think of it, I *had* been skipping out on meals, hadn't I? Raphael's observation reminded me that maybe I'd been a little too caught up in my own

world. Even if nothing was going on at all, it's natural that Shion or Shuna would get worried. Better make my rounds—now was a good stopping point anyway.

Replying to the voice I heard, I left my research center. As expected, Shuna and Shion were right there.

"Sir Rimuru, are you all right?!"

"I was worried. You didn't even appear for the meals you enjoy each day, so I thought that something might have happened."

Ah. So they *were* concerned for me.

"Sorry. I got a little lost in thought."

"N-no, not at all! As long as you're safe..."

"Shion is right. With all the hard work you've been doing, of course, nobody will complain if you want to take some more time off."

Once they saw I was fine, they were all smiles again. Now I felt kind of bad. They really cared a lot for me.

"Well, I'll make sure to check in at least once a day from now on."

"That would make me very happy, Sir Rimuru."

Yeah, better not get *too* wrapped up in my hobbies. Having someone worried for you is, in itself, a blessing.

As I let the remorse wash over me, Shion suddenly spoke up, as if just recalling something.

"By the way, Sir Mjöllmile has been searching for you since yesterday."

Huh?

"Then he should've called for me."

"He did, but there was no response... I apologize. We should have been louder."

"No, uh, sorry I didn't notice. I'll set up a doorbell or something next time."

Shion didn't seem too perturbed about it; I guess she didn't think it was *too* important. But after seeing how Mjöllmile was still hot to see me the next day,

she grew a bit more concerned and talked to Shuna about it. Apparently, it was labyrinth business, but Shion didn't know what kind. Did he figure Shion wouldn't understand it if he explained it to her, or was it something he was reluctant about letting Shion in on? I wondered about that.

Guess Diablo was a lot more talented than I thought, though. At a time like this, he would've absolutely found a way to attract my attention. In fact, he probably would've joined me at my research desk. Maybe that made Diablo more selfish than Shion, if you think about it—but enough about that. Mjöllmile's waiting for me.

Shuna had prepared a boxed sandwich for my lunch. Shion brewed up some tea. I was enjoying both as I waited for my finance minister.

"Ah, Sir Rimuru! I was looking for you. We've got big, big news from the labyrinth!"

I was in full relaxation mode, but Mjöllmile was frantic.

"What? What is it?" I asked, wondering if our user base was complaining about something again.

"Following Sir Masayuki, we've got another team that made it past Floor 30."

"Oh? Cool. That's faster than I thought."

"I wouldn't be so calm about that, Sir Rimuru! They're practically sprinting their way down! In fact, they're almost at Floor 40 already!"

*Um... Oh. Yeah, maybe I shouldn't be so casual about this.* But I didn't see what was worth getting in such a panic about.

What Mjöllmile said next convinced me otherwise.

"And their methods are, well... They're making a science out of skirting the labyrinth's rules. For example..."

He then began to explain. And he was right. I hadn't predicted this at all.

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As he put it, this party had come upon fairly ingenious ways of using Ramiris's labyrinth items.

First, they activated a Recording Crystal in front of the boss monster on Floor 20. One Crystal works for an entire party, so even if the boss wiped them out, they could revive themselves at the location they set for themselves. That was within expected bounds—so far, so good. But then, apparently, they would use a return whistle to warp out of the labyrinth. And then the party would split up, with each member going on to form their own party—always with ten people, the maximum.

"So then, um, all those people..."

"Precisely. It's no longer a party so much as a small army."

What was once a ten-person team was now ten *parties*, a total of a hundred people—each of them ranging between C-plus and B-plus as individuals. Apparently, they all wore a uniform of sorts, an overcoat with a shared design and a certain emblem sewn on it. They stood in line, no doubt unnerving the people around them as they marched in formation into the labyrinth...and that was the force they brought straight to the Floor 30 boss.

The rules stated that only one party could engage a boss at once, but here were ten of them challenging the same boss, standing in line to wait their turn. The orc lord and his five henchmen were powerful adversaries, but this army was no slouch either—and after a heated battle, they finally took the boss out with the third party of the group.

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"I feel like we talked about something similar just recently."

"Indeed we did. This is Team Green Fury themselves."

Ah, there you go. Judging by the matching overcoats, this must've been a set of people working for one noble or another. The sheer budget they must've had for Recording Crystals made me shiver. "Time is money" and all that, but those

cost one gold coin a pop, and they were tossing them all over the place.

"Do we know which patron they belong to?"

"I had Lady Soka look into that. Apparently, they're all part of the Sons of the Veldt, a pretty well-known mercenary outfit. She believes their benefactor hails from Englesia."

The Sons of the Veldt? I'd never heard of them. But it was a surprise to hear that one of the core members of the Western Nations had their eyes on our labyrinth. I seem to remember one of their affiliate families participating in the Founder's Festival...but no one from any of the main noble lines, I don't think. Maybe they got a late start, or maybe they had some other intention...?

"Well, hmm. How to put it? It feels kind of like they're paying their way in, which doesn't leave a great impression, but it's not a violation of the rules."

Annoyingly, we had no reason to clamp down on them. I understood Mjöllmile's alarm, but at this point, there wasn't much we could do about it.

"Our profits are rising, yes. Lodging a complaint about it might be unreasonable at this point in time. But if this keeps up, the floors you spent so much time filling with traps are going to be conquered in the blink of an eye, it seems like..."

So Mjöllmile was going nuts looking for me because he thought someone would beat the whole labyrinth while I was holed up in here?

"Guess I made you worry, huh? Well, it'll be all right. Things don't *really* kick off until beyond Floor 40. And I think the tempest serpent is going to stop 'em in their tracks for a while anyway. Team Green Fury had some excellent teamwork going; I think they ranked an A-minus as a fighting party—but as individuals, they were each around a B, so I doubted they could hold out against powerful ranged attacks for long. A tempest serpent is among the stronger of the A-minus gang, so even ten B-plus fighters could have trouble emerging victorious against one."

"Indeed, but judging by what Lady Ramiris and Lord Veldora tell me, we have reason to believe the leader of Green Fury is misrepresenting their actual skills..."

Huh?

True, I can't really run Analyze and Assess on someone in a video. Like—  
*Report. Accurate magicule counts cannot be calculated via Analyze & Assess on a motion picture of battle.*

...Right, Raphael warned me as much. I just used that video footage to assign a rating based off how the Free Guild ranks its monsters, so I couldn't really say with any accuracy exactly how powerful that party is. After all, I was only ranked a B-plus by the Guild, even though I'm definitely an S in actual skill. Ranks can differ from talent like that sometimes. And if someone was deliberately concealing their skill, we needed to consider addressing that.

"I think I better hear from Veldora and the gang about this."

"Certainly. I've already reached out to them, so let's pay them a visit!"

That's Mjöllmile for you. By the time he rounded me up, he already had everyone else on call. I nodded and stood up from my seat.

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We were back in the labyrinth's conference room, the usual gang.

"You are late, Rimuru!" Veldora scolded me.

"Yeah! Look at what happened! You're the leader—start acting like it!" Ramiris added.

*I'm the leader? That's news to me.* But that didn't matter right now.

"So how's it looking?" I asked.

"It's looking grim," replied Ramiris. "They've penetrated all the way to Floor 38 now."

She began to show me some video of their progress. She seemed pretty flustered, restless even, as she went over the footage, projected inside a little transparent box, with me. The effect was kind of like seeing 3-D miniatures move around by themselves. Too bad I couldn't Analyze & Assess this directly...

*...Suggestion. If I receive permission to interact with the subject Ramiris's intrinsic skill Mazecraft, it will be possible to collect more accurate, detailed*

*information.*

Oooh! A rare proposal from Raphael. It seemed worth trying. Let's ask.

"Ramiris, I have a favor to ask, if that's okay with you."

"Huh? Why all the formality?"

"Actually, I was hoping to intervene into your Mazecraft skill, but what do you think?"

"Intervene? What're you gonna do, exactly?"

What was I gonna do? I wasn't too sure myself.

"Well, you know, intervene. I wanted to collect more information about this labyrinth, sort of thing?"

I made most of that up, attempting to gloss over the truth with her.

*Report. That is generally the truth.*

Damn, I'm good. For once, I actually understood Professor Raphael's explanation.

"I mean, that's fine and all, but you sure you can manage that?"

"Um, why're you worried about me?"

"It's just, y'know, there's a *lot* of information to go through. Not even I can fully grasp it, so I usually ditch it from my mind once I'm done creating it."

Hmm? Hang on. She called it a *lot* of data, and she was probably right. With over a thousand challengers in the labyrinth at once, plus all the data from each floor, plus everything else—and we had permanent residents on Floor 95, too. Trying to grasp all of that at once—

*Understood. It will not be a problem.*

Oh, okay. Apparently, it won't be a problem.

"Hmm, I *think* I'll be fine...?"

"Why are you phrasing it like a question?"

"Now, now, Ramiris, you are in good hands leaving everything to Rimuru here. There is not a thing for either of us to worry about!"

I was all anxious, but Veldora was kind enough to browbeat Ramiris into trusting me.

"Well, all right! I'll give you the right to intrude into my Mazecraft skill, then!"

Ramiris touched me, and with that, I instantly had access to the labyrinth.

*Report. Connected to the subject Ramiris's intrinsic skill Mazecraft. Now collecting information.*

The seemingly impatient Raphael sprang into action. The moment it did, I... Hmm? Maybe I felt a whole bunch of data run across my brain? But it didn't hurt at all. I was tensed up, prepared for anything, but this was kind of a letdown.

*Report. Analyze and Assess on the Team Green Fury complete. Their leader is over the A rank, but my appraisal of the others does not differ greatly from before.*

In a moment, Raphael found the info I needed. Talk about reliable. Then I noticed the Analyze and Assess was still running. Did something catch its attention?

*Understood. Analyzing all battles that have taken place within the labyrinth...*

*...so quit bothering me,* I thought I heard it say. Which made sense. There's no way an average bum like me would understand the professor's thoughts. I'm sure it was plotting something grandiose again, but I'll leave it be for now.

So back to our meeting.

"I see..."

"Did you learn something, Rimuru?"

"That was fast. It didn't work, did it?"

Ramiris, to say nothing of Veldora, gave me a doubtful look. I'm sure they had trouble believing me, as much as that annoyed me.

"You know," I said, bragging a little, "this guy's an A-plus or so."

I brought up some other footage from Ramiris, blowing up the view to make it easier to see.

"Huh?!"

This surprised the whole room, Ramiris more than anyone else. "Um, Rimuru? Why are you using *my* skill so well?!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, you gave me the right to intervene, so I guess that's why."

"You're kidding me! Even I can only show footage from a set position. I need to personally know someone before I can track them on here..."

Apparently, Ramiris could only access footage that had already passed through her labyrinth managers. I could see why; wrangling all this data in depth was a dizzying task.

"Well, let's just say I'm more gifted at this for now," I said to assuage her as my eyes turned to the image.

The over-A explorer we were following was the elementalist who led the Green Fury team. If that leader was hiding so much power, there were likely even more elementals they were able to tap into. If they had access to higher-level ones, you could count on them having access to power several times their own.

"Hohh. When you say 'over-A,' are we talking about monster standards?"

"Right. I think the Free Guild pretty much assigns ranks based off what rank of monster they think you can beat, but..."

That, however, was ignoring any safety factors. I think, to be exact, the standards were based on the scenario of several adventurers facing off against a monster of that rank.

"All right, so what about us?"

"You guys...?"

Masayuki, I wasn't sure about. By the looks of him, he'd be on the low end of a D—but his unique skill was out of this world, so put it all together, and he'd be well into the A range. Saying that would probably give Masayuki the wrong idea, however, so I decided to keep quiet about it. Better to obfuscate the truth for now.

"I'd say Jinrai just barely clears the line for an A rank, but I'm not too sure if he

could beat a tempest serpent solo or not. If he had the complete Ogre Series set, though, it'd be no sweat for him."

His Mithril Armor couldn't fully protect him against Poisonous Breath; as a foe, the tempest serpent was a bad matchup for him. Unlike monsters, humans come with a lot of weaknesses baked in, so to speak—and since this isn't a video game, weakness against one attack or another spelled the difference between life and death. Even if his core strength made him competitive, the right poison at the right time could still easily kill him.

"Huh. Jinrai's really something, huh?"

"Yeah. Although, I think your skill is boosting him in pretty much every way. And then...who else did you have? Jiwu and Bernie? I'd pin them both at A-minus."

It was a great party. Well-balanced, to be sure. Maybe that's why Masayuki's faults never bubbled to the surface.

"Yeah, I definitely have some companions I can count on."

"Ha-ha-ha! And given how much more powerful you are than them, Sir Masayuki, you're an over-A for sure. After all, Sir Rimuru himself certified you as a Hero!" Mjöllmile had nothing but respect as he eyed Masayuki.

I really wish he'd be kind enough to stop. Masayuki was smiling, but he looked about ready to burst into tears at any moment.

"But the problem is that it's not only the Green Fury leader," I said. "Over on this team, *this* guy's an A; *this* guy's an A... The Sons of the Veldt, they're all called? They sure assembled a rogues gallery here."

"No way! That many high-ranked people?"

"Hmm... Nothing *I* would have an issue with..."

Yes, if the top members of the Veldt formed a party, even Floor 50 wouldn't stop them for long.

"Bovix and Equix are A rank, too, but if it's one of them against these two dudes in particular, it'll be an uphill battle. And I'd put the Green Fury leader on the same line as Bovix."

"That high up?"

"Yeah. I mean, this pair here, they're about twice as strong as Jinrai—just comparing their bodily abilities, not their battle skills."

The two Veldt standouts were each on the level of a high-end magic-born. Weaker than Gelmud (*that name takes me back*) but certainly stronger than one of the lower-ranked paladins. Meanwhile, the Green Fury leader was in a class of their own, too; I wasn't sure, but I was willing to bet their skill level in battle was pretty high.

"Looks like they're summoning magic beasts to run on ahead and alert them to the traps I set. They're professionals, for sure."

"Yeah, if this keeps up, it's just a matter of time before they reach the floors I set up."

Hmm?

I figured Ramiris would be happier about that. Why all the tension? I wasn't too thrilled about this party dodging all my traps, but she and Veldora were all ramped up about taking on challengers. Between that and the generally disturbed way she was acting, was there something else going on?

"Say, are you hiding something?" I decided to just ask her point-blank.

Veldora and Ramiris looked at each other, figuring out how to handle this. Presumably, Ramiris drew the short straw, because she spoke first.

"Well, in the three days you were holed up in there..."

And the story she had made me want to rub *my* forehead, too.

\*

As she explained, Hinata's Crusaders had begun their training—beginning with Floor 51, as we agreed upon.

Ramiris had lined Floors 51 through 60 with her own set of traps, and of course she watched them excitedly as the paladins went about their business. Adalmann, the guy she tapped to be the Floor 60 boss monster, had summoned a massive force of undead, leading to innovations like corridors of infinitely spawning zombies, oxygen-free rooms (the dead didn't have to breathe, after

all), and things even more diabolical than that.

"I was really confident, you know? And those stupid paladins kept on *purifying* everything in their path. The no-oxygen chamber stopped them for a bit, but the people behind the front-line team just resurrected them, and off they went..."

"They had the perfect tools for that challenge, huh? Well, that's the way it goes sometimes."

I tried to comfort the depressed Ramiris as she continued.

Before much longer, the Crusader group reached the boss on Floor 60. Adalmann was waiting for them, but again, he was just the kind of opponent the paladins trained for.

Thinking about it, the results really made perfect sense. As a wight with none of his own power, Adalmann was only as good as whatever he could summon. The paladins were way beyond what he could personally fight off. At the same time, however, Adalmann was a sort of "elder statesman" in the eyes of the paladins. He couldn't just run away from them, I suppose. Hopefully he didn't find the experience too humiliating.

"He wasn't all depressed, was he?"

"He was..."

*Ah. Thought so. Better give him a pep talk later. "So what happened next?"*

"After defeating Adalmann," said Veldora, "they pressed on to the floors where *my* traps were set. I was watching from above, chuckling over all the pain and turmoil they'd undoubtedly be about to face, and—"

"And they actually dodged our master's traps, too! The slippery floors, the illusory walls, the Corridor of True Darkness, the death rays—not even I could come up with some of that stuff, but they strode through all of it!"

Veldora and Ramiris gritted their teeth as they described it.

The floors between sixty-one and seventy were Veldora's to decorate as he saw fit. His traps *did* take some victims, yes, but unless they died instantly, the paladins could readily heal them back to shape. Between that and their

Resurrection Bracelets, as they put it, the team never really acted like they were in danger.

And here I thought those floors were too tough. With a team ranked A or above, as long as the whole party didn't die at once, they could always bounce back. Something told me we'd need to recalibrate the difficulty level a little.

"But my Elemental Colossus put in a real good fight!" said Ramiris. "He wiped out all the challengers, even..."

Wow. If he can wipe out a team of paladins, that's nothing to sniff at. But hell, his sheer weight alone was a threat. He was impervious to swords or magic, he moved like a jackrabbit, and his weight had to be measured in tons. He'd be anyone's nightmare.

So why was Ramiris all despondent?

"Well, it appears that seeing the paladins struggle against that boss frustrated Lady Hinata quite a bit," Mjöllmile said with a grin. "At one point, Sir Fritz, one of the paladin commanders in the party, said to his companions '*Why, I'm not even sure Lady Hinata herself could conquer this foe.*'"

Hmm. Yes, if Hinata was there—an *angered* Hinata—not even an Elemental Colossus could stop her. In fact...

"So, uh, how far did Hinata get...?"

"Y-yes, um..."

"That's the problem!"

It really shocked me. In the space of a single day, Hinata made it all the way down to the ninety-fifth floor. Even if we spotted her at Floor 61, that's an insane amount of speed.

She made quick work of the Elemental Colossus, stopping it in its tracks and using Disintegration to completely destroy it. Before much longer, she was at Floor 80, beating the boss there with pretty much a single blow.

"My apprentice Zegion's in pupal form at the moment, so he was in no shape to get moving," Veldora explained. "Apito woke up first, but she couldn't keep up with that girl's speed, so she got whipped."

"Yeah, that was quite a fight! Being a queen wasp, Apito's agility puts her at the top of the monster kingdom. And she was trying her hardest to land a blow on that Hinata lady, but she fended off every single one," said Ramiris.

Mmm. Yeah, if it's Hinata involved, I could kinda see that. She's a strong one. How I even managed to beat her was still a mystery to me.

"And then she kept on going! Floors 81 through 89 are each ruled by one of Kumara's followers, but she knocked them out, one by one."

"Right, and Kumara's still too young, so I let Beretta serve as the boss of Floor 90, but Hinata beat him!"

"Ah... It looked to me like Beretta had gotten stronger, but I guess he tangoed with the wrong lady," I said.

"Mm-hmm. It's incredible," replied Ramiris. "I can't believe people don't call Hinata a Hero."

And with that, Hinata called it a day and settled down in her elegant suite on the ninety-fifth floor.



She had spent yesterday conquering Floors 96 to 99, the “dragon floors” crafted by Milim that were supposed to be the toughest we had to offer.

“The Raging Earth floor, you know—the earthquakes are one thing, but the gravity traps are murder on you,” continued Ramiris. “It’s about five times normal gravity in there, so you’d *think* she’d have trouble moving around, but...”

But neither lightning from the heavens, nor bone-chilling cold, nor searing heat seemed to work against Hinata.

“So then it was finally time for my appearance.”

“Whoa, really, Veldora? You fought her?”

“I did. I take all comers! As the last boss, I will flee from no challenger!”

“...And what happened?”

This was Veldora—of course he wouldn’t run. But I needed to know the results. Veldora was stronger than me, so I couldn’t imagine that he lost—but the question was how Hinata decided to approach this.

“Oh, I won, of course. But she *was* rather strong, I will admit. Her sword skills reminded me a tad of the Hero who banished me, but her fighting style was quite the opposite.”

Hohh?

Whether Veldora’s victory was a foregone conclusion or not, I was kind of sad I missed the fight. I really wish someone thought to record it...

*Understood. Unfortunately, all battle records appear to have been deleted.*

*Yeah... But damn. I can’t believe how stupid I am for missing an epic event like that.*

“I tell you, Sir Rimuru, I could hardly believe my own eyes! Ah, Lady Hinata was poetry in motion!”

Oh, Mjöllmile saw it, too? I am *so* jealous.

“Yeah, I have to hand it to Hinata... People argue over who is better—am I or is she? But honestly, every time the question comes up, my stomach starts to

hurt."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Modest as always, eh, Sir Masayuki?"

*Mollie, please. That's not modesty at all. It's the cold, hard truth.*

"Hee-hee-hee! Oh, no need to joke about that, Mjöllmile." The smile on Masayuki's face looked taut and thin as he talked his way out of the question.

Mjöllmile didn't get the message. "Ah yes, indeed. I am sure that when it comes to battle, there is never any joking around with you! Why, if you ever had the chance to wage battle against Sir Veldora, I'm sure the results would be beyond comprehension. I'd love to have a front-row seat for *that!*"

It's funny. Mjöllmile was usually such a compassionate, empathetic man. But with Masayuki, he just didn't know when to quit. *Please*, just stop. The kid looks like he's about to have a heart attack!

"Oh, you think so? Would you like to have a bit of a sparring match, Masayuki?"

"A bit of a sparring match" would kill him.

"Now, now, now... Yes, Masayuki's a champion, but he uses his brain to fight more, you know? If we ever fought, I think I'd have a slight edge—but with *your* outlandish strength, Veldora, I don't think he'd ever live up to you."

"I see, I see! Yes, I thought as much as myself. You always *were* a fine judge of character, Rimuru! Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha!!"

Whew. That oughtta do it. Praise him, and it immediately lifts his spirits.

"Anyway, back to the topic?"

For now, I needed to hear Veldora's story to the end. I glanced at him, and he nodded back.

"Yes. You see, the Hero who sealed me away never made a single wasteful motion in her attacks. By comparison, that woman Hinata seemed to take a more varied approach, searching for something that could work against me. They were both coolheaded as fighters, never exposing themselves, but Hinata's style seemed full of needless strikes and movements to me."

As he described it, Hinata executed a wide range of attacks—every kind of magic, amulet, and artifact she could think of; she deployed them all. Simple physical attacks don't work on Veldora, so I imagine she was experimenting to see what, if anything, would. But pretty much nothing she threw at him had any effect.

"That final attack of hers was a fine one, though. It even damaged me, albeit a very small, tiny amount. It reminded me of the Hero's Absolute Severance skill, to some extent."

He was talking about Meltslash, Hinata's ace in the hole and a finishing move that took advantage of her sword Moonlight. But not even that fazed him?

"Do you think she could be a threat if she used the right tactics?"

Ramiris thought about this for a moment. "Hmmm, I think she's stronger than Clayman or the other, lesser demon lords, that's for sure. Even the Octagram's current members might have a hard time with her if they let their guard down. But my master here's in a world of his own—"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Exactly! If she wants to fight even with me, she'll need at least ten times the energy!"

Oh...

So not even Hinata was a good match for Veldora? I *really* wish I could've been there to study that battle. If I saved my memory of it, it could've been a great reference in the future. But there was nothing I could do now. Leaving the past where it belonged, I steered us back to the original topic.

"All right. So in essence, the second half of the labyrinth failed to function properly against the paladins and Hinata? But the bosses get resurrected, right?"

"Yeah, but Adalmann is weaker than Bovix, y'know? And he helps me with research and stuff—I think he's a real talent, but I don't think he's the best person for the Floor 60 boss. Also..." Ramiris began to visibly shake. "My—my masterpiece, the Elemental Colossus... It's broken...and it won't go back to normal!!"

Then she broke down in tears. Huh? Wasn't he a boss?

"Did he not have the bracelet on?"

"No, he did," came the downhearted reply. "But he won't resurrect. He didn't back when *you* broke him apart, either."

Apparently, golems that occur naturally can be resurrected in the Dungeon, but the types Ramiris built don't. That gave me an idea.

"Maybe it's because they don't have a soul. Beretta resurrected just fine, so maybe your labyrinth treats the Elemental Colossus like any other item?"

"...What?"

"Hmm, that seems likely to me," agreed Veldora. "Your authority fails to extend to him, Ramiris, because he's not counted as a potential target."

It sounded right to me. Which means that even if I rebuilt it, it might just get broken down again. That wasn't going to happen *too* often, given its strength, but we should really address that.

And before that:

"That takes a lot of time to build, doesn't it?"

"It does! So right now, Floor 70 doesn't have any boss at all..."

I knew it.

"Yes, and down on Floor 80, Zegion will likely be sleeping for a while to come. Apito has grown stronger herself, but she has far too little real-battle experience. I think she needs some training before we can have her serve as a boss."

It turned out Apito was already receiving some remedial battle training. I wasn't quite sure *this* was what I put her in the labyrinth for, but she was gung ho about it, so I saw no harm in letting her. Hinata was her teacher, by the way; they asked her to help out in exchange for another chance at fighting Veldora. Hinata was already assisting with our kids, so giving Apito some battle instruction probably wasn't much more of a stretch.

That left Kumara. The Kumara minions running things from Floors 81 to 89 were, in essence, magic-born manifestations of Kumara's own nine tails, one per floor. Each had their own free will, evolving and learning by themselves, but

detaching them from her own body like that greatly reduced Kumara's own magicule stores. Thus, they decided Kumara would join with Alice, Chloe, and the rest and study under Hinata.

...All of this was decided yesterday.

"Okay, so we have no real bosses from Floors 60 to 90 right now?"

"That's right!"

"Indeed. And that is why we have a problem!"

Ramiris and Veldora were sneering at me for some reason.

"Good heavens..."

"Boy, talk about bad timing, huh?"

Mjöllmile and Masayuki were just as surprised to hear about this. I thought things were pretty chill with the labyrinth by this point, but I guess I was wrong.

"...All right. I think I understand the situation."

I heaved a resigned sigh.

\*

So now I had a stack of problems to deal with at once, but at least we knew exactly what needed to be addressed from Floor 51 on down. Plus, the traps I laid out were still in fine shape.

"I suppose it'll only be a matter of time before someone slays the tempest serpent...but there's no need to panic!"

"Ah, that's the confident Rimuru I know. You have a plan?"

"Hee-hee! I thought so. I knew there was nothing to worry about with you around!"

The anxiety seemed to vanish from Veldora's and Ramiris's faces. It was very self-serving of them, but I nodded back and explained my thoughts.

"Right. Like I said before, my traps begin to get serious from Floor 41 downward. Those are bound to trip them up."

"Ah, how reassuring to hear!"

"Hmm? I suppose so, yes."

"And what kind of traps are these, Rimuru?"

Oh, is *that* what you ask? Better sit down for this.

"Well, the coups de grâce are the slimes on Floor 49. Once you make it past a certain hallway, you're cut off from the rest of the floor and confronted with a huge pile of slimes. *Bad* ones, let me add."

This swarm of slimes would merge together to form truly gigantic slimes, almost ten feet in diameter. The escape routes in front of and behind it were cut off, effectively stranding the poor victims. Physical attacks—slices, blows, heavy impacts—didn't work on it, and in a closed corridor, not much magic was safe to use. Anything that exploded was likely to blow up in your face, so that was off the table.

These slimes didn't have much attack force, no, but they'll maneuver to cover you from both sides, the classic pincer strategy. If you can picture edging closer and closer to the wall behind you as one of them advances, you can probably see how much of a threat they could be.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Victory is ours!!"

"Yeah! It's in the bag for us now!"

"Not so fast, you two. I didn't stop there."

I'm glad my initial salvo was enough to make them cheerlead for me, but there were a bunch of other traps. Prepare to quiver in fear as I break them down:

**Slime Pool:** What at first glance looks like a bouncy, rubbery corridor is actually a slime—one that opens into a soupy grave halfway down!

**Slime Rain:** A storm of fist-size slimes descends upon you, each one small enough to work their way into your clothing and armor. Watch for acid burns!

**Slime Doll:** Looks like a monster at first, but it tirelessly takes all your attacks, gradually exhausting you. Even worse, each attack you

try on it exposes your weapon to corrosive acid. Try not to let your equipment get destroyed!

And so forth. I had other ideas, but for this set of floors, I wanted the focus to be on explorer harassment. Breaking their weapons, in particular, could make it impossible for them to fight any longer. It's the perfect way to buy us time.

"Brilliant. Truly, a brilliant selection of traps. So even if we don't defeat our enemies with these traps, we win as long as we can leave them damaged?"

"That's right, Veldora."

"Hmmm... And breaking their weapons is a good way to chase off the stronger contenders. I didn't think about that."

"Right. If you can beat them, it's fine, but *now* they're gonna have to think about what if they *can't*. It oughta buy us some time."

For now, these traps wouldn't do much more than slow the challengers down. That was a shame, but we needed that time to come up with more permanent solutions.

"So what do you intend to do with the time you buy?" Veldora asked.

Better give a serious response to that. "It's important we don't forget that our labyrinth isn't your normal, run-of-the-mill labyrinth. This is the Advanced Dungeon, a newer, evolved type, and it's meant to keep evolving and growing more advanced."

"...!"

"Yes, of course."

"So we just need to make adjustments so the Dungeon can handle things better next time. First off... Adalmann. I'll figure something out with him. I wanted to change up the atmosphere in his boss room anyway, Ramiris, so I'll need your help."

"Sure thing!"

Adalmann had made it up to the rank of cardinal in his life; I think his job was officially high priest or something. In a party, he'd be your back-row support type. Leaving him to serve as a boss solo was a mistake; he needed to be paired

up with some kind of front-row partner. I had some other thoughts, as well, so Ramiris and I decided to visit Adalmann later on.

Next came the Floor 70 boss.

"We'll just have to make another Elemental Colossus," I said. "And the perfect person for the job's just come back."

I could get the needed materials, so let's take that approach. But it wouldn't be any fun to just build the same thing again.

"The perfect person?" Ramiris asked.

I nodded at her. "Yeah, Kaijin is back. He knows a lot about spirit engineering, so I think he'll happily take the job. Plus, I think this'll help with the experiment I was conducting earlier. I'll show him my research results, so I think you can expect an even stronger colossus than before."

"...Really? Oh, great!"

We couldn't produce immediate results for her, but with Kaijin on the team, we'd be stronger than ever. It wouldn't be ready immediately, but it'd definitely be a threat for the next set of challengers who made it down there.

"So for Floors 80 and below..."

"I think that will work itself out over time. Once Zegion wakes up, your garden-variety challenger will have no chance, let me tell you. And the dragons Milim got should evolve for us once they spend some more time in the labyrinth."

Kumara was a growing creature as well. No need to hurry things along. The question was just how much time we could buy for ourselves.

"Okay. So that'll be our basic plan. Now we need more time, and I don't think my traps are gonna be enough. So there's something I wanted to test out, and Veldora... Ramiris... I need your help."

"But of course."

"Sure thing!"

They both affably nodded. I returned the nod, then looked at Masayuki.

"Masayuki, I'd like you to continue delving into the Dungeon. But instead of going past Floor 41, it might be best to focus on completing the Ogre Series first."

"Very true. Sir Masayuki's activities in the Dungeon are always good advertising for us, and I don't see much need for him to hurry."

"So I should let someone else get past Floor 40 first, then?"

"Yeah. Also, I think you should maybe stay away from us for a little while. I don't want you getting caught up in our plans."

"Are you scheming something again?"

Masayuki leered at me. Well, *that's* mean. He's acting like I'm always hatching some kind of nefarious new caper.

"Well, let me keep that under my hat for now. But we'll handle things on our end, so Mjöllmile and Masayuki, I'd like you to keep things going as normal."

"Very well, Sir Rimuru!"

"All right. I'll give the news to my party."

Good, then. Now to see how long my traps can hold out.

"Okay, if there's nothing else, let's—"

"Oh, one moment. I did want to discuss something..."

Just as I was about adjourn the meeting, Mjöllmile stopped me. I guess he had other business to address.

"What is it?"

"Well..."

What Mjöllmile had to say threw me a bit.

"Lady Hinata was asking me about her reward money for conquering the labyrinth floors..."

"Huh?" I reflexively replied. Those prizes, awarded for clearing every tenth floor, were meant to attract the nobility's attention. What'd Hinata want with them? I mean, she *did* earn them, but...

"She did not *officially* make it down to the bottom during normal operation, no, but as she explained it to me, if she played by the rules, didn't she deserve to be paid?"

Mjöllmile looked concerned.

Okay, Hinata. Yes, you're technically right. But weren't we kind of in this together? It was a test for us, too, and to them it was on-the-field battle training. I didn't see how money had to be involved.

"No. Turn her down for me."

"Are you sure, Sir Rimuru? If we do, she may decide to stage a more serious challenge in the Dungeon, wouldn't she?"

"It's fine. Just remind her that people will learn she lost against the labyrinth master, and the word'll spread like wildfire."

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! It is impossible for me to lose!!"

Nice. I knew he'd pitch in at a time like this. Plus, if she really *did* stage another attempt, we could leverage that in our advertising.

"W-well, all right. But if possible, I'd like you to break the news to her, Sir Rimuru—"

"What? No way."

Yeah. No. I didn't want her hating me. It'd suck if she thought I was being a tightwad. Better to leave this role to someone like Mjöllmile, with the firm, resolved attitude I needed.

"B-but if I may, riling Lady Hinata's anger honestly scares me a little..."

"Thanks a bunch, Mollie!"

I think he was about to say something, but I cut him off. *Sorry. I'm just not into doing that stuff. A pretty girl like her, you know, I'd like us to stay friends. Besides, Mjöllmile's got a mafioso face and isn't afraid of anyone; he thinks of everything in terms of profit and loss, so I'm sure he'd have no problem saying no.*

I'm also sure that I just imagined it when I thought I heard him sadly mutter

“Perhaps I’ll use my pocket money, then...” under his breath.

That wrapped up our agenda. Leaving the now-grieving Mjöllmile to himself, I went on with my business.

\*

I told Veldora and Ramiris our meeting time tomorrow. There was some prep I’d need to wrap up before then, but before that, I had one errand to attend to. Shion was on standby outside my chamber, so I took her along with me to visit Shuna.

Shuna was overseeing dinner preparations when we saw her, giving out instructions to her staff. There were more people in the kitchen now, the air alive with conversation between an assortment of species. The skill Shuna demonstrated by organizing them all showed her strength as a leader. I hated to interrupt her for my personal business, but we were battling against time here, so she’d have to forgive me.

“Hey, Shuna. Got a moment?”

“Oh, Sir Rimuru! By all means, tell me what you need.”

Shuna ran up to me when I called out to her. In this noisy kitchen, everyone was always kind enough to let me sample their dishes when I stopped by now and then. I tried to offer a quick comment for everything I tasted, but I was in a rush, so our impromptu tasting had to wait.

“Sorry, guys, but I need Shuna’s help with something today. I’ll be able to take my time in here next time, okay?”

“Certainly!”

“Stop by whenever.”

“Wait’ll you see what we’ve been working on now!”

The enthusiasm was palpable. I guess me complimenting someone on their food was a kind of status symbol around here. Next time oughtta be *real* fun.

“Okay, Gobichi, can you run things for a while?”

“Yes, Lady Shuna! Ready and able!”

Gobichi was second only to Shuna in cookery by now. He was the head chef whenever Shuna was gone, so we were in good hands.

"Right, see you later," I said, waving at the disappointed kitchen staff.

We were on our way to Floor 60, Adalmann's lair.

"Oh, thanks for that sandwich, by the way. It was good."

Shuna smiled as we walked along. "I'm so glad you liked it."

"Allow me to make a box lunch for you next time, Sir Rimuru!" Shion was quick to volunteer.

I considered my options before replying. "Yeah, you're certainly improving by leaps and bounds. Could you maybe work with Shuna on one sometime?"

I thought I was safe trusting Shion by this point, but a little insurance never hurt. Shuna's presence should keep Shion from going crazy in the kitchen.

"Perhaps tomorrow then, Lady Shuna?!"

"Hee-hee! All right, Shion. Let's begin with something simple first."

It was a pleasant exchange. Their musical performance had been in perfect sync, too, actually. I'm glad they were getting along.

So we chatted along those lines as we reached the sixtieth floor.

"Adalmann, I'm coming in."

"Ah, it's you, Sir Rimuru! Truly, recent events have filled me with anguish. I am fully prepared to accept any punishment you deem fit for my inferior self—"

He immediately fell to his knees when I said his name. His penchant for exaggeration was as healthy as always, but I was used to it by now.

"Nah, as far as *that* goes, it's our fault for misreading this. You're not a good fit for combat against paladins. I don't think you could've avoided that defeat."

"...No, even now, I lament just how spiritless I was in battle. Losing to such inexperienced fighters... I approached the battle as if I were still a wight king, but I lost after my magic failed to trigger..."

Right now, Adalmann was nothing more than a powerless wight. A wight with

some pretty advanced magic knowledge and battle experience, sure, but species-wise, he was just a low-level monster. There wasn't much magic he could fully harness, and the only creatures he could summon were equally low-level undead. Monsters had the capacity to evolve via the magicules in the labyrinth, but that took time. Adalmann's minions wouldn't be evolving for a while to come—but what I was about to do would help him power up much more quickly.

"One of the most important things you can do is know the extent of your powers. Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Yes! Anything."

"How much holy magic can you wield at the moment?"

Holy magic was, in essence, force stemming from faith. You didn't need to gather up magicules from the atmosphere, and it wasn't affected by the magic strength within you. If you had the right knowledge and enough spell-casting time, you could weave powerful magic without exerting a great deal of energy.

What it *did* require, though, was a pact forged with a god. A god, for the purposes of this kind of magic, was an existence who could wield the spiritual particles that were the building blocks for magicules. It wasn't dependent on the caster believing in this or that god, or some other divine concept in this world—a god was just anyone who could directly interact with spiritual particles.

In Luminism, for example, Luminus was a god for this reason. Adalmann was a devout Luminist, and becoming a monster hadn't shaken his faith at all; that's why he could cast Disintegration as a wight king, I suppose. Now, however, he was worshipping me as a god instead of Luminus, and we couldn't forge a pact of faith with each other. I figured holy magic was thus out of the question, maybe.

"These days, not very much, I am afraid. Even lower-ranked magic is inaccessible to me."

I thought so. Holy magic, in essence, worked the same way as spirit magic. A pact was involved, and you were borrowing force from a higher power to cast your spells. Not even Hinata could cast holy magic without borrowing Luminus's

powers. If the human race didn't align itself with a god like Luminus, they'd lose access to one of the most effective ways to handle monsters.

It'd be ironic if it weren't so scary to think about. If Luminus's whims had driven her to go in a different direction, the world might've wound up far more chaotic than it already was.

"All right. So let me ask you, Shuna: How much holy magic can *you* use? And what's your faith pointed at?"

"In my case, it is not exactly holy magic. It is an imitation, powered by my unique skill Parser, and it works surprisingly well."

Ah, I see. An imitation? I *did* leave her to analyze the barrier over our town, come to think of it. Maybe that let her copy a subset of holy magic as a side effect.

And in addition to that:

"My faith is in you, Sir Rimuru, and there's no doubting the power that brings me. That's why I think I might be able to do this." Shuna gave me a somewhat bashful smile.

"...Huh? But when you fought me, didn't you say that even monsters could use holy magic...?"

"I was bluffing," Shuna replied, still smiling. "It was a bluff I was quite sure of, but you wound up proving it for me, Sir Rimuru."

Adalmann gave us a quizzical look. It was surprising how much variety there was to his facial expressions, being a skeleton and all. But regardless.

The most important element to executing holy magic was faith. Faith was intertwined with connections in the soul, and it might be that Shuna inadvertently grasped this at the deepest level. If that was the case, I just needed to present my theory and have Adalmann learn it. He should know how it feels, so I didn't think it'd be that hard.

"Now, I'd like both of you to accept for me what I'll call the secret skills of faith and favor. I just learned them from Luminus not long ago, and it's strictly classified information, so keep that in mind."

As a former high priest, I figured Adalmann could rediscover holy magic once he could connect with me. Even now, when his magicule count was nothing like it used to be, holy magic ought to make him a lot more useful in a fight.

“The secret skills of faith and favor...?”

“Ah, ahhhh... Now I too shall bask in the powers of the truly divine...” He was even more stifling than usual today, but I put up with it.

“Um, Sir Rimuru, do you mind if I ask a question?”

I hadn’t thought about it until now, but for the first time in a while, I was being carried by Shion—in slime form, of course. I didn’t want that to stop—it was comfortable, after all. This holy-magic talk would fly straight over her head, I was sure, but I had to be confident she could keep it secret.

“Don’t tell anyone, all right?” I said to her.

“Of course!” came the energetic reply. I was happy enough with that, so I went over the basics of my plan with Shuna.

“I see... So I can learn holy magic as well if I can ‘believe’ in you?”

“Right. I think so. It’s something you can research in your free time anyway. Maybe talk about it with Adalmann and stuff.”

“All right. I look forward to seeing how much of it I can learn.”

Shuna was picking this up fast. With her Parser skill, maybe learning Disintegration wasn’t a pipe dream, even.

As for Adalmann:

“Oh, ohh, *ohhhhhh!!* I am swelling, overflowing with power!!”

He was pretty excited.

“Holy Cannon!!”

With a red light sparking up from deep within his eye sockets, Adalmann pointed a hand forward and screamed. A concentrated ball of energy flew out from his palm—a bolt of Holy Cannon, a full-fledged holy spell. A powerful one, too, and one he had generated all by himself.

“Ohh, Sir Rimuru, my god...”

He prostrated himself before me in worship. I wish he wouldn't. It kind of made my spine prickle.

"Great, um, that worked, huh? Now keep practicing so you can start casting some higher-level magic. And if something comes up, you can always turn to Shuna for advice!"

I was clearly trying to hurry things along. Shuna, understanding my intentions, lightly nodded.

"...Ah. So you want me to be his adviser since you dislike dealing with him yourself?"

I heard that question loud and clear, but pretending I didn't was probably the best move here. If she could just assume I'm an insensitive clod who doesn't understand anything for myself, that'd be great.

"I promise I will live up to your lofty expectations, Sir Rimuru!!" Adalmann, meanwhile, was energized like never before.

I decided now was a good time to give him another important piece of advice. "Now, as a wight, if you cast a holy spell, doesn't that damage you?"

There were two types of holy magic—one neutral type that worked with spiritual particles, and another of the "holy" type that canceled out magicules. Holy Cannon was the latter type, and as a monster, I figured that would cause him damage.

"Ha-ha-ha! A little pain is nothing that would faze me—"

Ah. Adalmann's just soldiering through it. But that doesn't really solve the problem. I could tap Beretta's Reverser unique skill to flip the holy attribute around to demonic...but that's another future research topic.

For the time being:

"Then how about this, Adalmann?" Still enveloped in Shion's chest, I sent a beam of light into the air.

"Ohhh!!"

"I removed the holy attribute and powered it up a bit. It's called Holy Ray, and it's my own creation."

Holy Ray is a neutral attack, neither holy nor demonic in nature. As long as you didn't screw it up, it would never damage the caster. However, it was a trickier spell to cast—in other words, it required the user to have more "faith" in me...

It was meant for a single target, and in terms of spontaneous force, it was better than my Megiddo spell. It launched quickly and emitted a bright light, but it was actually a long string of concentrated, spinning spiritual particles. As a piercing attack, it wasn't as powerful as Disintegration, but took much less time to cast.

"Wonderful. Truly a wonderful spell!!"

Adalmann was beside himself with joy. If he could master this spell, it might help him get used to manipulating spiritual particles in general. Then he'd be able to launch bigger beams with tons more lethality. This was one of the spells Raphael developed based on my requests, and for Adalmann at the moment, this was the most ideal weapon I could give him.

"I'll be glad to discuss magic with you at any time, so don't be afraid to contact me."

Shuna had already kindly accepted my request. That was, to say the least, a relief.

"All right. Keep up your training, then, and try your best to learn holy magic that *won't* damage you."

I wanted that to be a focus. It would complicate fighting otherwise.

Raising a hand to quiet down the jubilant Adalmann, I then tackled our next problem.

"So right now, you don't have too many ways to attack. We can help you gradually build up an arsenal, but before that, there's something quick we can do."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you're more of a back-row fighter by nature, right?"

"I would say my role more often was to provide rear support, yes. When I was

a wight king, I'd often use summoning magic to bring forth an army of undead, overwhelming foes with my sheer numbers."

I'm sure he did. There was no rule that said a floor guardian had to fight solo, so all we had to do was bring on someone to take up the front row for him.

"Right? So I think it was a mistake for me to pit you against parties of people."

"Yes, I do have a variety of martial arts at my disposal, but with this body of bones, it's all rather incompatible..."

No, that's not the issue. He must've mistakenly thought I was scolding him. Punches and kicks weren't going to solve anything.

"Nah, nah, don't worry about that. If you're fighting a single person, then fine, but if it's more than one, call for some friends of your own. You had one, didn't you? I think his name was..."

"Oh, you mean my friend Alberto?"

"Yeah, right, Alberto. I guess he's a skeleton right now, but he used to be an imperial acolyte, didn't he? Good enough with a sword to trouble Hakuro, even. That's the kind of strength you need. And if he's got the right equipment, he can still cut it in a fight today, right?"

"Yes, with his talents, I am sure he can live up to your expectations, Sir Rimuru."

I could sense the pride in Adalmann's voice. Now I was getting more confident about the idea I had.

"Okay, can you give him this equipment for me later?"

I produced a set of gear from my Stomach and laid it out on the floor. Previously, I had heard Alberto was capable of fighting without a shield, so I figured this was the best set for him:

**Cursed Sword:** A one-handed, medium-length sword that absorbs life force from its surroundings—including the wielder, making it a failure as a weapon.

**Cursed Mail:** Produces a constantly deployed barrier with high magical resistance and defense—but also continually saps the

wearer's life force.

These two items were collaborations between Kurobe and Garm, both trying to extract as many features from them as possible. They were planning to create a whole series, but they shelved it once they realized no living being could use them. Garm, in particular, actually collapsed while crafting them; things were touch and go for a little while. We could laugh about that now, but given that backstory, we were all a bit loath to just throw these things away.

Besides, they both *worked* really great. Unique-caliber gear, you could even call them. But since monsters count as living creatures, too, we figured they were completely unusable...and now, as I realized, that's no issue at all with the undead.

"What do you think? You don't feel sick or anything holding them, do you?"

"I feel nothing in particular. We are already dead, after all."

Adalmann checked them himself to be sure. The moment he unsheathed the sword, Shuna and Shion began to wince—that life-absorb feature must've been working. Given how Adalmann wasn't fazed at all, undead must've been impervious to it.

"Great. I think you'll be okay, then."

Back in its sheath, the sword no longer sapped our energy—but that alone could make it pretty decent for attacking.

"Oh, and there's this, too."

It was a surcoat, an outer garment, made of my Sticky Steel Thread—a superior piece, resistant to heat and cold and also resilient against bladed weapons. These were circulating around as part of the Tempest-made goods we had available, but we charged an arm and a leg for them.

"Very well. I will be sure Alberto receives these. He will be overjoyed, I promise you!"

Great. With Alberto fighting for him, Adalmann would have a lot more options in battle now.

Oops. Just remembered.

"And, Adalmann, I want you to have this."

I took out a jet-black robe, like something a priest from some dark, sinister cult would wear. It looked kind of cool, actually, not to mention gaudily decorated. It was, in fact, one of the most impressive pieces of the whole Tempest clothing collection—something worth at least a hundred gold coins, or the equivalent of a luxury sports car. Even royalty or nobility couldn't shell out for this without due consideration. *Truly* top of the line. And it performed well, too—amazingly, even if it got ripped, it'd use Self-Regeneration to fix itself up. That made it a magic item, one with features you almost never saw.

"Oh—ohhhhh..."

Adalmann respectfully took it from me.

"I'd like you to put that on and greet any challengers you see like you're still a wight king. I think that'll help create more of a 'floor guardian' atmosphere with you, y'know?"

This was more a matter of taste than anything—*my* taste—but still.

I had also asked Ramiris to help me renovate this floor. We envisioned something like a throne room, with Adalmann leading an army of undead like the king he was.

"I will gladly do that, Sir Rimuru. It happens to be one of my talents."

Nice. It seemed like I could rely on him.

"Okay. I'll leave you be here, then. Also, if you have any other talented knights you'd like to have serving you in here, knock yourself out."

"Understood, my lord. If I could check with you on one thing..."

"Mmm? What is it?"

"Well, I would like to bring one of my pets here with me, but could I ask for your permission?"

A pet? Hmm... Didn't seem like an issue.

"Well, sure, if that's all it is. You can use whatever pets you want in battle, actually; just try not to have them outnumber the parties attacking you."

"Yes, my lord. I have been granted this land by my god, and I promise you that I, Adalmann, will protect it with all the ability I can muster!!"

Overreacting again. I let it slide. It wasn't worth commenting on.

"Okay. We're gonna be renovating this space to look like a throne room tonight, so feel free to choose whoever you want to serve you. If you have any questions, ask Shuna or Ramiris."

"Yes, my lord!!"

"May the words of Sir Rimuru propel you forward!"

Shion had to butt in there. I really wish she didn't—but she seemed happy with herself, so I didn't pursue it.

\*

The next day, we all came together at the appointed hour.

"Hee-hee-hee... Adalmann's floor is just *perfect* now!"

The moment she caught sight of me, Ramiris started bragging. As she had reported, she completed the throne room the previous evening.

"Thanks much. The rest, I think we can leave to Adalmann."

"Are you sure?"

"Welllll, he'll perform better than he did yesterday anyway. If he's fighting an A ranker, he's gonna have trouble, but he'll at least be able to expose his opponents' skills for us."

The longer Adalmann held out, the more serious his foes would get. That's where Raphael would step in, analyzing the battle and figuring out how we should best respond—valuable info we could leverage in the next floor.

Despite everything I said to Adalmann, it really wasn't any big deal if he lost. Besides, depending on the decisions we made right now, both he and (for that matter) Bovix may be idle for a long time to come. We needed to address every facet of this.

So! Time to start implementing—

"What are you doing?! I heard all about it! My dragons got pummeled?!"

Now that's the last person I wanted to see—Milim, storming into the conference room and looking absolutely livid.

In her hand was Gobta, looking like a dirty old rag; he was being dragged along, but it looked like he was still breathing. I could hear him muttering “Heh-heh-heh... I did it... I sure did... I finished it all!” over and over to himself, too, so I guess he was conscious. Milim’s training must’ve really done a number on him, but he didn’t *look* any stronger to me—just kind of (okay, a *lot* more) beat up. Was he all right?

Milim nodded at me, oblivious to my concern. “Ah yes! Yes, Gobta performed brilliantly! I didn’t think he’d ever beat Hell mode!”

She did look pretty satisfied. And judging by the praise from Milim, Gobta must’ve performed a truly monumental feat.

“In that case, it is time to teach him my Veldora-Style Death Stance—”

“No it’s not! Gobta is *my* disciple!”

Veldora and Milim promptly began arguing, a completely spent Gobta to the side of them. I really didn’t want to get involved with that, so I’ll leave that choice up to Gobta. Glad he’s home safe, at least. I *was* going to reward him later.

Once I had his attention, I ordered Gobta to get some rest. He promptly headed to a nearby nap room.

Did I mention Ranga?

“My—my master, I have returned...”

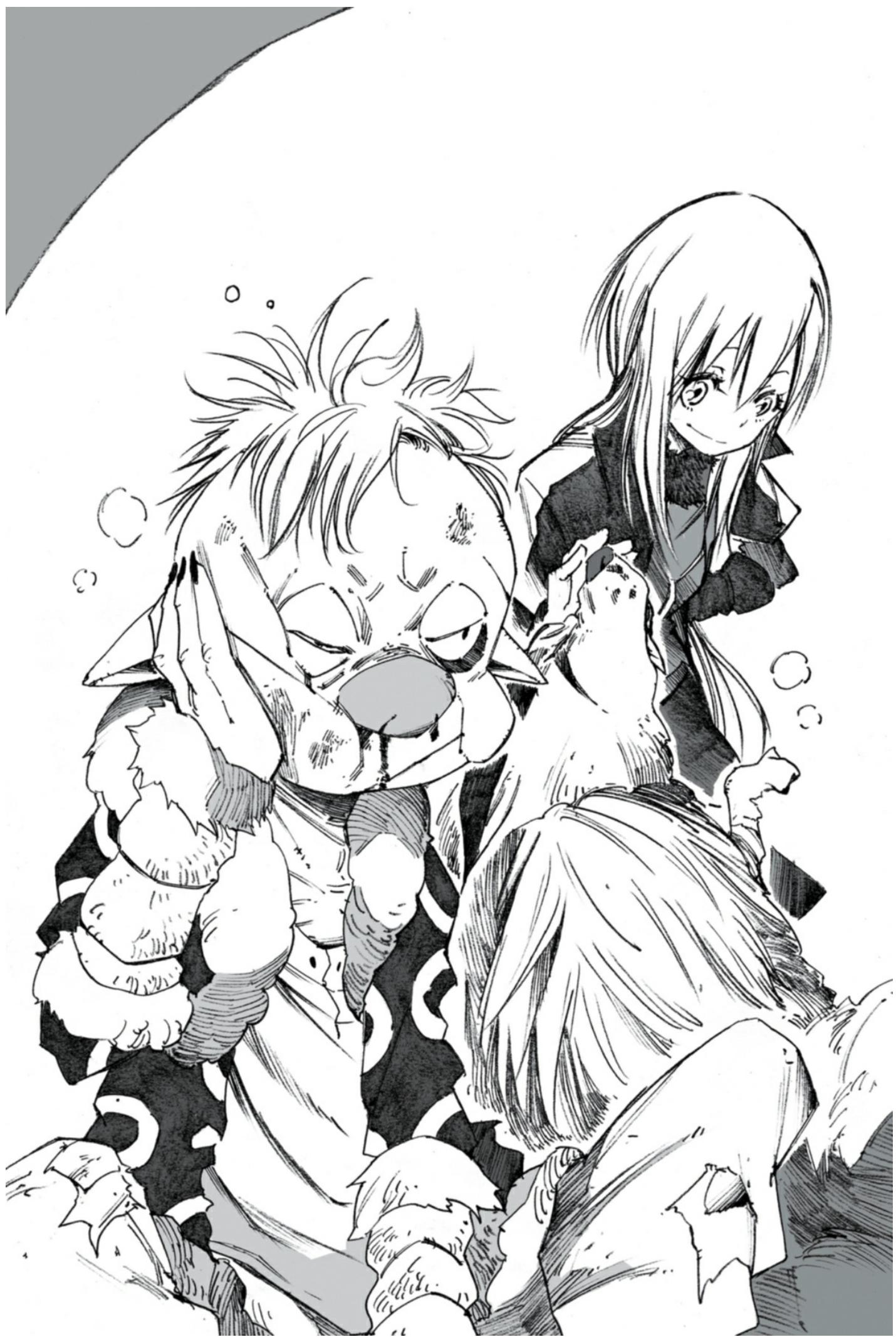
He was wobbly as he padded toward me, voice hoarse. Gobta looked bad, and Ranga was about the same. Pretty intense training, I guess. I reflexively gave him a pat on the head; he squinted appreciatively.

“Good job. You can rest in my shadow now.”

He jumped right in the moment I said it.

By the way, once he had recovered enough, I asked Gobta what they were up to. It turned out that his “training” was nothing but on-the-field battle—back-to-back fighting against monsters either at his level or slightly above it. Once he

and Ranga were in perfect sync with each other, they moved on to a never-ending string of battles against people like Carillon and Middray.



As Milim apparently put it to him: “No matter how hard you try, you’re never gonna house more magicules within your body. But don’t worry! If you can Unify with Ranga, that immediately solves the problem—and once you learn how to master the increase in power, you’ll be fine! So leave the magicule surge to Ranga and just try to polish up your senses!”

“So it was nothing but battle-sense training since then,” he concluded with a smile. He had also learned the extra skill Sage, which let him speed up his thoughts. I was pretty impressed.



Having Milim back was a boon, actually. After leaving Adalmann, I had been making the necessary preparations all night, just barely wrapping everything up in time.

Promptly, I took out one of the items I had completed. Veldora, Ramiris, and Milim each gave it curious stares as I held it in my hand.

“Pay attention, everyone! I have a special item here, something I’ve been developing for a little while. Personally, I think it’s groundbreaking. It’ll help us solve the problems we’re facing in the labyrinth, and it’ll also add some more fun to all our lives.”

I gave all three one of their own. I didn’t expect Milim in today, but I was planning to invite her over once I had something practical to share, so hers was all set to go.

The idea for this came from the homunculus Archduke Erald used earlier. I figured that having access to temporary bodies would let you do some pretty neat stuff.

“What’s this?”

“Never seen this before. Do I eat it?”

“Hmm... To me, it looks like a vessel for the soul—or the like.”

Milim, Ramiris, and Veldora seemed equally curious. No, Ramiris, it wasn’t food. Did she think *everything* I brought over for her was food? Oh, well.

Veldora was fairly close to the right answer. These items were quasi-

compartments for souls. When transferring your consciousness to a homunculus, a corridor is established between it and your soul using some magic. I had Analyzed and Assessed the core components of that magic, revising them for my own needs. This was what I gave to Treyni—a vessel for her chaos core. I called it a pseudo-soul.

"Veldora's almost got it. This device imitates a soul vessel. I can't provide a soul itself, so instead, I tried to create a substitute that mimics one."

"Hohh. Why did you do that?"

Veldora, maybe pleased he got it right, tried to sound as intelligent as possible. There was no need for me to put on airs; I could go ahead and just state my aims, but before that, I wanted to surprise them a little. After all the effort I spent on this, I thought I deserved a bit of fun.

"Hey, not so fast, not so fast. I'll explain everything to you, okay? But next up, I've also got this. Take it and try to imagine a monster in your mind. Any one is fine."

I then took out a set of black balls, each about the size of a fist, and handed them to my audience.

Veldora gave it an odd look. "Hmm? Any type?"

"Yeah. Either an existing one or whatever crazy thing comes to mind for you."

"So a goblin or an orc? Or a horned hare, or an ogre bear, or anything?"

"Hmm? Sure. But make sure it's something you like. I don't want you to complain about your choice afterward."

"All right. A monster, then? Do these create monsters who you'll repel labyrinth challengers with...?"

"Something like that."

He was always supersharp with things like this.

Satisfied enough with my guidance, the three of them picked up their black orbs and sank into contemplation. These items were called master cores, and the magical core of Charybdis came in handy with developing them. I had that kept in isolation within my Stomach, but Raphael had finally finished analyzing

it. It was the core of a large monster, as well as the root of its power; apparently, in the transformation into demon lord, I had consumed all the negative energy inside, so it was now an empty shell. That made it perfect for housing a soul vessel...and now, here we were.

After a few moments, the magicules in the air began to interact with the master cores, creating monsters—the exact ones each bearer imagined.

"Well? Pretty neat, huh? And like Veldora said, we can use these monsters to engage parties in the labyrinth. That's what I gathered all of you here for."

That wasn't the *only* reason, but nobody was listening anyway. They were all marveling at the monsters they created.

Meanwhile, I was busy making my own monster—a ghost, a transparent, disembodied soul floating in the air. I'll omit its stats, but one special skill it had was Cancel Physical Attack—as a ghost, no physical attack worked on it. It couldn't attack physically, either, of course; magic was its only offense.

Next up was Veldora. There was now a skeleton standing next to him. It couldn't cast magic, although it could learn how later on—with the right evolution, it could also master Battlewill.

Milim, meanwhile, had generated a bouncy, lustrous blob. It had no limbs, its color a garish red that demanded your attention. It was a slime.

Um...

"Why'd you make a slime? Are you picking on me?!"

"N-no, um, you asked me to go with something I liked. What's the issue?"

Now she was firing back at me. Ah well. She was clearly happy, at least, her eyes all but shouting "Slime!" out loud. I was wondering about the Day-Glo red, however.

Finally, we had Ramiris. What was this? A knight? Or a suit of armor? Yes, it was a suit of living armor, to be exact—full plate, but looking worn out for some reason. It was still the largest out of the four monsters we made. Maybe Ramiris's hang-ups about her size drove her to imagine something big. The fact that it was completely empty inside was pretty appropriate for her.

Everyone peered closely at the monsters they just willed to life. But the surprises were only beginning.

"All right, so listen. As Veldora pointed out, I'm thinking about using the monsters we created to dispatch the intruders inside our labyrinth."

"Mm? Intruders...?"

"Yes. These monsters are the guardians of the labyrinth, so anyone stepping inside has to be intruders, right?"

"Ah, I see."

"Huh? What?"

"Mmm, indeed. Remember, Ramiris, we are running this labyrinth. Calling them 'challengers' is rather strange, if you think about it."

"Yes... Now that you mention it, you're right!"

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

Veldora's stepping in to explain matters was convincing enough for Ramiris. Milim, meanwhile, pretended she knew the entire time. I doubted she did at all, but I needed to move things along.

"Right. So we'll be taking on the intruders with these...but do you think it'll be possible at all?"

"Of course not. They are far too weak."

"My armor *looks* pretty cool, but I'm not too optimistic, no."

"Rimuru, I'm disappointed in you! You *know* I'm too smart a girl to expect anything from these."

Heh-heh-heh. Just as I thought, they were spouting off whatever popped into their minds. Why were Ramiris and Milim acting so haughty with me? That set me off a bit, but I needed to act my age here.

"Well, the story doesn't end when you create them. The *real* show begins now, so I'd like all of you to sit down and relax, okay? Now, what I'd like you to do is point your pseudo-souls at your monster and chant 'Possess!' out loud."

There were some incredulous looks, but they all settled into their seats for

me. We had some pretty comfy chairs in this conference room; the cushioning was excellent.

Then, all at once:

“““Possess!“““

The moment we all said it together, the pseudo-souls in our hands lit up as they were absorbed into the monsters, fusing with the master cores inside them. This resulted in a complete avatar core—and when it was done, my consciousness blacked out.

In another moment, my view had changed. My Magic Sense, something I had on at all times, immediately shrank down its range, drastically affecting my vision. I had my five simulated senses now, so it was still far better than my first few days in this world, but the other three had never experienced anything like that, so it must've been a bear to deal with.

I looked around as I thought about this. In my hazy vision, I could see a skeleton stretching out its legs, a slime zooming around at surprising speed, and a suit of living armor methodically toddling around like a classic wind-up robot. All three of them had successfully “possessed” their monster.

Even now, I could feel myself getting used to this. It felt far more natural than anticipated—like it was my own body. A body that was far less capable than my own, however, so it was hard to move around. But once you figured out how you moved, it got easier to predict how your body would react to your will. You didn't need long at all to move it exactly as intended.

The same was true for the other three.

“““This is great!“““

After a few minutes of testing out their new bodies, they all shouted in unison.

“Isn't it? What do you think of my research, huh?”

“Amazing. Truly amazing, Rimuru!” Veldora cried.

“That's classic Rimuru, isn't it? No wonder I thought you were such a great guy!” Ramiris agreed.

"I knew it all along," said Milim. "I've always believed in you!!"

They were hopelessly wrapped around my finger. *But hey, glad they're happy.*  
"Well, looks like we've got a resounding success. And now that you've all  
jumped into those monsters, I don't think I need to explain what we have to do,  
do I?"



"Heh-heh-heh..." Veldora chuckled. "Such a silly question. So instead of having the monsters do our bidding, we take matters into our own hands? What a creative idea, Rimuru."

"Exactly!" I replied. "Although, I wish I could've tried conquering the labyrinth in this form..."

"So this is what a video game is like? I've heard about this!"

"What? Is that true, Veldora?!" said Milim.

"Master! So we'll beat up the enemy like this, then? And then we can make these bodies learn new things, too...?" Ramiris jumped in.

Gotta hand it to Veldora. He immediately guessed what I wanted to do. Yes, this was basically a pseudo-MMORPG—although, there wasn't anything too "massive" about our party of four. Maybe just an MORPG, then? It doesn't matter. The key thing here, the concept, was that we could now enjoy the very labyrinth we expended the effort to build.

"Hee-hee-hee! Well put, Veldora. You can nearly read my mind, I see. But don't get the wrong idea yet. Yes, I developed this with an eye toward playing the labyrinth like a game, but we have other business first, don't we?"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha, we do! We need to use these bodies to dispatch the challengers—I mean, the *intruders* causing us problems, then?"

He got it, all right. Yes, I thought about using these "avatars," these monster bodies, to interfere with Green Fury's rapid advance. And like Ramiris said, I had thought of several ways to enjoy these bodies—leveling them up to evolve them, learning how to fight with the restricted skills they had, and so on. Still, what I *really* wanted to do was go have fun beating up monsters and challengers—I had no idea I'd invent something so *useful* just to make that happen.

"Of course, once everything was ready, I was just thinking that we could enjoy conquering our own labyrinth as well," I said.

"Ah, right. We'll be able to test out our work, huh?"

"Mm-hmm. And with these avatars, we can't exercise our full powers, right?"

So I thought it'd help us get another perspective on problems in the labyrinth."

"Yes... True. And the master of the labyrinth taking on challengers himself—some people might see that as unseemly. But copying my soul into a weaker beast like this..."

"Right! This way, we can beat up intruders as regular old labyrinth denizens, not as True Dragons or demon lords."

"Now I get it! This sounds fun!!" Milim was certainly convinced. Given the nearly infinite power she lobbed around all the time, a much more inconvenient form must've seemed novel to her. She looked really excited about it.

"Well, shall we spring into action?"

"Yes, why not clean up the garbage before enjoying our own game?" said Veldora.

"The time has come to fully stretch out my arms, I'd say!" said Ramiris. "I can't wait to test all forty-eight of my finisher moves!"

"I'm not sure how any of this works, but this seems kinda fun to me!" Milim cheered.

We all triumphantly stood up. Time to go down there, get in Green Fury's way, and ensure they couldn't challenge the bottom floors for a little while. How would we do that? Well, I had a few other schemes in mind.

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First, we needed to get used to our avatars. After that, the next important thing was equipment. We all put on Resurrection Bracelets with infinite charges, ensuring we could die as much as we wanted—but that wasn't enough. Our avatars were freshly born and extremely low level. Pushovers like us wouldn't deter Green Fury, no matter how well we surprised them. If we had some decent equipment, though...

"Right, we'll definitely want to get some equipment together. Let's go to Kurobe's and have him craft some weapons and armor!"

"Ah yes, indeed! I'm a mere skeleton as it is, after all."

"Hee-hee! You fools! I'm a slime built for speed and mobility now! I could

work just fine in the labyrinth!"

"Um, I'm just a suit of armor... Can I put more armor on over this?"

"Oh, we can figure something out. Let's just head over. And if you don't need equipment, Milim, just stay here."

"D-don't give me that nonsense! I can hold my own as it is, but I still need some gear!"

Talk about selfish. She should've just said so. I wanted some equipment as well, so I prepared to undo the Possession and leave.

"To go back, just picture the word *separate* in your mind. That'll bring you back."

I gave them a quick demo, putting the avatar core in my pocket as I taught them. These avatar cores had the monster encoded in them, one per core, and they couldn't be shared between different people. These cores were a second "self" for you, really, so I wanted to be sure people took good care of them.

"With these," I added, "you'll be able to call on your second form anytime you like."

"Pretty neat item, definitely. We'll need to think about what to do with them while we're busy Possessing."

Veldora and Ramiris, back in their original bodies, stood up from their chairs.

"Maybe fit it on our Bracelets so we don't lose them?" suggested Veldora.

"That's a good idea. I think I'll do that!" said Ramiris.

They both played around with the avatar cores in their hands. I think I'll do that with mine as well. But what about Milim?

"Hey, Mili—"

"I'm gonna go like this!"

Before I could call for her, Milim—in slime form—was digging her way into my pocket. "Okay, let's go!" she shouted, bossing me around and demonstrating her utter lack of interest in listening to me. She must've really liked that body. Pretty childlike of her...which, yeah, she *is* a child. Calling a child childish wasn't

very constructive, so I gave up on scolding her and got going.

We were at Kurobe's workshop.

"You there, Kurobe?"

"Oh, Sir Rimuru? What brings you here today?"

Kurobe came right up when I asked for him. Seeing Veldora and Ramiris with me surprised him.

"Well, we're looking for some weapons," I said as we walked inside. I hadn't been around for a while, but the workshop definitely had more people now—monsters included. It was scorching hot as usual. Temperature didn't affect me, so it was fine, but working in here must've been grueling for the others.

"Looks like you've hired some more apprentices."

"Yeah, luckily! They still need practice, but some of 'em are pretty talented."

Some of them looked up as they heard us talking in the workshop. Once they saw who I was, they leaped to their feet and bowed at me. Seeing all of them do that at once startled me, but Kurobe was used to it.

"It's not break time yet! Get back to work!"

His ornery shouting drove his staff to return to their jobs. But I kind of understood their thought process. If you're sitting at your cube, and the CEO comes in out of nowhere, *you'd* be nervous, too—especially if you were on the bottom rung. And maybe it didn't feel that way to me, but I was the ruler of this nation. I hadn't let it concern me before now, but maybe I should have given more advance warning as a rule.

Coming in casually like this might've just caused trouble for everyone. Whenever a district manager or whatever came to view our workplace in my old world, we'd always spend the previous day cleaning up the whole office to prepare. If it was the president, then no mistakes would be tolerated. The higher up you went, the more it unnerved people when you got all casual with them, I guess.

Still, I didn't want every trip out to be filled with pomp and circumstance. I hated to call Kurobe out of his busy work schedule; better for me to just show

up whenever he's free.

"Sorry I barged in without any warning. I think I'm gonna make a regular habit of it for a little while, so no need to get all tense, okay?"

Thus, I decided to address the staff. Maybe them being *too* casual with me would be a problem, but there was no need to be on pins and needles around me. I loved acting like a boss, but I didn't make a hobby out of inconveniencing people. If the other person's too nervous to react to me, that bothered me, too. Gobta's obliviousness was just right. Just keep in mind the acronym TPO—time, place, occasion—and it was easier to find the right approach.

My advice seemed to relieve the staff a bit. Once I was sure of that, I nodded and went into a room deeper inside the workshop.

I wasn't aware of this, by the way, but the apprentices weren't anxious just because I was a demon lord.

While I wasn't paying attention, someone had held a Tempest popularity contest, and apparently, I had been voted into the top-three idols alongside Shuna and Shion. A surprising result, they told me. Ramiris and Milim were in the rankings as well, and while I won't say exactly where, I can tell you that Milim and I were *way* ahead of Ramiris.

I wasn't sure whether to whine about it or marvel at how my town's grown. Either way, hearing about it later made me roll my eyes.

\*

"So what kind of stuff d'you need?"

In his personal chamber, Kurobe got straight down to business.

"Well..."

We all went over the hopes we had.

"I'm intending to have Garm build the armor, so I think it'd be neat if you could collaborate again."

"Yeahhh, true. All right. Let's go bother Garm about it."

So as we talked, we decided to take Kurobe over to Garm's workshop. I wound up causing a similar commotion over there, but I'll skip describing it.

"Equipment for monsters?! Wow. You always have the craziest projects for me, don't you?"

As Garm groused about this, the four of us all Possessed our avatars to demonstrate for him.

"All right. We'll make you exactly what you want—no, even better!"

"Yes, we're on the case. I love a nice, creative project like this, and I'll try to craft some stuff that'd never work on a human!"

Kurobe and Garm both readily agreed to the project. And really, I couldn't wait to see what they came up with.

They said the work would be done in several days, so in the meantime, we trained ourselves to get more used to our avatars. Nothing too complex—fighting monsters in the labyrinth's upper levels, attacking obvious newbie adventurers.

Over the past few days, we had grown adept at dividing up our roles. Reaching that point, though, was a slog. At first, we even *lost* to beginner parties up top.

We'd also get wiped out by traps, which would probably be funny to us later but definitely wasn't at the time, and do other stupid things. We tried using magic items to keep traps from deploying and stuff, even. It was Ramiris who kept setting them off, with Veldora usually suffering as the hapless victim. I floated, meanwhile, and Milim could stick to the ceiling—pitfalls weren't a concern for us two, so we forgot to warn the others about them.

That was a mistake, I'll admit, but Ramiris... Seriously? Why are *you* setting off traps? We made sure to give her an earful about it, and I think she deserved it.

Through all the pain, we skipped out on sleeping to keep on training. In battle, teamwork was the most important thing. Normal parties would talk to one another or give signals with their eyes, but we had pretty much none of those skills at all. We had Veldora and Milim with us, after all, two people who were the strongest in the world all by themselves.

What we *did* have, however, was one cheat-level skill—Thought Communication, letting us stay in touch and give orders with pinpoint accuracy.

I was the party's command post, Veldora, Milim, and Ramiris serving as my hands and feet. Thanks to that, we began to rapidly build ourselves, eventually gaining some decent experience and abilities.

Once we had a good footing, we patiently waited for our equipment as we fine-tuned our teamwork. As we did, we heard the news that Team Green Fury had beaten Floor 40.

"Hoo boy," said Ramiris. "Now they've beaten the tempest serpent, huh?"

"They took a pretty careful approach. The first team was all about gathering intelligence, the second whittled down its energy, and then the A team killed it," said Veldora.

Bosses were resurrected regularly, of course. But if a boss successfully beat a party, that didn't erase its current damage or state of exhaustion. If a group of people had the right teamwork, this gave them a clear advantage.

*"That was a mistake. Bosses really need a way to heal..."*

"Yeah, but those monsters work strictly on instinct, so..."

As Veldora saw it, they lacked the intelligence to use healing items anyway, making it a moot point. He was right, but we weren't out of options.

"Why don't we bring it up with Treyni?" I suggested. "The labyrinth managers can heal monsters, can't they?"

"Oh, right. I'll do that!"

So we decided to have Treyni's sisters heal bosses if they were involved in a consecutive streak of battles all at once.

Little by little, we were addressing and solving the labyrinth's issues. And then:

"They're about ready to hit Floor 49. What'll we do, Rimuru?" Milim was on the verge of panic. But she was right. Green Fury would reach their most climactic battle yet as soon as tomorrow.

"Well, we may not have our equipment at the moment, but I'd say our teamwork is golden," said Veldora. "Shall we try taking them on now?"

"I'm game! Time to use my arms of steel to beat them to a pulp!" Ramiris crowed.

Those two were always out for blood. Honestly, though, I don't think we stood much of a chance in a clean fight. For now, Floor 49, packed with the most devious traps I ever devised, was our only real chance at messing with them.

"Well, so be it. Maybe we can scrounge up some weapons..."

Even if Kurobe and Garm provided us the best gear possible, we probably wouldn't take a frontal approach with them. It'd certainly up our chances a lot, but we could probably hold our own anyway. But just when I was about to commit, I heard a knock on the conference-room door.

"Sir Rimuru," came Shion's refreshing voice, "Kurobe said he's ready."

Our party looked at one another and grinned.

Our specialized avatar equipment was complete.

I was given a Death Scythe and Hell Garment, two magic items that even ghosts could wear. Veldora got the Death Blade and Hell Mail, along with a Hellgate Shield to complete the picture.

As a slime, Milim could only equip simple objects, swallowing up a Death Stiletto and covering her body with a Crimson Cape. The moment she did, her body grew a pair of bloodred wings—quite a transformation. "See?" she gleefully shouted. "It's really true! You need to equip your items, or else they won't work!"

Yeah, great. If she was happy, I was happy.

Finally, Ramiris. She had ordered Heavy Fullplate armor, which looked like a work of art, but we weren't sure if she could even equip it. Nervous, she Possessed her living armor and tried to take it up—and at that very moment, she *switched* armor. With a clatter, her old tin suit crashed to the ground, turning to dust and vanishing in the wind. She had upgraded from living armor to heavy living armor—not an evolution, but more like a total replacement.

"Wh-whoa! This is so much easier to move in!"

She was right. Her old, creaky gait was now smooth and ninja-like. It'd help her teamwork a lot, I was sure. Funny to think a suit of armor's feature set could affect the way you moved, though. Kind of an unexpected discovery.

Elated, Ramiris now had to select a weapon and shield.

"Ha-ha! I don't need no stupid shield!"

...was her opinion, so she opted for a large two-handed weapon instead—the Death Axe. The power it packed made it the ultimate in weapons—wielding it was tricky, but oh well; not my problem. She got picked on all the time for being a wimp, so maybe this'll assuage her ego a little. Funny how her personality kept coming out like that.

So we were all decked out in brand-new equipment. These weapons and armor were all on the level of a Unique item, but since they were heavily modified for use by monsters, they were more novelty items than anything. For beginners like us, however, they were crazily overpowered. What's more, they had a type of curse applied that registered our names to them—thus, they could never get stolen.

It was the best equipment we could've possibly asked for right now, and it gave us a new perspective on everything. It was almost time to rumble, and we couldn't have been more excited.

Time for a quick check of our avatars. My ghost dropped physical offense in favor of magical and spiritual attacks. It was classed as a sorcerer, and in time, I'd like to maybe teach it spiritual and illusory magic so it could make the upgrade to full-fledged wizard. Holy magic would be a nice addition, too—what would happen if I placed faith in *myself* to drive that? That'd be a fun experiment.

Veldora's skeleton was an all-rounder, capable of various kinds of attacks. It was a fighter class, and I think he wanted to teach it magic so it could become a magic knight later.

Milim's slime, meanwhile, was geared entirely for speed—and for landing telling blows in a single strike. Wish fulfillment for her, I suppose. Her class was assassin, and maybe I could have Soei give her some training, but I didn't want to occupy his time with our dumb little make-believe fun here. Her basic

strategy involved lunging down on foes from the ceiling—a powerful strike if it worked, but what did she intend to do if it didn't? Run, I suppose; she certainly was fast enough for it. In a way, she was the ideal slime fighter.

Finally, as you'd expect, Ramiris's heavy living armor was an attacker with more than ample defense, giving it a lot more stability than I originally gave her credit for. The class was berserker, and while she was no crazed warrior, defending herself was never really a priority in Ramiris's approach. As a dangerous, attack-oriented creature, that was the name she was given. Once she got used to things, I could picture her as a tank, providing a twin wall of defense with Veldora.

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We were all set to go. Given that we never got hungry, long, dragged-out battles were our lone major advantage. *Let's do the best job we can to get in Green Fury's way.*

Such was our thoughts as we set off, but...well...we sent them running so fast, the actual battle was a total letdown.

If you threw away all emotion and ran a completely impartial, third-party Analyze and Assess on our avatars, you'd realize that we were probably already pushing an A in rank. Our equipment was more than half the reason for that, but even without it, as long as we made good use of our powers, nothing could stop us.

The main oversight we made was that our own personal battle experience was reflected in our avatars. We couldn't use all our skills, but things like Thought Communication and Hasten Thought were themselves enough to give us a decisive edge. Plus, we could cast magic so quickly that it was really unfair. Our restricted magicules blocked us from using much of it, but we had the knowledge for it, and thus we could handle magic better than even your average royal court sorcerer. This came with no casting time, so we could engineer tandem magic strikes with practically zero time lag—our foes had no chance to react.

Veldora, meanwhile, was such a genius with his sword, it was like he had eyes in the back of his head.

"Kwaah-ha-ha-ha! My Veldora-Style Death Stance gives me instant access to an infinite number of sword skills! ...Oh, wait, this doesn't work..."

He was trying to imitate the moves he saw in the manga he read. I thought he was just screwing around, but some of his moves were actually kind of plausible. His power was off the charts to start with, of course, so I should've expected anything and everything from him. Treating this whole thing seriously at all now seemed silly.

Milim was exactly as blazing fast as she set out to be. Even speeds that nobody else had a chance at controlling were no problem with her reflexes. I really had no idea slimes could move that fast if they tried—sliding frictionless across the ground, with enough elasticity to bounce off walls and lunge at foes. That worked just as well off the ceiling, too. Your average person would have trouble even following her with their eyes. As a slime myself, these new discoveries were a huge shock.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Slow! Too slow! Face my wrath, you chump!"

She was getting exceedingly carried away as she dropped down on her foes' backs, stabbing with her Death Stiletto. That was enough to end most battles. Her body was largely impervious to physical attack, and if you want to cast magic against her, you needed to capture her in your sights first. Think about it, and you'll realize that Milim's slime was a pretty scary enemy to face.

But what let Veldora and Milim truly shine was Ramiris, the unsung hero of the pack.

"Hraahhh! Time to be crushed!!"

Ramiris's battle strategy was pretty simple—find an enemy, run straight at it, and stage a full-frontal attack. This would be a bad idea for most, an imbecilic strategy, but in our case, it was the way to go. She never listened to any of my advice anyway, so I figured we might as well take advantage of her—she'd be our tank, our diversion, and the remainder of the party could get on the attack then.

Normally, that wouldn't work too well, but Ramiris ran around like a daredevil, never bothering to defend herself, this big suit of armor sprinting for you and spinning a Death Axe in its hands. Anyone who saw it would be forced

to deal with it—and since she didn't care about defense, her attacks tended to find their target. (She also had Cancel Pain, which helped a lot.)

Plus, the armor itself was pretty sturdy. A Heavy Fullplate used what seemed like a cartload of magisteel; weight concerns were tossed out the window with it. It came with a Self-Repair function as well, so most damage wasn't an issue. If a regular person put it on, they probably wouldn't be able to move at all. Having such a hefty chunk of magisteel come your way—well, I wouldn't want to be her enemy.

What's more, I had Recovery Magic.

I had been experimenting with holy magic as part of my work, and it was surprisingly easy to deploy. It wasn't a matter of "having faith in myself" so much as offering prayers in exchange for control over spiritual particles, a skill usually shut away from me. In my case, my magical power as a ghost was sent over to the "real" me along with the words of prayer. I was, in essence, borrowing force from my main body to cast magic.

These "words of prayer" were mainly about building up an image. When working with spiritual particles, you'd never get anywhere if you kept asking what your disciples wanted and going with that—it'd take too much calculation. All that processing work is instead applied to the people who placed their faith in you. The more disciples you had like that, the more magic force you got—to put it another way, you got higher up as a god. You were also connected to your believers, and you could use those believers' minds to expand your calculation capacity—kind of a substitution cheat that saved you magic force and time.

Now I saw why Luminus sought to build more believers for herself. With a massive enough number of practitioners, she could whip up large-scale magic on a passing whim. The "secret skills of faith and favor," indeed. That's some scary stuff she taught me.

But enough about that. The point is, I had holy magic, and as a party, we boasted a pretty formidable force—and right now, like evil personified, we had just wiped out Team Green Fury on the forty-ninth floor.

You should never be afraid to try something new, I guess. Our frontal attack failed, so we polished our teamwork and took advantage of the traps.

I set the Slime Doll on them, damaging their weapons. I used the Slime Rain to break their focus and exhaust them—and then we attacked, throwing them into the Slime Pool. While Ramiris's bellowing grabbed their attention, Milim sneaked up on them, breaking down their teamwork as Veldora split them apart and isolated their rear support. Our giant slime crushed their powerless magicians and thieves, while Veldora and Ramiris bear-hugged the remaining core members straight into the Slime Pool, sinking them down. Our aim was to destroy their weapons in the acidic goop, and once Green Fury's main weapons had corroded into useless fragments, that'd be a huge damper on their dungeon-conquering speed.

"Ugghh! After all that swag we earned!!"

It turns out the leader of the Sons of the Veldt, the one currently whining about the equipment dissolving in her hands, was female. That surprised me—but not as much as what her companions said next.

"Well, maybe this timing's for the best. It was about the right moment to pack up."

"Yeah, our *home country*'s calling for us anyway."

I definitely heard one of the survivors from the team say that to the leader. I thought the Sons of the Veldt was an independent mercenary corps, unaffiliated with any other nation. My reports stated they were being funded by someone in Englesia, but maybe it was more like a long-term gig? The term *home country* indicated that they might've had more loyalty to Englesia than a simple employer-employee relationship. I'd need to keep an eye on them.

As long as we were encouraging people to use the Dungeon, we'd naturally see visitors with murky origins. I was expecting that from the beginning, but we should probably give everyone another heads-up about that. The whole Green Fury thing reminded me of it all over again.

Besides:

"We did it."

"Yes. Victory is ours!"

"Why wouldn't it be? We are the strongest in the world!!"

If I didn't keep these idiots in line, they'd immediately get distracted by the next victory ahead. The thought was in my mind, but—right now, at least—I didn't let it get in the way of my joy. Mission accomplished.

## INTERLUDE

### MARIBEL

Maribel had been resurrected as an otherworlder. She had memories of being a ruler in Europe. In her previous life, she had all the finances she wanted; to her, war was just another pawn for her to use.

Her glory was built on misfortune. A battlefield, bullets flying. Kill or be killed; a vivid hellscape bathed in blood. Burnt homes, lost families, wailing people. And she never held any remorse about it. Maribel's life was a happy one, all the way to the end of her natural life span.

And now she was here, born as a princess in the small Kingdom of Seltrozzo.

Her family was in the ruling class, the people calling the shots in the Western Nations. In this world filled with monsters and chaos, nations couldn't afford to squabble with one another; it was natural that something like the Council of the West would be formed. That council was built hundreds of years ago by Granville Rozzo, the great founder of the Rozzo family and a mysterious, seemingly ageless figure.

He was the oldest among the Five Elders who held actual power in the Council, while still serving as head of the Rozzos, who had taken root in the Western Nations. Even a princess directly related to Granville wouldn't have so much as a chance to see him. Maribel's own brothers, in fact, had never even met the Five Elders before. But Maribel was different. Her memories, and her will, were things Granville couldn't afford to ignore.

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The advance of civilization would have been impossible without the existence of money. People advanced from using crops like rice and wheat as currency to a money-based economy, pushing society forward by leaps and bounds thanks to the scale money allows.

The value of money could also change. Gold and silver coins were made of metals with intrinsic value, guaranteeing that the money itself would have similar value. But now we were in an era where things like receipts and bonds in business transactions could serve as substitutes for money—the start of a paper-based economy. This would lead to the creation of banks, outposts indispensable to free exchange. You gave banks money; they gave you receipts as they diverted the money to other things, lending it to those without cash and earning interest from them.

That was the business model people eventually came up with, and it was a kind of magic more insidious than alchemy. Money, in the form of interest, seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Comparing the amount of cash circulating in the world and the total amount of receipts generated, there was clearly going to be a substantial amount of irrecoverable funds—as well as people in deep trouble after not being able to pay up.

If you lent money and charged interest, you would always have that problem. The shift from coinage to paper currency only sped up the process.

People collected money from the rich, dangling interest payments as bait. They invested it to create even more money. Business exchanges began to take place on a worldwide scale, beyond national borders. Limits on the production of paper money were removed, under the pat promise that the nation would be good for it all. Combine that with exchange controls caused by power differences between nations, and the scale of the economy blew up to dozens of times its original size—and Maribel was even factoring the amount of currency produced into her calculations as she controlled the market.

Much of it was a fiction, far removed from the actual economy. A bubble that was bound to pop sooner or later.

In her past life as well, Maribel blew the bubble up as much as she could. Any debts she couldn't recover, she shunted off on the weaker nations and disposed of—in other words, waging wars to balance her accounts. The weaker nations thus fell, and the rich got richer. The parties being harvested for everything they had went from individuals to whole nations, but the basic process was the same.

Maribel was a seasoned master at this. She was a golden child of finance in her previous life, and she had both her memories from that and the intensely powerful greed of a ruler. This manifested itself in her unique skill Avarice, a sinful skill based on one of humankind's core vices. If a unique skill was a set of emotions and desires that took corporeal form, those based on a cardinal sin like greed were treated as special cases among uniques.

In the case of Maribel, the strongest member of the Rozzo family since the day she was born, that truth was obvious. The Avarice skill let her hold sway over people's desires—she could literally see them, and the bigger the desire, the easier she found it to rule over them. Everyone had desires, of course, and stoking those desires let Maribel control them any way she wanted. And, little by little, she used that to slowly build her audience of sympathizers.

There was no urgent need to act. Observing the people around her, she could tell that the standards of civilization in this world were pretty low. There was a money-driven economy but still a single currency that circulated across the whole of it. There were no language barriers; everything was different from the last world, but in a way, the environment was perfect for her to take advantage of. To Maribel, the whole world seemed like a sandbox, ready for her to play in.

*Yes... Yes. I am destined to descend upon this world as its rightful ruler.*

Ruling this world, to Maribel, was a natural goal to have. Once she was older and had the right to speak up, the world was hers for the taking—but until then, she thought, the fewer people who knew about her ambitions, the better.

Ever so carefully, she made sure no one could guess her true nature from her behavior. And when she was three years old, she had her first audience with Granville.

\*

"So you're Maribel?"

"Yes, Grandfather. It is a pleasure to meet you."

It wasn't a three-year-old's usual way to greet someone, but Maribel had accounted for that in her calculations. Granville wasn't like the other rabble skulking around the palace; to her, even her father, the king, was just another

pawn. Her brothers, her wet nurse, her servants, and everyone else—as she read their desires, she methodically brought them under her rule.

But Granville was different. He was above all that.

“Why didn’t you try to control me?” Granville asked, seeing that Maribel had promptly dropped the act. There was no familial kindness to it. All that existed was the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. It was then that Maribel learned her instincts were correct. If she had tried to deceive Granville, she likely would’ve been killed on the spot. Not even Maribel’s Avarice skill was omnipotent. It could be resisted. After repeated, gradual attempts, it might’ve been possible to bring Granville under her rule, but he wasn’t the kind of man to allow that.

Maribel was confident of that, so she decided to be honest. No matter how things played out, she would need partners—and along those lines, Granville could potentially be the greatest partner she’d ever have.

“I can see people’s desires. I mean literally *see* them. And prodding them allows me to make them do my bidding. But you’re not like the others, Grandfather. You have a greater ambition than anyone else, but you’ve also got a will strong enough to bottle it up. So...”

“Hmm. So you’ve seen that far, little girl—or should I call you Maribel? Who are you anyway?”

“Me? I’m Maribel. Maribel the Greedy.”

“Heh-heh... *Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* I like it. Declaring your very presence before me, are you?!”

The head of the Rozzo family liked Maribel. In time, they opened up to each other, sharing in the secrets they knew. Granville knew about the politics surrounding the Western Nations, as well as the demon lords who ruled the world. Maribel knew about her previous world, as well as the Avarice skill she acquired in this one. To her, this was the gamble of a lifetime.

Her brain was one thing, but her body was still that of a three-year-old. As she saw it, it’d be difficult to survive all on her own.

*No matter what it takes—no matter what—I need to firm up my position. And*

*to do that...*

To do that, she needed to prove to Granville Rozzo, the local kingpin, that she was useful. Instinctively, she understood that was the best thing she could do right now to set herself up as ruler.

And the gamble paid off.

"Maribel, if something happens to me, I want you to inherit my ambitions. What I seek in this world is peace. We must reach a world of universal equality, under the rule of the Rozzo family."

"Yes. Yes, Grandfather, I understand. I promise I will provide you with my full cooperation."

Thus, this unlikely pair forged a bond that none other could enjoy. The family founder and the little girl—the alliance between a former Hero and one whose avarice knew no bounds.

Granville spent the next several years guiding Maribel, instructing her on the full array of Rozzo holdings and coconspirators. He also revealed the true identity of the god Luminus, as well as his own secrets—the underground dealings he engaged in to protect his seat in the Seven Days Clergy, as well as how the demon lord Luminus's power was what truly kept the Western Nations safe.

He told her everything. And now, at the age of ten, Maribel was second only to Granville in power, using her skills to the fullest to take action against Rimuru.

CHAPTER  
3

## THE COUNCIL

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

## CHAPTER 3

### THE COUNCIL

Here in Seltrozzo, a small northern kingdom, a conversation was underway between a boy and an old man. The boy was Yuuki Kagurazaka, grand master of the Free Guild, and the man was named Johann Rostia—Council mainstay, generous benefactor to the Guild, and prince of the Kingdom of Rostia.

As his last name suggested, he was the elder brother of Rostia's current king, but he was also one of the Five Elders who controlled the Council. He always held his confidential meetings here, in Seltrozzo, a small, rural nation perfect for avoiding the eyes of the Western Nations.

This was because Seltrozzo was home to a safe house run by the Selt Foreign Information Bureau, the leading intelligence agency in all the Western Nations. The SFIB was established as a risk-management group, surveilling the lands outside human control and preparing for any upcoming monster threats. It had a group of talented agents, all of them ranked B or above, and its small number made it truly a team of elites. Any location under their protection would be impossible for foreign agents to infiltrate, and that was why Johann used this house for all of his most delicate meetings.

“Well, can I hear your report, then?”

“Right. It’s pretty clear that the demon lord Rimuru’s fully on to me. I went out of my way not to leave any evidence, using merchants from the East and so on, but regardless...”

“Then can’t you talk your way out of any suspicion?”

“Yes, my own staff suggested the same thing, but there’s no guarantee ‘talking my way out of it’ would keep me safe, you know? He *is* a demon lord, keep in mind. Rile him the wrong the way, and it’d be like stepping on a tiger’s tail.”

Yuuki didn't hide the fact that Rimuru was suspecting him. He had no reason to. After all, Johann—this Five Elders member—was essentially Yuuki's boss.

*Boss* was the right term, because this was strictly a business relationship between the two, one that existed because they both profited from it. The Council funded the Free Guild, and in exchange, the Guild carried out work for the Council. It was a simple, give-and-take sort of agreement—on the surface.

From the Guild's point of view, they couldn't survive without support like this from the world's nations, the funding and preferential access it received for its organization's work. The Guild had more influence now than back in its Society of Adventurers days, but in terms of power, it still wasn't above the Council. It was the behind-the-scenes support from Johann the Elder that helped Yuuki develop the Free Guild as much as he had these past few years; that was another reason Yuuki had to mind his manners around him.

"And you can't defeat this demon lord?"

"Are you kidding me? The way I see it, you could assemble a hundred A rankers, and it still wouldn't be possible."

"You'd go that far? Perhaps it's smarter not to make him our enemy, then. But..."

Johann paused, his sharpened eyes glaring at Yuuki, before continuing.

"...it is the elders' opinion that the demon lord Rimuru is a hindrance. And your missteps are the cause, Yuuki."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"Your little conspiracy with the demon lord Clayman. If that had succeeded, we wouldn't have had to deal with those sniveling Eastern merchants to open trade routes with the Empire. Once we had secured that, all we'd have to is wait for Veldora to fade into oblivion a few centuries from now, and the Forest of Jura would no longer be a threat. In fact, demon lords like Carillon and Frey could've served as protective walls for us. And *now* look."

"Well, I don't see what I could've done, you know? You really can't plan for someone like *him*."

Johann was one of the people aware of the plans Yuuki's group was working on. They were applying their own spin to the games played among the demon lords, trying to work them to their own advantage. And the whole reason that was possible...

"Yes. Yes, you're right. You couldn't have done anything. We never could've imagined a monster like *that* in our way. But couldn't you have bested him?"

It was the young girl who entered the room now, silently closing the door behind her. Maribel Rozzo, the very person who'd formulated this whole plan. She slipped into an ornate chair, joining the other two.

"Oh... M-Maribel. And is the venerable Granville with you?"

"No, I've come by myself today. But I'd still like to hear the answer to that question."

Maribel turned to Yuuki, paying Johann little mind.

"...It's just not possible," he replied, as if captured by her gaze. "Rimuru alone would be a challenge, but he's got the Storm Dragon with him, too, you know? Forget it. There's nothing anyone can do about him."

"You saw Veldora?"

"Yeah. He was going around in human form, but he introduced himself as Veldora and everything." Yuuki meekly answered the question.

Maribel expected nothing less from him. "Right. The demon lord Rimuru is the key to sealing Veldora away. If we let that evil dragon free, he'll spread ruin across the whole world. Grandfather told me himself."

"Indeed," Johann said. "Your grandfather personally witnessed the darkest days of that dragon's rampage. He's always quick to remind me of why our god is so fearful of him."

"Yes, and now Rimuru has tamed him. Meddling with them is dangerous...but if we want my Rozzo family to prosper, we need to crush the rise of Tempest."

"What a headache this is. Yuuki, couldn't you defeat Rimuru if you truly put your mind to it?"

Johann was now repeating himself. Combined with Maribel, they had now

asked the same question three times. Didn't Yuuki have what it takes to beat Rimuru? But this time, Yuuki had a different answer.

"We're talking about someone not even Hinata could beat, you know? It's gonna be *really* hard for me to win if I fight him. My chances *could* go way up under the right conditions, but..."

What it sounded like he meant was: If it was just the demon lord Rimuru by himself, maybe they could make it happen.

"...So what's your next move?" Maribel asked.

"My general strategy will be to avoid direct confrontation with Rimuru. Even if I *did* beat him, I just don't see it earning us much. We'd have to pay far too much of a price for it."

Yuuki went on to discuss their future plans, including Kagali's upcoming ruins expedition. As Maribel had ordered, he was leaking out the info he gained from Clayman, and Maribel and Johann were now acting on it.

Maribel thought for a moment.

Eliminating Rimuru, or at least rendering him harmless, was something she wanted to achieve at any cost. The greatest wish of the Rozzo family would have to go unfulfilled otherwise. Maybe it'd be easier to seize the world if they worked with the demon lord, but Maribel had already deemed that a poor choice.

The problem was their differences in thinking. With this world as well, Maribel intended to take it from a single, gold-based standard currency to a paper-based economy spearheaded by each individual country. She wouldn't eliminate the current money system; she'd just implement new currencies in each nation. It didn't have to be paper either; silver or copper or whatever was fine, too. Basically, if she could build a world where currency markets went up or down depending on the power of all nations involved, then perfect.

That's how foreign exchange worked, and it'd be the Council—and the will of the Five Elders—that set it up. That was the one absolute must to victory here—they needed to be the people deciding the value of things. Against the weaker nations, they'd even levy punishing taxes or conscript their populations

into military service in the name of monster hunting. It was a perfectly legal way to subjugate one nation under the rule of a stronger one.

All the conditions were in place. There were no outstanding issues to deal with. Maribel's plan to economically rule over the nations in the Council of the West was proceeding along fine—even Granville was happy with it. They had spent the past few years completing the groundwork for it. And now, with the rise of Rimuru and his nation of monsters, it was all going haywire.

Maybe things weren't in crisis mode yet, but Maribel could see what was in store. The demon lord Rimuru would likely offer the Western Nations their defensive support, in a bid to win their trust. With all that military power in the backdrop, he'd have them open up an economic relationship, to a certain extent, using Blumund, a small kingdom, as a foothold into the West. He'd run all the logistics, give his people the joy of working, and guarantee their safety.

*I wish he wouldn't mess with me*, Maribel thought. Other large nations, like Dwargon and Thalion, were already complete, permanent packages—she may not have liked them, but she could accept them. But right now, Tempest was riding straight into Maribel and her companions' home turf. If they expressed a desire to join the Council of the West, it'd be like torching their personal hunting grounds. A declaration of war.

She refused to accept that. She was sure that she and the demon lord Rimuru were incompatible with each other at the core. There could only be just one ruler—a single, overwhelming force. You had to be the one calling the shots, or else you were never promised a sure victory. And as long as the Rozzo family was attempting to rule all of humanity, Rimuru would always be an obstacle. Even if they could work in harmony at first, it was clear to her that they'd grow apart over their respective interests.

That was why Maribel saw the demon lord Rimuru as such a threat.

It was easy to say she'd eliminate Rimuru, but actually *doing* it was much harder.

She had participated in the Founder's Festival, so she could have a chance to observe him. It took some convincing with Granville, but he gave his okay after she promised not to do anything to Rimuru. The visit convinced her that she

was right all along. Tempest was just *too* attractive of a city, brimming with desires, and in time it'd become the cutting edge of trends, building a new age for the whole world. The more they opened up and forged deeper relations with other nations, the more valuable it'd become—and before long, the Rozzos would no longer be able to make unilateral decisions.

*Yes... Yes. Everything's going the way the demon lord Rimuru wants it...*

The mere thought made Maribel want to fly into a rage. She resisted the urge as she pondered how to respond.

Defeating him was out of the question. Even if they succeeded, they had no idea how Veldora would respond. Letting a monster capable of wiping out a force of twenty thousand elites single-handedly go around unfettered was the height of folly.

So that left rendering him harmless—either through coercion or persuasion.

If they opted for coercion, Duke Meusé's failures offered some important lessons. Maribel had perfectly set the table, hoping to indebted Rimuru in a way that followed every rule. Instead, Rimuru followed the rules to take revenge. The duke was a fool for misreading the opportunity, but what *really* deserved praise was the personal connections Rimuru enjoyed.

*Yes. If there's a snake in the grass, you'd have to be a fool to prod at it...*

And now the demon lord wanted to join the Council. It was easy to oppose that.

Maribel had cornered the market for grain, in anticipation of upcoming wars. Now, thanks to Farmus's civil war, the marketplace was having to turn to private stores to keep their shelves full.

*Maybe we should disguise people as night bandits and have them torch the villages around the big cities. That way...*

They could keep raising the prices of staple foods, as well as restrict the amount of bread that entered the market. With the smaller nations, just a little bit of tightening could lead to major food distress. When people lacked food, they got angry, and that anger was directed at the people who started the war. There was nothing easier than riling up the unintelligent masses, and pinning all

the blame on Rimuru would be a straightforward task.

And then—voilà. The representatives from those smaller nations would oppose Rimuru's Council bid. It'd be perfectly simple for Maribel to engineer.

But...

*No... No. It used to be a given that you couldn't magically transport food, but I guess that demon lord's made it happen. Judging by the sheer variety on offer in their dinner banquets, I think it's safe to assume that. And given his connections to people as big as King Gazel and Elmesia of Thalion, accepting him would probably lead to fewer problems...*

Engineering food shortages in the smaller nations could just give Rimuru a chance to provide them with support. If they scoffed at that plan and tried to coerce him out of it, they'd just be repeating Duke Meusé's error. As Maribel concluded, trying something that already failed once could very easily come back to bite them.

She wasn't self-absorbed enough to think she could carry everything out flawlessly. All she needed to do was proceed slowly, methodically, and carefully. With that in mind, winning Rimuru over to her side seemed more doable.

*If we want to sway him, we should try meeting with him and offering a chance to join a united front. If I'm willing to compromise a little—No, I can't do that. No need to be timid. I'm Maribel the Greedy. Whether he's a demon lord or not, I swear I can rule over him!*

*There's no other option, she thought.*

The unique skill Avarice could freely control its target, ruling over their desires and making them do their bidding. Just as she had done with Yuuki, Maribel could easily bring him under her rule, with him none the wiser.

She had not one, but two ways of doing this.

The first was to overwrite the target's desires with Maribel's own, making them into a cooperative partner with the same goals. This approach had a weakness—she needed to be within conversational distance of the target to trigger it. Plus, like a slow-acting poison, it took a certain amount of time to take

full effect. If she didn't want to arouse the target's suspicion, she'd have to make several contacts with them to make it seem more natural—and since the conversation would need a reason to take place, there was only so much desire she could inject at once. It required a major time commitment.

The second approach, meanwhile, went much faster—it involved using Avarice to force the target to accept her rule. A quick injection of greed could even destroy the target's self-awareness, turning them into a living puppet.

This, of course, was much more dangerous. Depending on the size of the target's desire, this approach could also take some time—and even if it only took a few seconds, that'd be more than enough for someone as powerful as the demon lord Rimuru to kill Maribel. Taking this tactic required very careful preparation, which was why Maribel immediately gave up on it against Granville.

Those were the two ways Avarice could take over a person. And given the way that it worked on people's primordial desires, there wasn't a soul in this world that could resist it. The main drawback was its dependency on time, not to mention the size of the target's desire.

No matter which approach she took, Maribel couldn't take over a target unless they had a certain amount of desire inside them. The larger that desire, the firmer the grip Maribel could have over them. But what if the desire *wasn't* big enough? Given that Avarice controlled people's desires, if there wasn't much to work with, the skill couldn't influence them enough to be successful. She *could* prod that desire, inflating it enough so she could take hold, but again, that took time and opened her up to suspicion.

That was why she couldn't take over the mind of Hinata the Saint. Maybe she could if they met more often, but Hinata would've questioned her motives if she kept popping in for no reason. Maribel couldn't risk that much danger, so she gave up on the effort. On the other hand, she held regular secret meetings with Yuuki through Johann the Elder. Seizing *his* mind was easy.

Now her main question was Rimuru.

*I saw him up close, but he didn't seem to have much desire despite all his outrageous behavior. It's not fair...*

At the dinner banquet, she had a direct view of Rimuru. With that insight, she felt what *might* be just *barely* enough to rule over his desires. With a desire that small, she could take it over quickly with just a few sessions, but it wouldn't give her much overall influence on his behavior. Of course, once she got that foothold, the rest would come falling down after it, she figured.

If worse came to worst, she *could* use her final option. If that worked, the demon lord would be Maribel's to use as she pleased—and since Rimuru had tamed Veldora, the Storm Dragon would essentially be hers to control as well. A dragon even the supreme being Lubelius feared. An attractive prize, to be certain.

*Best to keep up my observations for now. Then I can consider my options and come up with the safest approach to subdue him!*

Her mind made up, it was time to concoct a strategy.

Yuuki advised against direct confrontation with Rimuru. That's why the demon lord Kazalim, under the guise of Kagali, would be guiding him through the ruins. Those ruins had their dangers, but apparently Kagali had no intention of putting Rimuru in harm's way inside them. She could use that as part of her game plan.

"Let's send him a letter. We can invite Rimuru to the Council and see how he reacts."

"You think the demon lord would agree to it?"

"No worries there. Joining the Council of the West is one of his burning desires."

"How curious."

"Well, Rimuru wants to work hand in hand with humans. He wants to prove that the monsters under him are harmless as long as we stick to his rules."

Yuuki's explanation made sense to Maribel, as dumb as it sounded to her. Being bound by rules meant losing your freedom. Doing away with your demon lord military force? Staying on the same tier as the human race? It seemed supremely stupid to her.

"So why don't we make that dream come true? Then I can inject him with my poison," said Maribel.

"Ooh, scary. Isn't Yuuki Kagurazaka just as strong as Hinata the Saint? If he and Rimuru fought for real, he has good prospects to win, I think. But now that you have him, you want a demon lord as well?"

"Yuuki's ambition is too strong. He doesn't even realize I'm controlling him. He thinks he's making these negotiations out of his own free will."

As Maribel explained right in front of Yuuki himself, this was a happy thing for him. Her rule over him meant that he wouldn't be pushed down by any excessive greed. Yuuki ignored it all, not responding to it—that was how perfect her domination was of him.

"...And I'm sure the demon lord Rimuru is like a child before you, Maribel. And you'll have *full* control of him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm just worried that your rule could be broken, somehow."

She flashed a cold look at the flustered Johann. "There's no need to worry about *that*. Once I cloud someone's desires, they'll never return to normal. Not unless you overwrite the desires I implant in them."

Maribel was greed personified, enough so to cultivate the unique skill Avarice within her. There was nobody in the world who could desire something more. She was fully convinced of that, and it made her laugh off Johann's concern.

"Y-yes, I imagine not. I trust in you on that, Maribel."

Johann the Elder tried not to invite Maribel's wrath upon him. She was the de facto number two after Granville, and not even an elder was safe around her. If he got on her bad side, she might try to control *his* mind next. He had made a blood oath with Granville to avoid that, but once Maribel took over, he didn't think he could rely on that oath too much. Thus, he never dared to lift a finger against her.

"Everything we say in here is a secret, all right?"

"Of course, Maribel. I'm not in any hurry to die."

"Smart decision. Now, Johann, I want you to send a letter to Rimuru, leader of Tempest, for me. I'll write it out for you right now, so make sure it reaches him before the next Council meeting, please."

Without waiting for a response, Maribel began writing the letter. The sight of her scribbling away on the fancy, expensive paper struck terror in Johann's heart. It was the kind of terror you'd feel if a girl like Maribel, hardly even ten, treated bossing people around like it was her God-given right. She had the air of a ruler, and not one of the Five Elders was a match for her.

"All right, Maribel. You can leave that to me."

He left the room quietly with Yuuki, not wanting to bother her.

Even after Yuuki and Johann left, Maribel continued to weigh her options. She had all the time in the world. She would draw up plans, lay out the framework, and see this through. She had more than enough pawns at her disposal. And once again...

*This'll be fun. This'll be so much fun.*

...Maribel, the girl who trusted not a soul in the world, got lost in her own reverie.



The man fell to the ground, a flood of red, bloodlike particles shooting out in front of him. His eyes had burst open in surprise; he probably never saw it coming.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You left yourself open, you fool!"

Milim's excited voice thundered across the hall as the man's five remaining companions grew tense and nervous. They banded together, keeping a wary eye on their surroundings—but they could do nothing.

"Blowing wind, grow into a tornado and slice into my enemies! Time to rage—Tornado Blade!!"

Bunching up like that was a mistake, and I all but sneered as my Tornado Blade slashed into them. This was kind of a ranged version of Windcutter, one that cost a lot of magicules but caused slashing damage to multiple enemies

within a given space. This made it great for battles against groups of foes.

Milim had acted first, sneaking up on one person as he went ahead to check for traps. After killing him, she quickly shot out of the area to avoid getting caught in my magic. The group had no idea what happened; the moment they huddled up for safety, Milim was out of the way, and they were cut to ribbons by my Windcutter.

“Look out, it’s Scarlet! Be careful!”

“Shit! That magic got Marja and Nadja. And Gene’s not breathing either?!”

“Damn you! All of you!!”

The surviving enemies, beginning to appreciate their situation, started ranting at us. By *enemies*, of course, I meant the labyrinth challengers.

We were dealing with a group of adventurers this time, by the looks of it, and a pretty well-balanced one at that. But our party had the power and experience to outclass them. That first surprise attack took out the enemy’s main search specialist, and before they even knew we were near, my opening magic landed the first strike. Even before we noticed them, we had an invisibility magic deployed, allowing us to discover the enemy first. This magic was canceled once we began to attack, but by then, our foes had already lost one or two people—the magic attacker and healer in the back row, to boot. That decided the battle right there.

Now that they could see us, the enraged front-row adventurers were making a beeline for us.

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Tough luck!!”

“Ohhhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! You’re not getting past us!”

Veldora and Ramiris were certainly enjoying themselves as they withstood their charge. By now, I had nothing left to do—just take up a supporting role and make sure those two had enough space to move in.

I used my Analysis magic to examine the fighters running toward us. Above them, I could see bright-red bars that were less than half full.

“They got less than half of their HP left. You guys can take care of them

yourselves, right?"

There was no self-aggrandizing there.

Yes, the red bars above the fighters' heads showed their remaining stamina. That was what I configured my personal Analysis magic to display; I tried to set it up like a video game for instant comprehension. If other people used the same magic, they'd probably see something different—regardless, it was pretty convenient for me. The familiar readouts let me quickly confirm the situation and give out the most suitable instructions to my team.

By this point, we were pretty much guaranteed to win. A front-row set of fighters with no rear support was no match for Veldora and Ramiris. With no one buffing or magically healing them, we'd continually whittle down their stamina until it was over. A more careful party would've kept a barrier over them at all times...but not this one, apparently.

It didn't take long for my two companions to prove me right, smiling insidiously as they slashed the remaining three adventurers into a bloody mess. It was an easy win.

Using Milim's surprise attacks and my magic to dispatch the scouts and back row first was proving to be a sure-win tactic for us. Of course, we'd been kind of overfishing the pond, so to speak, so our efficiency was starting to suffer. It wasn't perfect yet, but more and more parties were learning how to counter us. These challengers weren't fools, after all, and they were clearly making a dedicated effort each day. I was glad to see that, but we needed new strategies to deal with them.

...As I thought about this, the final survivor disappeared into a flurry of light particles. The battle was over—another sight I was getting used to.

"We did it! These punks were no challenge at all!!"

"Heh-heh-heh... You're right! We're invincible, the strongest there is!"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! All these little ants! They leave me a tad unsatisfied, but..."

My companions were getting thoroughly carried away now.

...What were we doing, you ask? Well, researching new battle techniques against the labyrinth's challengers, of course. We were eager to learn, so we'd been putting in a lot of hours down here.

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I mean, you heard of Team Green Fury, right? We were able to beat them last time, but we can't rest on our laurels. They got called back to their "home country" or whatever, and they may never come back—but maybe they just had some trouble procuring new equipment. We didn't know if they'd pay a return visit sometime, and we wanted to be ready to fend them off if it happened.

Thus, even after Green Fury was behind us, we kept diving into the labyrinth, sliding into a familiar pattern of fighting off challengers. It kept the labyrinth lively, too.

A few days after our pitched battle with Green Fury, Masayuki's party made it past Floor 40.

Masayuki really was born under a lucky star. Apparently, acquiring the entire Ogre Series of equipment was pretty simple for them. It was only natural, then, that they stomped all over the tempest serpent. Now their focus was conquering Floor 50.

The news of Masayuki breaching the forties energized the rest of the challengers. That was just what we hoped for, and now the more talented parties were aiming for Floor 40 as well.

Our experiments with releasing some videos of the boss battle gave us a huge response, too. The recording of Masayuki's team fighting the tempest serpent, as shown on our projector, created buzz all over town; people wanted us to play it again and again.

As Mjöllmile and I saw it, this was a business opportunity. In a TV-free world like this one, battle footage from the labyrinth was as good as entertainment got. We may need to edit out some of the gorier content—but then again,

maybe there'd be demand for the uncut version, for the right price. We could work on that. Of course, there'd also be broadcasting rights, likeness rights, all those other little details...but I could let Mjöllmile work on that for me.

In fact, I bet Masayuki's smile could sell a lot of different products. The endorsement contracts alone might make him rich. He'd be happy; Mjöllmile would be happy; we'd all be happy. It'd be a trial-and-error process, but I'd like to see how that worked out.

And video content wasn't restricted to the footage recorded by magical items. In fact, we had a lot more saved up. Raphael was reading a massive amount of data from the labyrinth and running Analyze and Assess on it made it possible to replay entire fights in visual form. We used that, for example, to create highlight reels for challengers—and this, too, was a huge hit when we broadcast it. It really riled up the more attention hungry of the challengers; one of them reportedly claimed his video footage helped him find a girlfriend.

Even people who didn't really take the Dungeon seriously were starting to get into it, thanks to our shows. And I understood it. Maybe it was a little self-serving, but if it whipped up enthusiasm, then great. But it was our job to give them a dose of reality, too. Tough love was in order here—we couldn't let them get soft—and so we continued to hop inside our avatars and torment the challengers.

Nowadays, people were calling us the Dungeon Dominators, fearing and respecting us. Our appearance had dramatically changed as well.

The ghost I controlled now had a Fear Aura, a bluish-white, flame-like shimmer that burned around its body. I liked it; it really added to the atmosphere. Veldora's skeleton, meanwhile, had all of its bones refurbished—after seeing Ramiris change her armor out, he started whining about his own upgrades. "A golden skull would suit me well," he said when I asked. Eesh.

I thought about ignoring him, but considering my project for Diablo, I figured Veldora may as well join my experimentation with temporary bodies. I could, for example, replace his skeleton with a framework made of whatever metal I wanted to test out. Pure gold has durability issues, so I decided to go with the strongest material I had, although it was still in the experimental stage. It

happened to be golden in color, too, so it worked well.

This material is known as orichalc, a special alloy made by adding gold to magisteel and refining it with a denser dose of magicules than usual. Focusing on the “everlasting” element of gold and other precious metals, I was hoping to add that element to magisteel as well. The results were a grand success—this orichalc was better than magisteel in all aspects, not just strength. It was crazy. The only problem was that I couldn’t produce much of it—gold itself is both rare and unavailable for mass production—but hey, Veldora asked nicely, so I prepared an orichalc skeleton for him.

Just like with Ramiris, the bones could be made of anything as long as he hung on to his master core. The conversion was a total snap, and now he was a gold-colored skeleton fighter. The durability far outclassed his original bones; it was excellent, almost needlessly so. As he moved around in it, I kept a careful watch, seeing how much punishment it could take and whether any problems cropped up.

Milim, meanwhile, was now a celebrity—a terrorizing sight that people had named Scarlet. Her unbelievable speed made her look like a crimson shooting star, they said. Her battle style, abandoning everything except speed and relying on quickness and critical hits, had made her a legend...one spoken of in hushed, fearful tones.

Even Ramiris had changed a little. Like the proactive fighter she was, she had taken on a more eerie presence, a purple Death Aura shimmering around her heavy living knight’s frame. One swing of her Death Axe overwhelmed her foes, and her unrelenting battle style made her well-known as a suit of armor who fought like a berserker. That knight might even be stronger than the real Ramiris... Actually, I take that back. Wouldn’t want to damage her reputation.

So we had become famous in just a few days. The reaction from the challengers was just as great. They feared us, keeping a keen lookout for our presence. That made sense. We were stronger than some of the weaker bosses, and in terms of sheer malice, far above them.

As I mentioned, our main goal was to research fighting techniques in the labyrinth. This wasn’t playtime for us—I can’t emphasize this enough. Day in

and day out, we gave our all to the research, and I was sure this persistent effort would come in handy for us someday.

And it did. Challengers would occasionally use rare extra skills against us—or even original magics that I presume they invented themselves. I learned a lot from that, and now that Raphael could obtain information directly from the labyrinth, everything anyone did in there could be examined in my research. Raphael ran Analyze and Assess on all of it, so the Dungeon was turning into a treasure trove of data for us.

Even better, just as our personal battle experience was reflected in our avatars, the things we learned in avatar form were retained in our original bodies. This was an unexpected side effect, and I was considering how we could use it on things like new types of training.

Our research was continuing on a daily basis, so I suppose it's only natural that we learned a lot.

One time—just one time, I promise—we got a little carried away and decided to try conquering our own labyrinth. The result: utter defeat.

With our current abilities, Bovix, boss of Floor 50, was like crashing into a brick wall. The frontal approach we preferred was useless against an over-A opponent like him. The effectiveness of our surprise strikes would need to be evaluated, but more than that, Bovix was just too much for us. I was glad we could rely on him, but now we felt like we *had* to beat him.

So we decided to get serious about building up our characters. Again, strictly for research purposes. Research—and training for ourselves, too. Definitely *not* for fun. Make sure you don't get the wrong idea here.

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We watched as the fleeing challengers faded into the distance. “That was an easy one,” I muttered. The other three nodded.

We were on Floor 38 or so of the labyrinth, and given how close we were to

the tempest serpent, there were a lot of strong fighters around—people who could give us a tough fight if we didn't pay attention. For our current state, it was the perfect hunting ground.

Just as we were about to keep going, the Replication of myself I kept in my office for emergency purposes contacted me. *What could that be?* I thought as the message EMERGENCY VISITOR flashed before my eyes.

I guess playtime was over. Wait, no—we weren't playing. This was *research*. Very important stuff. I reminded myself of that as I returned to my office.

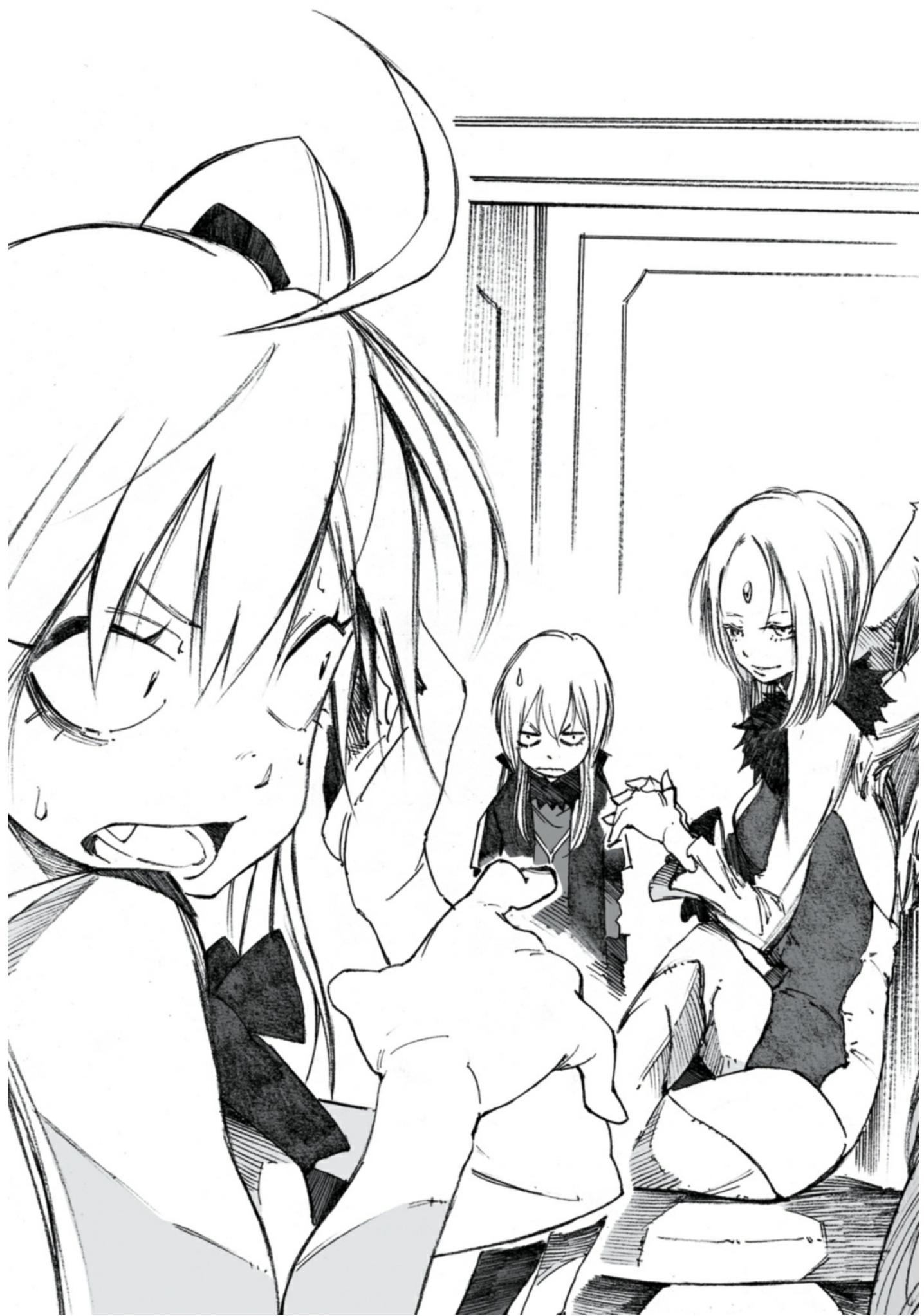


There I found Shuna and Rigurd waiting for me, as well as someone else—a woman I knew well. It was the ex-demon lord Frey, lounging in one of my chairs. I guess this was my emergency visitor.

Seeing me enter the room, Frey walked right past Veldora and rested her eyes upon Milim behind me. She gave her a friendly smile.

"Ah, Milim! So you were *here*, were you? By the way, have you finished up the assignment I gave you yet? I found my watchmen bound and unconscious on the ground, but you'll tell me what happened to them, won't you?"

The smile stayed on her face the whole time. This was more an interrogation than a friendly question, I felt. Frankly, it scared me. It wasn't even directed at me, and I still wanted to be anywhere but here. In fact, it was *exactly* like when my school friend came over to play after finishing his homework, only to have his mom find out he hadn't finished it at all, so she stormed over to drag him back by the ear. Ah, nostalgia.



As for Milim herself:

“*Gehh!!* F-Frey?! N-no, um, I can explain everything...!!”

The moment their eyes met, Milim grew intensely nervous.

Welp. Guess the party’s over for her. And lemme just make it clear: We’ve got nothing to do with this. Okay?

“Ha, ha-ha-ha... Milim, if you had work to do, you should have let me know, all right? I really shouldn’t keep you here then, huh? Better head on back and get that work done!”

“Mmm,” rumbled Veldora, “Rimuru is right. Our apologies for occupying you so long with our research. You should have told us you had work to do. Sorry to drag you along with us!”

“Y-yeah, yeah, that’s right! Boy, Milim, coulda said something before we took you across kingdom come!”

Ramiris got the picture for me, too. Great job. See? That’s the teamwork we’ve been building.

Now we’ve hopefully demonstrated that we knew nothing and aren’t involved in any way. There were tears in Milim’s eyes as she looked at me, but...well, sorry. I don’t think I can save you here. Also, *please* don’t drag us into this.

“N-no! F-Frey, listen to me!”

Milim tried to protest one final time, but Frey’s iron smile sunk the effort. Resistance was futile. Milim was now hers.

Picking her up by the scruff of her neck with her talons, Frey fully neutralized her. With that, she dragged her all the way back to her homeland.

*Phew.* That was scary. I thought we were all going downtown there, but we made it through scot-free.

But just as I breathed a sigh of relief:

“By the way, Sir Rimuru, what have *you* been doing all this time?” Shuna had appeared behind me without warning, and she had a sharp question ready for me.

Sweat that I knew I physically couldn't sweat seemed to bead up on my forehead. *No. I'm fine. This is fine. I wasn't playing this whole time. It was research! Yes! Research!*

My resolve firmed, I decided to make excuses. But before I could give it a shot, Veldora spoke.

"Hmm, I think we might be getting in your way here. Allow me to continue my sorcery research back in my own chambers. There is much deep knowledge even I may still glean from it..."

He kept up his muttering as he took a volume of manga out and turned around.

*He's running out on me?!*

By the time that thought crossed my mind, it was already too late.

"Oh, yeah, um, I think I'll join him down there..."

Now even Ramiris was stabbing me in the back. They both walked briskly out of the room, leaving me to rot. I can't believe them! Only at times like these did they operate like a practiced team.

But I couldn't dwell on my heartless friends. I had to give a reason fast, or else Shuna's rage would scare me to death. A bad excuse would destroy me here—calling it studying or research seemed a little weak to me.

As I watched Veldora and Ramiris leave, my brain cells went into full operation, desperately seeking the best response. Dammit. I couldn't think of anything. But I didn't need to panic yet. If it'd come to this, I had one last resort.

It's time to shine, Raphael!!

Nope. No need to fear. I had Raphael, a font of wisdom, on my side. *C'mon*, I begged my friend. *Give me a shining excuse that'll get me out of this.*

And the result:

*Understood. There is no need to make excuses. Just stand your ground, and the problem will be resolved.*

*Huh? No need to make excuses?! What do you mean, just stand my ground—?*

“Oh, there you are, Sir Rimuru! I’ve been looking for you!”

Just as I had that thought, my beloved Mjöllmile burst inside, looking harried as usual. So *that’s* what it meant. Talk about deus ex machina. Mollie, you’re a savior!

“Ah, hello, Mollie. I was expecting you here soon.”

Following Raphael’s advice, I stood my ground and acted like I planned for all this. Mjöllmile gave me an odd look, but then began nodding, seeing the wisdom of playing along.

“Ah, glad to hear, Sir Rimuru. We’ve received a letter from the Council, but have you had a chance to read it? It was in a very tightly sealed envelope, so I’m wondering if it’s a request to visit them so they can deliberate over our admission...”

Huh? A letter from the Council? They wanted to hold a conference to decide whether to let Tempest join them or not?

So the moment had come at last. Really gotta hand it to Professor Raphael, though. Did it realize the Council would get to work right this moment for me? Ah, no way. Not even *it* could—

*Understood. Green Fury was hired by the Kingdom of Englesia. Based on the timing involved, their primary goal was clearly to investigate matters inside Tempest. Also, according to a report from the subject Soei, agents from multiple intelligence organizations were sending reports back to their home nations at the same time. Putting this together, it is very likely that moves were made over the past several days.*

Okay, maybe it *could* do it. It was just as the professor calculated! But I didn’t remember hearing about any report from Soei...

*Understood. It is believed that my lord was too preoccupied with his games to pay attention.*

*Don’t call it a game!*

They say there’s no kidding yourself, but I guess there’s no kidding Raphael, either. But it had a point. I was pretty serious about matters up until we

defeated Team Green Fury, but after that, yeah, we were just having fun.

But Raphael definitely got me out of a jam there. Patting myself on the back for not trying to come up with some convoluted excuse, I tried to frame it like I knew everything all along.

"Yes, I definitely think you're right. Their investigation teams were in the labyrinth as well, so I played along with them for a bit. They all came hurrying back to their homelands after a while, though, so I figured we'd see some movements soon."

"Oh! Are you talking about Green Fury, perhaps?"

"You got it, Mollie. They were a little *too* strong in my mind, so I did some looking into them."

That was a huge lie. I was just riffing on what Raphael said. But that's all right.

"I see, I see. Some secret investigations, eh? Very impressive, Sir Rimuru!"

Shuna gave me a broad smile and a nod. Thanks to standing my ground, I managed to pull the wool over everyone's eyes.

Now that the danger was past, I accepted the letter from Mjöllmile and looked through it. It definitely *was* an invitation from the Council. Raphael was proven right, and I had just saved a ton of face.

But...*man*, that was close. Getting too caught up in games always trips you up in the end. That was a valuable lesson for me, and I'll try to temper my Dungeon time going forward. I'll need to be more careful—all good things in moderation, and so on.



The Council of the West is a league of nations dotted around the Forest of Jura. Representatives from each of its member nations gathered in Englesia every month for a conference, the aim being to work things out for each other's mutual benefit in areas outside the jurisdiction of any single country.

Each member nation, no matter how small, had an equal say as they all deliberated together. The ideal here was to protect the greater good for all humankind—the greater good, in this case, meaning preservation of the

human-populated parts of the world.

The Council's top priority was conducting anti-monster measures, but they also dealt with droughts, pandemics, typhoons, earthquakes, and other disasters. When it came to the distribution of extra food and other goods between nations, deliberations could often get mired in intergovernmental differences, so for essential goods and services, the Council stepped in to debate and organize things instead. If famine broke out, they worked to provide relief; if a large number of monsters appeared somewhere, they could send extra soldiers to deal with them. This, of course, was never easy—all sorts of problems cropped up on a constant basis.

Funding for the Council was provided by its member nations, each of which paid a different percentage of the budget. Even though each nation paid differing dues to the Council, they all had equal representation in the conference itself. This created some dissatisfaction among the members, so to address that, nations were allowed to send more selected representatives to the Council based on their share of the funding.

Of course, that opened up the possibility of throwing the Council off-balance, so regulations stipulated that member nations had to contribute a much larger percentage for each extra councillor they added. Despite that, a country sending more members inevitably meant they got to have a larger say in matters. With that in mind, the larger nations often paid several times the usual budget contribution so they could send several councillors over.

As discussed, the Council's activities had no direct bearing on the interests of its member governments. Despite that, it was still a good place for larger nations to show off to the world. The more of a say they had in the Council's agenda, the better chance they ran of getting favorable treatment when everything shook out. If danger came along, they could apply pressure to make sure their country was looked after first.

The funding received was used to conduct the Council's business, which was always decided by majority vote among its representatives. For example, let's say a dangerous monster appeared somewhere. The Free Guild, a lower branch of the Council, was tasked with dealing with it, so the Council would send a formal request to deploy adventurers to the area.

But of course, there might be more than one monster, and they could be threatening more than one country. The more powerful nations would likely act to procure stronger adventurers for their own country first—that was a given. Sending more funding to the Council indicated that you were a more valuable presence among the Western Nations. There was no point diverting limited resources to protecting something useless. Countries with excess capacity could help, but otherwise, they'd be shut out. That was the reality of it—the weak were given the cold shoulder on an equal basis from everyone, in a very cruel game of numbers.

This was why being late with your share of contributions was never allowed. The minimum contributions were always collected, and anyone who couldn't make the payments was booted out of the Council. To the weaker nations, that was a matter of life and death—it meant nobody would help them if things went south. It was the Council's job to make those decisions as well, so it was a given that countries with more councillors had a lot more power in the group.

These contributions, of course, weren't cheap. They piled up based on the number of representatives you sent, so even a superpower like Farmus could only send around five, at most. The fall of Farmus was thus a huge event, nothing the Council could afford to ignore. Between figuring out how to handle the new Kingdom of Farminus and addressing the rise of the troublesome Jura-Tempest Federation, tensions were understandably high around the Council right now.

After the Tempest Founder's Festival, the Council held a special session that quickly erupted into chaos, with representatives yelling at one another until they were hoarse. Hinata Sakaguchi attended as a guest of honor, given her close relationship with the demon lord Rimuru.

She could have turned down the invite—unlike the Free Guild, the Western Holy Church wasn't a subgroup of the Council. They were on friendly terms but existed as completely different structures. As a leading figure in that organization, Hinata had every right to ignore the summons. But when she heard the Council's subject matter, she decided to join in. They were set to discuss Tempest's admission into the Council, a resolution that could greatly affect the future direction of the Western Nations, and considering that, Hinata

couldn't stay away.

The current chaotic disorder in the Council made her wince a little.

*When you collect a bunch of fools together, it's not surprising how little work gets done...*

Hinata led all of her own meetings, keeping decision-making as quick as possible without things falling too far out of hand. A serious enough disagreement, after all, could always be decided with battle—such was her philosophy. And in the conferences in Tempest she attended, they always managed to decide on vast, pondering matters, even with all the big names that constantly seemed to join in. It was hard for Hinata to comprehend—like something out of a fairy tale.

*But even if that's a notable exception, she mused, couldn't this Council be a little more constructive?*

To someone like Hinata, who mostly attended active, useful meetings, the debate unfolding before her seemed like nothing short of a farce.

"We can trust that nation! I feel we should exert all efforts to welcome them as our friends."

"You say that, but we are talking about a demon lord here. Allegedly, he can negotiate with the Storm Dragon, but if we anger him, what if he sets that menace on us?"

"No need to worry about that. I doubt this demon lord has much power himself. He's just leaning on his buddy to posture against his foes."

"Ridiculous! Then how do you explain the draw that he and Lady Hinata here fought to? Because I *think* we should appreciate this demon lord for the strength he's clearly shown!"

It was a never-ending torrent of unintelligent opinions thrown against one another.

*This is so stupid. How can they even keep this going in my presence? Their thoughtlessness is astounding.*

Hinata was right about that, and yet they were arguing over whether the

demon lord was a juggernaut or a pushover. It certainly left an impression on her.

"Look. The demon lord Rimuru has declared that the lands of the Forest of Jura are his territory. At the same time, however, he stated at the Founder's Festival that he has no intention of sending monsters out to the forest's borders. This means a lot. Councillors, we need to consider that as we work toward a conclusion!"

"Indeed. Our nation is home to a people living in constant fear of monsters. The demon lord's statement provides salvation to them, and it is backed by fact as well. Ever since the founding of Tempest, monster-related incidents have been on a steady decline."

"Nonsense! Has the demon lord deceived you?!"

The Forest of Jura's monsters were managed by the demon lord Rimuru. The nations nestled along its vast border were already reaping the benefits. But whether a nation bordered Tempest, was exposed to other threats, or was located relatively safely inland, they all had different motives driving them.

The border nations here were the most welcoming to Rimuru's reign. They had all participated in the Founder's Festival, getting a taste of Tempest's prosperity for themselves. Whether it was a nation of monsters or not, they reasoned, if it could directly connect to their own national interests, then bring it on.

Countries facing other threats, meanwhile, had trouble deciding how to approach this. They had the Free Guild and the Crusaders to protect them and deal with monster damage; none of these nations were large in scale, and none could afford to act carelessly here. They were all in the same boat, largely, and they had their hands full staying afloat as it was. The more quick-witted among their leaders were already scheming to see how they could take advantage of Tempest, but some of them skipped the Founder's Festival entirely and had no inherent trust of monsters. The debate over Rimuru raged among these nations, and no matter which side they went with, their position was a pretty weak one.

Finally, the larger, safer nations (and the countries dependent on them) were,

as a rule, approving. They, of course, had the luxury of tackling this question based on how they stood to profit from it—security was not a concern of theirs. They were countered by councillors who were more skeptical about Rimuru's policies. If something were to happen, the demon lord might decide to place the full brunt of his powers upon them—such was their blind belief, and they were thus virulently opposed to him. Some were already loudly accusing the Tempest border nations of turning traitor and letting Rimuru brainwash them.

With all these clashing interests, it was a given that the meeting would be a rowdy one. From the perspective of a higher power, it was all the work of fools—but most of the representatives were just looking out for number one. Hinata knew that, which was why she could stay silent.

"All right. Why don't we accept their argument? If they say Tempest will be our friend, then let's welcome them in. But they'll need to bring some gifts with them."

"I firmly agree. Try to fight them, and we'll just have another Farmus on our hands."

"They'll need to learn their place, though. Do we even know if they have any interest in respecting the international laws we've put in place?"

"I don't think we need to worry about that. You've heard the rumors about Duke Meusé's folly, I trust?"

"How could anyone *not* have?"

The real bottleneck was due to the representatives from the rich nations. They were well-informed to start with, and they were deliberately trying to stir the pot here, encouraging the chaos. Their objective was clear—they already made their conclusion, and now they wanted to guide everyone else toward it without seeming too unnatural.

*I feel for the smaller nations' representatives. They were oblivious when they came here, and now they're faced with a choice. They may as well throw their vote down the drain...*

Ignorance really is a sin. Without the correct information, you stood to lose a vast amount. And now the weak were being hounded into letting their precious

vote go to waste.

Still...

*But I suppose this is all leading up to Tempest getting accepted. Which is fine by me, but...*

The larger nations shared the same motives as Hinata. It was a pity about the citizens of the weaker countries, but as she saw it, better to keep her mouth shut about this. She *did* need to resist the urge to speak up, though.

“The demon lord Rimuru’s motives here don’t really matter. The question is whether we can make good use of him or not.”

“Precisely. Given our present concern about the East’s movements, there’s no reason to turn down a demon lord’s power if he allies with us.”

Prince Johann Rostia, one of the senior representatives in the Council, was now bringing up the Eastern Empire.

“The East, you say? Meaning the Empire?!”

“There are movements? But Veldora is right next to us, in the Forest of Jura...”

Johann’s statement caused a stir among the Council. Now, Hinata thought, *we’re getting down to business*. The preamble went on far too long, but that’s nobles for you. They were feeling one another out, gauging how much information each side had on them. Once they were sure their side had the upper hand, *that’s* when they bared their fangs. That was their style, just as Johann showed when he so expertly seized the initiative.

“As I’m sure you’re all aware, the military of the Eastern Empire—namely, the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire—has begun making certain maneuvers. According to reports from passing merchants, they’ve been conducting military exercises at a higher rate than before.”

The Council fell silent at Johann’s words.

Hinata was aware of that, as were Gazel Dwargo and the heads of the other nations bordering the Empire. They probably kept tabs on the Empire through the sales of their healing potions and equipment. Since the Dwarven Kingdom was officially neutral, Gazel was no doubt following his obligations to keep what

he knew confidential.

Plus, Rimuru undoubtedly knew as well. The proof was in the tech announcements he made at the Founder's Festival. Rimuru insisted that "no, no, that was really all Gabil's and Vester's own work" and so on, but that was a barefaced lie. He *had* to be involved, too, and he meant his statement as a threat against Gazel... Not a threat exactly, perhaps, but it was Rimuru's way of saying *Hey, Tempest is making the potions now.*

*You can never underestimate him. He knows what's going on in the East, and he's needling Gazel about keeping quiet. How far ahead is he looking? It's just amazing to me...*

Thus, whether he knew it or not, Rimuru was being vastly misunderstood by Hinata here in Englesia.

Now, while all of this might've been known information to Hinata, it was shocking news to the majority of councillors here. Everyone sat on the edge of their seats, waiting for more from Johann; they needed as much information as they could as they debated how to protect themselves. Nations rich enough to have regular armies were one thing, but the smaller ones didn't even have the free budget to retain one of those. *Small-scale* was the watchword with their militaries; they preferred to hire mercenaries at times of war, but if the whole region was building up their firepower, they'd be facing pretty slim pickings.

"Everyone," Johann said in a voice that carried well across the chamber, "calm down. I'm not saying the Empire will make their move at once. Let us keep our heads cool and debate how to respond!"

Just as Hinata thought, *this* was the real topic of the day.

"And what *will* we do?" one representative asked, followed by many others.

"How to respond?! What measures do we even *have* against them?!"

"The Kingdom of Farmus is gone! Even if we wanted to build a defensive line, we can't do that with just us smaller nations!"

"Order, please! The Empire isn't on the move because of you-know-who in the Forest of Jura. I wouldn't be as assured if he was still sealed away, but now he's alive and active for us!"

"Wait one moment! You want us to pin our hopes on that evil dragon...?"

"Please, I'm telling you, calm down! Right now, if the news is to be trusted, Veldora has been tamed by Sir Rimuru, the demon lord. The very same demon lord who seeks admission to our Council, am I right? Then I think the answer is clear."

The man calling for order was Count Gaban, a representative from Englesia.

"Councillor Gaban is right," Johann continued. "As we face this threat from the East, now is no time to wage a war of words against each other. If the demon lord Rimuru will join the Council, I am sure their military might will aid us."

"Ah..."

"Certainly, yes..."

Cheers of agreement rang out. Johann smiled approvingly.

"In my humble opinion, I think we should recognize Tempest as a full-fledged member."

His voice was solemn, as if gauging the reaction around him. That alone changed the atmosphere in the chamber. Even those who feared the demon lord as a complete unknown now recalled the very real and recognized threat from the East. Tempest was a land of monsters but also a nation that responded to common sense. The Empire, on the other hand, was a ravenous foe bent on gobbling up everything in its path. They were a *human* enemy, and as such, if they lost to the Empire, everyone could see that they'd be next at the dinner table.

The ruling class, all of them, would undoubtedly be killed.

The Empire was a massive military state, with a history of growth powered by the nations they swallowed up. They were always thorough with their enemy, and to the Western Nations, they were a presence to be feared.

"Hmm. I think Councillor Rostia is making a valid point. A point I agree with, I should add."

"I'm very glad you understand, Councillor Gaban! And I think you won't be

alone in this chamber. I think it's time to take a vote on Tempest's admission first, but what do you think?"

"Seconded. The West needs to put up a united front before anything else."

"Quite true. Now's no time for infighting!"

Several representatives voiced their approval of Johann. It led to a general commotion that forced the chairman to shout for quiet once more.

At the chairman's lead, the vote began. First Johann fanned everyone's fears; then he put on the pressure to conform. A very impressive performance, indeed, in the classic style of nobility.

*I suppose this is all part of the script, too? Even without the preamble, that took forever...*

Clearly Johann and Gaban were colluding on this, with a supporting cast voicing their agreement in the audience. As a nonvoting attendee, Hinata could tell that much from her seat. It was all just a scripted performance, and the ending was coming up shortly, much to her relief. Eight hours had passed since the session was brought to order, and despite the regular breaks, the exhaustion was palpable. Not physical exhaustion, of course, but the mental kind, making it all the more painful to Hinata.

*I can't believe all the stupid questions I got asked, though. They could've just asked me to watch Rimuru to make sure he doesn't go crazy, but no...*

That was the main reason Hinata was there. Whether the Council knew him or not, they were about to ask a demon lord to join their ranks. They just wanted to cover their asses in case he decided to get violent—and considering she (reportedly) fought him to a draw, Hinata helped the councillors feel far safer. That's basically what the nobles wanted, although they asked her in the most roundabout way possible.

The talk about an Empire on the move was just an idle threat as well. Those military maneuvers probably *were* happening, but they were just an empty show of force. If they were *really* about to invade the West, they had mountains of obstacles to deal with first—the Forest of Jura and the Armed Nation of Dwargon, to name but two. And maybe things would've been different before

Tempest and Dwargon forged an alliance, but now, the Empire didn't have much to work with.

*They really should've made their move before Rimuru became a demon lord. Then Veldora wouldn't be back in the picture, and the Empire really could've had a chance at world domination...*

Now the Empire was pinned down, too afraid of a vengeful, unmuzzled Veldora to act. They were too careful for their own good back when there was no sign of Veldora, and now they probably knew full well the golden opportunity they missed. Rimuru and Gazel were still on the lookout for them, of course, but the way Hinata saw it, any move the Empire could make was nothing for anyone to worry about.

She was pretty sure Johann and Gaban agreed with her on that point. Here they were, keeping the smaller nations' eyes fixated on outside threats while they firmed up their own footing. It was so *noble*-like of them. Hinata had had enough of it long ago.

And after the ballots were tabulated, the ayes had it—the majority of the counted had voted to admit Tempest.

"The Jura-Tempest Federation is now officially our ally. We will hereby send a formal invitation to the Jura-Tempest Federation, and after confirming the intentions of their leader, the demon lord Rimuru, to join the Council, we will reconvene to enact the relevant procedures. Adjourned!"

With the chairman's stentorian declaration, the meeting drew to a close. All in all, it was enough to make Hinata swear off dealing with the nobility again.

\*

The exhausting Council session was over, and Hinata was on her way back to the Church. But her suffering wasn't over yet.

"Hinata, could I have a moment of your time?"

She was stopped by a young man guarded by a posse of nearly ten bodyguards. He had shiny blond hair and a refreshing smile; a handsome man, although not much Hinata's type. After eight hours of that torture session, her tolerance for anything else today was gone. She just wanted to get home, and

the smile of a man she had no interest in was worthless to her.

Unfortunately, the man's social position posed some difficulties for Hinata's escape. This was Elrick, the first prince of Englesia, where the Council's headquarters was located. Being rude to him could trigger an international incident, so Hinata was in no position to ignore him.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

She summoned as much social courtesy as she could muster for Prince Elrick. He smugly smiled back at her.

"Well, Hinata, I wanted to ask you a favor."

Elrick did not know Hinata well enough to address her this casually. Given her position, she knew his name and face, but little else. This was their first conversation, and Elrick's overfamiliarity annoyed her.

"And what would that be?" she asked as they moved over to a reception room.

"I'm thinking about testing the demon lord Rimuru at the next Council meeting. Only the upper echelons are aware of the news as of yet, but if a demon lord is joining the Council, I think that would greatly unnerve many of our people. We will need this demon lord to live up to his duties, and we need to see whether he will deign to listen to us. That's where you come in!"

He flashed her another gleaming smile. Hinata wanted to jump out a window.

"How do I come in?" she asked, dying for him to get to the point.

"...?!"

Elrick, perhaps expecting Hinata to be a bit more cooperative, seemed daunted by her lack of interest. Still, he tried to look unaffected as he continued.

"W-well, let me explain. I describe it as a test, but the one in question is still a demon lord. If he decides to cause a scene, we'll all be in trouble. So I'd like to ask you to provide security duties for us."

As prince, Elrick no doubt expected the entire world to serve him at all times. He knew he had good looks, and he was convinced no woman could ever turn

him down. Hinata, he was sure, would be no different. Even his bodyguards looked on like this was common knowledge.

But Hinata had her doubts. For one thing, she had every right to turn him down.

*Did he think I'd say yes with that attitude?*

"Why, if I may ask?"

"Why? Because I know you are a strong woman. The most powerful leader of the paladins, confidant to the Luminian god, the chief knight of the Imperial Guard itself! Among the Western Nations, you truly have no equal, and I even hear that you fought the demon lord Rimuru to a draw. With your support, I'm sure we can reveal the true nature of this demon lord!"

His sheer arrogance was clear for Hinata to see as he heaped extensive praise upon her.

*What is he talking about?*

Rimuru was generally kind to her, but he was a true-blue demon lord. Deliberately trying to rile him was beyond stupid. And that "fought to the draw" thing was a rumor they deliberately spread around; she couldn't beat him at all. If Rimuru ever got *really* angry, it'd take a fellow demon lord like Luminus to stop him.

"I think that idea may be ill-advised. He is truly a powerful demon lord. If we were to fight again, there is no guarantee I could beat him."

"Oh, come now! No need for modesty. Just because you're talking to me doesn't mean you have to act like a meek, gentle woman."

The smile was now gone from Hinata's face. Elrick's self-absorbed protest deeply peeved her.

The oblivious prince was interrupted by one of his bodyguards stepping in. This large, important-looking man was Reiner, head general of Englesia's royal knight corps—and Reiner was about to rankle Hinata even further.

"Ha-ha-ha! Lady Hinata, I can understand if you're smitten with Prince Elrick, but now is no time for such dalliances. There's no need to worry about matters

if I'm around, but with your additional muscle, we will have that much extra insurance. So if you could—”

The chiding tone to his voice robbed Hinata of any desire to hear the rest.

“I’m afraid I cannot. The Western Holy Church and the Holy Empire of Lubelius have signed a nonaggression pact with Tempest. And a word of warning as well... Please refrain from angering the demon lord Rimuru.”

“...Pardon me?”

“Are—are you ordering *me* around?!”

The bodyguard, along with Elrick, seemed flummoxed by the idea that she’d actually say no to them.

Hinata had absolutely no intention of playing along. If this was an official request made through the proper channels, not even Hinata would’ve had the right to refuse. If the Council was making the request themselves, after all, it’d only be logical to call for an anti-monster specialist like her. Given the Council’s vital role in world affairs, there could very well have been an official request along those lines, once it passed through the local Western Holy Church post. And considering their future relationship with the Western Nations, Hinata wouldn’t have had the final right to turn that down.

*What a pain it would have been, though...*

Still, if that happened, there would’ve been a lot of intricate conditions to decide on, and given how their nonaggression pact forbade clearly hostile acts, Hinata probably could’ve found a way out of it. Elrick and his goons must’ve tried approaching her directly to skip all that...and now they were paying for it.

“You will regret this, Lady Hinata! Do you wish to make an enemy out of Sir Reiner, head general of the Englesia royal knight corps?”

“Exactly! The human race cannot allow a demon lord to do whatever he wants among us. Don’t tell me the Western Holy Church is fine with someone like *him* going on a rampage inside the Council!”

The other bodyguards were starting to whine at her, too—but that actually relieved Hinata. From them, she could tell this was all just a few people

stepping way out of line.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m afraid the demon lord Rimuru enjoys my full trust. Now if you’ll excuse me...”

So she left, thanking her lucky stars that this entourage lacked intelligence. In her eyes, she had exhibited the barest minimum of decorum needed, so this shouldn’t become any sort of diplomatic controversy. Making this unscheduled approach to a Council invitee was a much ruder thing to do anyway. Even if a prince was involved, Hinata handled it passably well, if not exactly with perfect poise.

But—

*They’re not really going to try to anger Rimuru, are they?*

The anxiety bounced around her mind. The moment she swore off nobles forever, *this* had to happen.

*Well, I turned down any involvement in it. Hopefully, cooler heads will prevail among them...*

If you wanted to take on a demon lord, you’d better have had the national army backing you up. If a small group of them tried to pick a fight, it really *would* take a party of champions to save your ass—and they wouldn’t have the time to prepare like that. A demon lord on the Council floor was probably an opportunity too good for them to pass up, but having an unexpected event to take advantage of didn’t automatically up your success rate.

But what if this entire encounter was planned from the start?

*That...seems pretty unlikely. But I better keep my guard up next time...*

The thought was depressing her already.



With the invite in hand, I was now here in Englesia.

I guess they were giving me the royal treatment, because I was lodged in the fanciest hotel they had. Once this meeting was over, I looked forward to checking out the capital for the first time in a while.

Benimaru was dauntlessly guarding me, with Soei receiving reports from his spies in the shadows. Speaking of shadows, I was starting to miss Ranga's presence in mine; he was out hanging with Gobta often these days. Gobta had fully rebounded from Milim's grueling training, but I guess he didn't have much time to rest. Milim had apparently declared that she was going to test him regularly from now on—with a string of real-battle competitions against Carillon. He came crying to Ranga, wailing about how he'd be killed at this rate, so I guess Ranga felt obliged to come join him...but judging by his wagging tail, I supposed he liked Gobta a fair bit. Nothing wrong with building a friendship.

So I officially brought Benimaru and Shuna along with me. A larger group would've presented lots of problems, so I decided to keep it small and simple. I was thinking about taking Shion as well, but I was still ever so slightly concerned about unleashing Shion in a big city. If she messed something up like she usually did, it could lead to all sorts of disasters, so I had her focus on educating her staff and keeping things orderly for me.

Geld was too busy directing the construction of Milim's new capital to get away from that. Diablo was still off on his epic journey wherever—he talked about the protégés he'd round up, but was he struggling with it? Because the production of his body vessels was proceeding along well—I wanted that wrapped up before he returned, so really, there was no need for him to hurry things along. I'm sure he'd zoom right back if I called for him, but I didn't have any pressing work for him, so no reason not to give him some free time.

Hakuro was off with Momiji to the land of the tengu. Gabil was out with Middray visiting the City of the Forgotten Dragon—it was home to a flock of wyverns, apparently, and he intended to capture some and attempt to domesticate them. Building Team Hiryu into a stronger fighting force had been on Gabil's mind for a while. As part of that effort, he decided to try building a flying squadron with wyverns as mounts. It was easy to forget given his newfound career as a scientist and researcher, but Gabil was still a powerful warrior beloved by his followers. I think he was on to something with that idea—if he made it work, I'd need to amply praise him for it.

Thus, the rest of my top-level staff were busy with other matters, so it was just two others and I who went to Englesia, meeting up with Soei there.

Our first visit was to some clothing stores, lined with the kind of show windows you'd find in modern Japan. In much the same way, a lot of passers-by liked looking at them, indicating just how much of a city the Englesian capital had become. The window in this particular shop also seemed astoundingly tall to me—glass was a fairly common thing to see around here, but panes *this* size could cost as much as a small house by themselves. If the shop was using these for display purposes, they must've been doing a damn good business. As Mjöllmile advised: Look at the flow of people, and you can see they made the right choices.

By the way, our town had show windows like this as well. When I told everyone what I saw in Englesia, Shuna and our other female staff demonstrated a keen interest in adopting that custom. I had no reason to turn them down, so after discussing it with Mildo, I had him work on manufacturing glass for me. We had a valued partner in Raphael, so it didn't take long at all to produce practical show windows.

Regardless, we were clothes shopping at Shuna's request. She was curiously peering at all the new fashions in those windows right now, and I have to say, it was all pretty gaudy. In the stores we passed, there were lots of outfits with novel designs we never saw back home. The clothes Shuna and her team sewed, after all, were mostly ensembles gleaned from my own memory, but these shops were full of original pieces from entrepreneurial designers. They all seemed to compete with one another on the racks, and the sight was more than enough to capture Shuna's heart.

"I certainly don't want to lose out to all this," she whispered, resolute. "I must redouble my efforts...!"

"Yeah, keep up the good work! And, everyone, go ahead and select whatever you like. I'll cover the cost."

"What?! Are—are you sure?"

"Me too?"

"...I'll keep this on, thank you."

"It's fine, it's fine! I don't pay you a salary anyway, so at least let me be generous with this."

As thanks for their usual hard work, I decided to give all three of them new clothes. I had a suit along with me for tomorrow's conference, but Benimaru and Soei were still in full battle gear. They fit in with the adventurers milling around town, so nobody brought it up, but on the streets, they were too imposing for my tastes. Shuna was in her usual shrine-maiden garb as well, and I think some fashionable casual wear would do her some good.

So I had them pick out their favorites.

Benimaru and Soei went with tailored jackets, shirts, and skinny jeans—Huh? All right. It looked good on them. And Shuna went with—*Whoa!* A fluffy white gaucho skirt and an ice-blue knit vest? Cute! That *really* worked on her!

"That looks good. I like it, Shuna!"

"Thank you very much! I'm glad to hear that, Sir Rimuru."

Yep. The shrine outfit is fine and all, but something casual wouldn't hurt her, either. It's also novel on her—fresh, if you will.

Since we were there and all, I decided to purchase several outfits. We'd no doubt use these as models to sew our own, starting next time. I also purchased a thin, dark-blue dress for Shion as a souvenir. She's got kind of a cool demeanor—in terms of looks anyway—so I figured she'd stand out in that.

"I'm sure she'll love it!"

"You think so?"

Glad to hear that.

"Yes, I'm positive." If Shuna said so, it was probably true.

"And you guys look okay in that, too, so go ahead and take it."

"Not as much guidance for us, huh?"

"...No."

Benimaru and Soei sounded like they had complaints, but who knows? And why were they still trying on outfits? They acted like they didn't care, but now they were diving deep into the racks. A handsome man looks good in anything, so I really didn't think they needed to agonize over their decisions that much...

Meanwhile, all my decisions were snap judgments. It wasn't like I could describe the difference between one ensemble or the other, so I had the store clerks pick for me. Couldn't go wrong with that, I figured.

Finally, we made our selections. We were fitted for them on-site, which let us change right into them.

Shuna was now lovingly clutching the box of clothes I got for her, smiling broadly. Unlike my disappointing secretary Shion, Shuna pretty much always had it together—the gap between them was charming like that. Benimaru and Soei looked happy about their own clothes, too, so I'd call this outing a success. They pretty much worked day and night, so I really wanted to thank them somehow. *If this excited them that much*, I thought as I settled the bill, *I should've taken them here sooner*.

After changing into new clothes, we headed for the café our old friend Yoshida used to run. A trainee of his had taken it over, and it was doing a pretty decent business—and since we were one of their suppliers, we were allowed to make purchases at a discount. We were scheduled to meet Hinata there, whom we heard had arrived in Englesia before us; I figured we could enjoy my first Englesian lunch in a while as we talked over tomorrow's conference.

As we waited for her, I let Soei give me a briefing. He had his feelers all over the Western Nations, so I figured he'd know why they chose this timing for the invite.

"All right, Soei, your report?"

"Certainly. First, I'd like to start with some of the feedback from the Founder's Festival..."

He gave me a rundown of the more important rumors and discussions he had picked up from across the land, in an easy-to-grasp fashion. I appreciated that.

The response to the Founder's Festival was pretty positive. From the royalty up top to the farmers at the bottom, people talked about it all over the place. The Dungeon was also generating tons of buzz—our ad pitch to the nobility must've worked, because a few of them were forming teams of challengers to conquer the Dungeon. Even people from faraway lands, not just the border nations, were reportedly curious. At this rate, I thought we could expect even

more customers soon.

After that pleasant news, we got down to business.

"So did you investigate the merchants—and who's behind Duke Meusé?"

"I did not neglect that, Sir Rimuru. From the merchants' families to their business relations, I conducted a thorough investigation. Based on that, I did not find any connections to particularly suspicious figures. However, these merchants did go through several government intermediaries in order to obtain business licenses in the nations they work in, and when I traced these officials, I found they all had connections to Duke Meusé."

So...what'd that mean?

*Understood. The merchants were likely doing the bidding of the subject Meusé.*

All right. So there's probably not much point investigating those guys further.

What about Meusé, then? I guess there really *is* some kind of secret cabal running the Western Nations, and they might be scheming something new right now, as we speak. Meusé seems like a competent enough noble. We better keep him under surveillance.

"So Meusé did a good job covering his tracks, huh? What's that potential threat up to now?"

As competent as he might be, though, there was no escaping Soei's eyes. No matter what kind of seedy group he tried to buddy up with, it'd only serve us in catching him red-handed. But Soei quickly banished that thought from my mind.

"He's dead, Sir Rimuru."

"Huh?"

"We believe he was felled by some manner of long-range attack."

As the duke of Ghastone, Meusé was something of a big shot. If someone like him was murdered, I really *was* starting to wonder about this mystery cabal. And if this was that cabal's way of escaping capture, they must have a lot of power to work with.

*Report. There is the possibility that they have noticed the subject Soei's investigations.*

So they shut him up, huh? Maybe we should give this adversary the respect they deserved. They weren't playing around.

"And you didn't see who did it?" Benimaru asked.

"No," Soei flatly replied. "I didn't detect any presence at all until Meusé fell to the ground in front of me."

He only heard the sound of Meusé collapsing, so there wasn't a whole lot he could do to stop anything. He sounded despondent about it, and I couldn't do much apart from console him.

"That's pretty unbelievable. If not even *you* could spot them, they must've been attacking from thousands of feet away. You would've detected the magic if they used any, and if it was some flying projectile, you would've picked up the lingering aura from that, right?"

It really couldn't be that easy to hoodwink him. I've got Raphael with me, of course, so Magic Sense lets me detect pretty much anything. But *this...?*

"Maybe it was a sniper, huh?"

"A sniper?"

"What is that?"

Ah. Not a concept Benimaru or Soei were aware of. Shuna gave me a curious look as well, and I suppose I could see why. This world didn't have guns...but then, would it be so unusual for an otherworlder to have one?

"You said a gun? I'm pretty sure Yuuki has a handgun."

"Wha?!"

The sudden voice from behind almost made me fall out of my chair. It was Hinata, sneaking up in an attempt to startle me. Benimaru laughed in my face. Even Soei was stifling a chuckle, a hand covering his mouth. I looked so dumb.

"Come on, my brother! And you too, Soei!"

Shuna, thankfully, yelled at them on my behalf, so I resisted the urge to speak

up. And, I mean, if Raphael would've been kind enough to say something to me

---

*Report. No malicious intent was detected.*

...Yeah, I bet. So it's my fault for acting all haughty, like always. I sighed at myself and played it off with a chuckle.

\*

With Hinata at the table, we all ordered lunch. For one silver coin a pop, we got a pretty fancy spread, and we avoided any serious conversation as we enjoyed it.

Full and satisfied, I decided to order some coffee—a little mature bitterness to round things out. And with enough sugar and milk, I had the perfect harmony between bitter and sweet—

"That's pretty much a café au lait, now, isn't it? I'd call you mature if you took it black, but that's liquid candy you're drinking." Hinata hit me back hard. I guess my inside voice had leaked out again.

"Will you shut up? This is fine! It's all part of the atmosphere!"

"Oh? Because between that and your outfit, there's nothing 'mature' about what I'm seeing at all."

Oof. First the coffee and now my clothing? And... Boy, is that *really* how I look? The clerk at that shop arranged what I thought was a neat poncho-type thing. I thought it was...yeah, maybe a little on the young 'n' springy side, but I trusted the staff there. And *now* look... I regretted ever trusting in a store employee's fashion sense.

"Dammit! This *does* seem like kids' wear, doesn't it?"

"No, no, Sir Rimuru, it's lovely on you!"

"R-right. Yeah. Looks great."

"I thought you liked it."

It's "lovely" on me? So I look like a kid to them?! Man. What a shock.

My clothes were comfortable, at least. I didn't dislike them. But that's not the

issue. I'm supposed to be high society, you know? I had even grown a bit lately, enough that I could probably pass for a middle schooler.

"It makes you look *cute*. Those are the facts. Give it up."

My shoulders slumped at Hinata's verdict. I guess I'd have to. I don't have the slightest amount of adult charm. I already *am* grown-up! Why do I have to be obsessed with my height at *this* point in life? Maybe I'm just gonna have to face reality soon...

Hinata, meanwhile, wasn't as brightly dressed as she was at the festival. She was looking smart in her paladin uniform, a dignified beauty in an outfit usually meant as menswear. Maybe she and I should swap looks? I resisted the urge to verbalize that thought, still a bit peeved as I went back to our first subject.

With all due respect to the late Duke Meusé, we needed to discuss the method of his murder.

"So if there are handguns around, do you think a sniper did it?"

"I don't know much about guns, but a handgun's range doesn't go beyond fifty yards or so, does it?" said Hinata.

Hmm. Maybe. So we'd need something like a rifle.

"Are there sniper rifles in this world or anything?"

"I couldn't tell you. I've certainly never seen one, but I can't guarantee there aren't."

Right. But maybe it's better, for now, to assume there were and act based on that. I decided to send a Thought Communication to Benimaru and the others to describe the kind of rifle I was envisioning.

"Hmm... Interesting weapon."

"Yes, if someone used that, I can understand why I didn't detect it."

"I think I could handle this weapon well enough. We can mix up the required gunpowder, and I imagine Dold would be able to make the unit itself for us."

The three of them had a variety of feedback. Benimaru didn't seem too impressed, but to Soei, it was a threat that he clearly didn't have a

countermeasure against as a bodyguard. It was a different sort of mission—and a different sort of challenge.

Shuna, meanwhile, was eager to make one of her own, the scariest reaction of all. I'm sure it was possible, yes, but *should* we? The development of guns changed the entire nature of wars—although the nature of war in this world was more about the quality of your offense than the quantity, which often made traditional Earth strategy obsolete. Bringing guns into the mix seemed dangerous to me; I figured we should hit the brakes on that for the time being.

"In the other world, this is a brutal weapon, something that can make even a powerless person the strongest out there. I can't say how effective it'd be over here, but maybe you could defend yourself against a magic beast or the like."

"Well, you can run out of bullets, but you will never run out of magic. But you *could* always make higher-caliber weapons for extra punch, and with enough of them, you could be a serious threat. But I hope you won't start mass-producing them just because you *can*, all right?"

Yes, it certainly wasn't impossible. In fact, it was *very* possible. That was why Hinata put her foot down so fast.

"Ah, we'll see. I think magic's gonna win out in a fight, but arming the general populace with guns would still be dangerous."

The lack of widespread gun ownership in Japan made me feel that particularly keenly. Looking at the news from overseas, you had situations where guns helped protect someone, but there were a lot more cases where nothing would've happened if guns hadn't been added to the mix in the first place. With that in mind, giving everyone access to such a lethal weapon out of nowhere seemed hazardous.

"All right. We'll keep this strictly confidential and stick to research only, then."

That seemed to placate Shuna, so we decided to go with that. And besides, threat or not, they didn't work on us, so it wasn't *that* big of an issue, was it?

*Report. Someone without the relevant knowledge would not understand what happened if they witnessed someone being shot to death. There is a potentially high chance someone near the victim is suspected as the killer.*

Hmm? That word of caution from Raphael sure came out of nowhere. What did it mean? Someone near the victim...

...Oh, right! If someone right by me got assassinated, I'd be a prime suspect, wouldn't I? That *did* make sense. And since Hinata was so closely involved with me, she probably wouldn't be allowed to testify on my behalf. If the killer got away, and the weapon was never found, there was every chance I could be framed for murder.

That was close! I could've fallen right into that trap if we didn't have this little chat. Not that I knew whether a trap was in place at all, but if Raphael was on the lookout, I'd better assume there was.

"Either way, we'll all have to be real careful at tomorrow's Council meeting."

"I don't think non-magical lead bullets would do much more than sting if they hit us, though. I don't see cause for too much alarm," said Shuna.

"No, I wouldn't underestimate it like that. Like Hinata said, higher-caliber weapons are more of a threat, and for all we know, there may be magic-infused bullets out there. Plus, if anyone got shot in the middle of the conference, I think people would point their fingers at me first."

"I worry about that as well. I will station Replications around the Council and stay on enhanced guard," said Soei.

That's Soei for you. He must've reached the same conclusion without me pointing it out.

"Right. Thank you."

"Of course."

I trusted he could handle any suspects he stumbled upon. With that concern addressed, I went back to the main topic. "So, Hinata, why are they calling me here anyway?"

I still hadn't heard exactly what would be discussed tomorrow, although I had my hunches. Ramiris and Veldora thought it was about a dragon causing trouble, or a mystery demon lord rearing his ugly head, or some other nonsense. It wasn't any fairy-tale junk like that—they wanted to see if they

could accept me as one of them. And based on the four-star treatment I was receiving, I expected some good news.

"Well, the resolution to let Tempest into the Council passed at the last special session. At the regular session tomorrow, you'll be asked to sit for a Q&A before they officially enact it."

Bingo! Those fools could spout off all that nonsense because they were oblivious to the truth. I was smart to ignore them.

"Oh, really? I was expecting as much."

I nodded, as if I knew everything in advance, as Hinata gave me a doubtful look.

*Report. Based on the current situation, there is no other potential possibility. The subject Hinata Sakaguchi is believed to be thinking "Why that act?" at the moment.*

Huhhhh?!

So sneering at her just made me look stupid, huh? And sure, I didn't have any doubts about this, but even I had my guesses about what they wanted. Like, what if they asked about my magitrain ideas or the requests to sell the weaponry Kurobe showed off? Or what if they interrogated me about which countries were asking us to reveal our research results? There was a pretty broad range I could picture, which gave me a headache.

But Raphael was confident this was about Tempest's admission. I wish it could've clued me in earlier. With a nervous cough, I took a sip of coffee. Hopefully, I covered myself well enough...

"Regardless, it's still not official yet, so try not to do anything dumb, all right? And I think, during the Q&A, they'll probably ask you some tough questions and try to get under your skin as a demon lord. Don't fall for their tricks, okay?"

I wasn't sure I covered for myself at all, but Hinata didn't seem to care either way. I guess it'd be trouble for her if I screwed up the meetings—since the Holy Empire of Lubelius was supporting us and all, it'd make them look terrible. Thus, she was focused on giving me warnings, first and foremost. How unsettling! I have the patience of a saint! Nobody could anger me *that* easily.

"Oh, you're worrying way too much. Unlike you, I know how to deal with adult social situations."

"Huh? If you're picking a fight, you know I'm game anytime."

"Uh, no, um, not like that..."

See? There's the difference between Hinata and me—the way she so readily flips the switch. But getting her any angrier would be bad news for me. I closed my mouth, a little fearful.

"But you do have a point. They're giving me all the bombast of a royal guest, so I *am* worried that they'll want something from me in exchange. You've been looking into that, too, right, Soei?"

"Yes, and I do have some information along those lines. Beyond that, it'll come down to the motives of the royalty involved in this affair, as well as what their subordinates think..."

"Right. I'd appreciate it if we could talk that over later."

"Yes, Sir Rimuru..."

Not him and me, but him and Raphael, really.

"...But there *is* one thing I'd like to ask Lady Hinata."

"What's that?"

Hmm? I thought we were done here, but Soei had concerns of his own. He had deployed his team to the four corners of the globe, looking into matters. As they investigated the shadowy committee running the Western Nations, they were also gathering information on each nation they visited. I was used to relying on them by now, whenever there was something I wanted to know—and knowing Soei, he must've heard some relevant rumor by now.

"It seems that several ministerial-level government officials from around the region are attempting to take advantage of our nation. Their aim—"

"...is to have Tempest serve as a defensive wall against the Eastern Empire?"

"Yes. Exactly, Lady Hinata."

She had guessed it before Soei could finish. She must've had her finger on the

pulse of it, too.

"So if a war breaks out, they want us to help them? Because right now, the only obligation we have along those lines is to Blumund. Is that correct?" Benimaru, for his part, concluded from his own analysis that Soei was worrying too much. He smiled at him—and I'd say he was right.

But the real issue lay elsewhere. Hinata probably realized that as well, and judging by how worry-free she seemed, she must've reached the same conclusion I did. Plus, in my case, I had Raphael predicting the future for me, so I could trust in that. If Hinata agreed with me, that just sealed the deal. So let's check on that.

"Benimaru's right. Our only treaty along those lines is with the Kingdom of Blumund. But even apart from that, I don't think we need to worry about the Empire."

"Could I ask why you think so?" Soei questioned, apparently quite worried. He always *was* serious-minded like that. To calm his mind, I decided to lay out the conclusion Raphael led me to.

"Well, first off, it's important to think about things from the Empire's standpoint. If the Empire tried to attack the Western Nations, what kind of strategy could they devise for that?"

Their goals for the attack were also key, but let's put that aside for the moment. If they wanted to wage war, they'd need to select an invasion route. There was a path straight through the Forest of Jura, a harsher one over the Canaat Mountains, and a potential sea route, the old trade passage dating from before our highway system. And while it depended on how large a force the Empire sent, there were issues with every option.

The sea route was a challenging one. It was the most direct path to the Kingdom of Farmus, but once you left the shores and went into coastal waters, you left yourself open to the large sea creatures that called them home. You'd be sailing right into a nest of over-A monsters, and even a large fleet wasn't guaranteed to make it through safely.

Even the spear tuna that was such a delight at our dinner banquet was a tough foe to face in open water. If one rammed your ship at sixty knots, or

nearly seventy miles an hour, it would easily tear a huge hole in the vessel. But even a steel-sided ship couldn't breathe easy, because among the creatures in the ocean, a spear tuna was still on the small side. These creatures lacked intelligence but brutally attacked anyone who dared intrude into their territory. There wasn't a military vessel on this world that could take a ramming from their thirty-foot-long bodies and stay afloat.

Thus, only merchants with an intricate knowledge of safe sea routes dared to cross the ocean.

So what about the Canaat Mountains option? Well, that'd involve traversing a hellscape known as the Dragon's Nest.

Dragons are willing to let a merchant caravan go by unharmed, but something bigger—say, a large army—was a great way to invite their wrath upon you. They weren't human, so negotiation was out of the question. If they mistakenly decided you were hostile, it was all over. These dragons were led by a powerful Dragon Lord, and if they had you in their sights, they'd pare down your army well before you had a chance to fight your war. If you won, then fine; if you lost, the whole world would laugh at you. And even if you *did* beat those dragons, you had the Western Nations' forces waiting for you on the other side. The feature presentation, in other words.

Besides, a military march through rugged mountains was an ordeal in itself. The path only opened up in the middle of the summer anyway. When the snow and ice settled onto those frigid peaks, all the magic in the world wouldn't get you through.

No, any strategist who hadn't lost his marbles would avoid this route at all costs.

Thus, your only choice left was through the Forest of Jura. But:

"The forest is the territory of a demon lord, and that's me. And there's Veldora, too, right?"

"Yeah. And now that the whole world knows of the Storm Dragon's awakening, the Empire can't afford to make any funny moves. They feared him even when he was still banished, so right now, they're essentially frozen in place."

Exactly.

We had spread the news that Veldora destroyed the Farmus army, and the Empire heard about that quite some time ago, I'm sure. Any ambitions they had along those lines must've been shelved by now. The Empire had feared Veldora for ages, and that fear made them too careful for their own good. If they had acted sooner, they might just have wiped us out, for all I know.

But now Veldora's here, and Veldora was chiefly why Raphael assured me we were golden.

*Report. That was a prediction, not a conclusion. The situation is constantly changing. If I obtain new information, I will need to factor that into my assumptions.*

Wow. What a worrywart. But that was fair. Working on bad assumptions can lead to some serious pitfalls later.

"It is true that the Empire is making some ominous moves. The Shadows I tried as familiars have proven pretty useless, so I was thinking we had better conduct a more thorough investigation soon. However..."

Soei's time was already occupied with exploring the Western Nations' underground, and members from Team Kurayami were carrying out their own missions as well. About all he could do was send out Shadows, low-level apparition creatures that ranked a D but could use Shadow Motion and Thought Communication, making them perfect spies. On paper, at least. Unfortunately, they were too weak to penetrate the barrier that protected the Empire.

It was hard, however, to send over anyone stronger than them. If I was deploying people to places with unknown security situations, that limited my applicant list to those Soei could vouch for. And if I detached any of those people from their current missions, that would hinder my orders.

Soei was talented but not omnipotent. Even after his evolution, he could only deploy up to six Replications of himself at once. Those were the trump cards he used to carry out the dangerous work I always sent him off to. He needed to leave some on tap in case a battle broke out, so if I sent any of those to the Empire, I'm sure he'd worry over who would be left to guard me.

"The Empire's moves really aren't being looked at that seriously, though. It's more of a cover story, an excuse for letting Tempest into the Council, that's being spread around by a few of the louder representatives. But if you're that concerned, Sir Soei, I could conduct some investigations myself."

Oooh. I see that Hinata, like Raphael, doesn't like trusting her own thoughts too much. I always knew how wary she was, but seeing that in action, I kinda had to admire it. I could learn from it, in fact.

But now she's volunteering to help investigate, huh? I might as well take her up on that—

*Report. Please ask her to look into the Armed Nation of Dwargon as well and see whether military activity is possible within its underground cities.*

...Raphael never wavers, does it? Now it's trying to work Hinata to the ground, too. But that made sense to me. The Canaat Mountains had some paths that led into the Dwarven Kingdom, the territory of Gazel. I couldn't imagine the Empire can do much with those roads, but it'd be worth looking into, just in case.

"Could I ask a favor when you do, Hinata?"

"What's that?"

"I'd kinda like you to investigate the structure of the Dwarven Kingdom, I think."

"Right, the Dwarven Kingdom's a city crafted from a cave underneath the Canaat Mountains. Hmm... That *could* be a possibility, too. You act so careless, but I really *can't* let my guard down around you, can I?"

"Ha—ha-ha-ha... Right?"

"All right. I'll look into the Dwarven Kingdom as well."

I wasn't sure what prompted Hinata's admiration, but fine. I thought Raphael was carrying on about nothing, but there's no sure thing in this world. I was just thinking about how I needed to be more careful. If there's a weed bothering me, better to uproot it now rather than later—and if Hinata was volunteering, no reason to hold back.

So we carefully went through the rest of our discussions, talking about closely

held state secrets and other vital affairs in the early-afternoon café space. We had a magical Soundproof Barrier over us, so nobody was going to eavesdrop on our conversation anyway. Skills can be so *useful* like that.

Hinata was kind enough to brief me on a few other things, too. It seemed like a lot of people wanted to take advantage of us—and not just for military purposes. Humans, after all, were suspicious folk—I should know; I used to be one. That’s why what Hinata told me made so much sense.

“I just want you to know, all right? There are people out there trying to use and abuse you, so don’t let them shoehorn you into anything.”

I had to accept that as correct. Whether I would listen to that advice was another question.

“What do you mean, use and abuse me?”

“Well, in terms of your military, at the very least. That’s something *I’d* want from you, too, and that’s what you want to see, right?”

As she put it, one condition for joining the Council was that we’d be responsible for management of the entire Forest of Jura. The member nations were unanimous on that, since we’d function as a bulwark against the Empire.

“I got no problem with that. With fewer monsters out there, I’m sure we’ll see more people challenge the labyrinth. We *do* want that, yeah.”

“Better not freely admit it so much. I’ve had to deal with a lot of heads of state in my time, and let me tell you, they’re clever. They might even ask you to station troops in their countries to keep monster damage down.”

Normally, allowing foreign troops to stay in your nation wasn’t the kind of thing governments liked to see. But as Hinata put it, in a world where monsters were a universal threat, leaders wanted to retain as much war power as they could. Many of them weren’t afraid to use other nations’ troops for that, including the Western Nations’ Temple Knights.

*Proposal. You could deploy troops to their nations to create an obligation to you.*

If we were recognized as a nation, it made sense that we could deploy our

army to foreign lands as a peacetime maneuver. If something came up, that'd make it easier to exercise our military authority. My home country back in my previous world took that strategy a lot.

"Hohh. I see, I see. That's not a bad idea, actually. Why don't I let them use us?"

"I can't say I like letting them think they're taking advantage of us, but...yes."

"It's essentially giving influence to our nation, isn't it?"

I grinned as Benimaru and Soei voiced their agreement. Shuna kept up her own smile, and I suppose her lack of complaint meant she agreed. And if we were all on the same page, that meant I could do what I wanted tomorrow.

"Why're you looking all sinister?" an exasperated Hinata asked. Guess she's reading my mind again. But she didn't say anything else, which I took as her tacit approval.

That marked the end of our lunchtime discussion, but before she left, Hinata brought up something else, as if she had just thought of it.

"Oh, right. I think there's also a group planning to do something stupid at the event tomorrow, so be on the lookout for it, okay?"

Once again, she warned me not to lose my temper or lash out at anyone. What she meant, I suppose, is that the Council wasn't a monolith, and I should treat everybody there as one and the same. Eesh. Why was she so concerned about a pacifist like me? She didn't need to say it; I understood just fine. So I told her she was worrying too much, and we left it at that.

\*

The next day came.

We were heading over to the Council's meeting hall—Benimaru, Soei, Shuna, and me, all in suits and lookin' sharp. It goes without saying that all our weapons were in my Stomach, so at a glance, it would've looked like we were unarmed.

Hinata had given me her full briefing, so I didn't have an iota of anxiety. Maybe a few councillors wanted to take advantage of us, but on the question of

my admission to the Council, all my worries were behind me. If I was recognized as a friend to humankind here, that'd be one step closer to the ideal society I had in mind—a world where man and monster coexisted and shared in one another's prosperity. To borrow a phrase from Mjurran, a Monster-and-Man Cooperative Alliance.

On the monster side, we already had magic-born, dwarves, elves, and more living with one another. That alone already resulted in a massive new economic sphere, but as an ex-human, I really wanted to reach out to them as well. But humans, you know—they're greedy. It's all *What do I get out of this?* with them, and they're willing to shut out their own countrymen just for thinking the wrong thing. But that greed helps them improve their lives, too, and it's the engine driving all sorts of new and expanding entertainment.

They weren't simple to deal with. Not like monsters. Better avoid expecting too much here. I couldn't assume this would go great from the very beginning.

When I reached the Council hall, several councillors were there to greet me. They were from our border nations, and based on what they heard from the Founder's Festival participants, they wanted to forge friendlier relations with me. I sure appreciated all the compliments, and I responded in kind, figuring it best for the future. They started smiling at me, the ice now firmly broken.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I heard you were a demon lord, Sir Rimuru, but what I *didn't* hear about was how much of a sociable leader you are!"

"I would certainly like to maintain a friendly relationship with you, going forward."

"No, no, the pleasure's all mine. I've got a slate of events in mind going forward, so if you're interested, please feel free to attend!"

I got the idea they were still a bit too leery to attend the Founder's Festival. Now, though, they were being downright familial with me. All that effort from Rigurd, Mjöllmile, and the others must have been paying off.

Now I was feeling really good. Hinata gave me all sorts of doom and gloom yesterday, but I guess I really *didn't* need to worry. But the next person to greet me sent me straight into a depression.

"A-hem! People, people, quit bothering Sir Rimuru. Councillors from tiny dots on the map with hardly anything to them shouldn't be occupying his time all day!"

"Indeed, indeed. All this rudeness may give Sir Rimuru the wrong idea about our Council. So please, remember your place and leave him alone."

My little entourage was promptly chased off by a group of representatives who acted like they owned the place. I wanted to ask who was being rude here, but I held back. Soei told me via Thought Communication that these people were from nations with some clout in this Council—every representative was allegedly equal, but that wasn't really the practice. That was shown perfectly well by these people who took it as their prerogative to lord it over their peers. There was definitely a pecking order here, based on your social standing.

"Right, Sir Rimuru. I tell you, you'll never have any constructive conversation with people like *that*."

"Yeah, thanks. And what would you call constructive?"

I really didn't want to deal with these guys, but I decided to play along.

"Heavens be! I suppose you may not be picking up on the hints, Sir Rimuru?"

"Ha-ha-ha! It stands to reason, I think. Sir Rimuru has never had to deal in noble etiquette before. But don't worry. We'll teach you everything you need to know!"

A simple question, and already they were answering me with stuck-up laughter. They made it seem so natural that I couldn't even tell if they were being deliberately malicious. A bit overly familiar perhaps, but it beat being feared...I think?

"By the way, Sir Rimuru, I hear you've been busy crafting a great deal of interesting things?"

"Yes! They say you're considering a magitrain system, for example, and let me tell you, my nation would be more than happy to be part of that effort."

"Ah yes, precisely. And the same is true with mine. We'd be happy to pitch in! Of course, we'd like a little, ah...well, *you know...in return*."

Um, sure.

So this is what *jaw-dropping* means. Rude ain't the half of it! I went lightly because these are presumably nobility, but that was a mistake. I must've *really* given them the wrong first impression. But I was on their turf. I needed to hold back, or things could easily spiral out of control. Broad mind, broad mind. Given all my grandstanding to Hinata, I couldn't get riled up here.

"Well, we need to put rails in place before we can run any magitrains. We've already created an order for our layout construction, so I'm afraid I can't take any more requests right now."

"Ah, no need to worry yourself over such details. I will gladly arrange matters with my government, so if you could give us some priority with your delivery, that would be quite fine."

Something told me he had no idea what a magitrain was. He'd never seen the real thing, after all. As if that weren't bad enough, he was also completely ignoring my own priorities and throwing thoughtless, one-way demands at my feet.

But...again. Patience.

"No, no! As I said, there's an order to this—"

But as I tried to bottle up my anger and turn him down, the demands just kept piling up.

"Then perhaps some other product, then? If you could arrange for some weapons or armor, we will be happy to buy it. Of course, don't forget to compensate us later!"

The bearded man in front of me, representing the duchy of Laquia, was a particular eyesore. He was not-so-stealthily demanding a bribe. I wondered if he had somehow forgotten I was a demon lord.

The nations adjoining the Forest of Jura were exposed to monster threats, but these more inland nations enjoyed total peace and security from them. That's why they prospered so much, I suppose, and maybe they just didn't see a demon lord as that big of a deal...but this was still an awful way to approach me. I felt like an idiot for even giving him the time of day.

"Also, may I inquire as to what kind of education your agent Mjöllmile has? I asked my officials to have him open some business channels, but he's been rather evasive about giving a reply, I hear. Would we be able to work with someone else instead?"

I wanted to yell "Shut up!!" at him. If *this* was the type Mjöllmile dealt with, then I was inadvertently putting him through a ton of pain. *He* always seemed to brush them off with ease, but some officials are more stubborn than others. I had a lot to learn from him.

"I'll look into that," I replied with a smile. Such a lovely turn of phrase, "I'll look into that." Indicating your interest in getting the job done, but offering no firm timetable, freeing you from the obligation to actually do anything. The secret weapon of elite office staff everywhere. That was the brilliant strategy I deployed—bluff my way through, then pretend the conversation never happened.

"Ah, good to hear!"

"We'll look forward to future matters, then."

"And now, we'd best be on our way."

"Don't be shy about offering your lineup, now! We can talk any time!"

That phrase deftly shooed all those fools away. Now *that's* how an adult deals with matters. If you want something, go buy it yourself; that's what I say.

"Ah, certainly, I look forward to that," I lied as I saw the representatives go.

What a pain they were. I had no obligation to give them anything. It'd be much surer for us if we just sold our wares through the Free Guild—at least *they* didn't demand bribes.

A few other councillors approached me as well, and I gave some quick greetings before moving along. Any long conversations here seemed likely to get me in trouble.

It was still morning and already I was getting a bit testy, but at least this was good experience. If I caused any problems before the conference even began, there's no telling what kind of tongue-lashing Hinata would give me later. I

decided to accept things as they were as we entered the hall.



"Should you have let them go like that, Sir Rimuru? I can't believe you forgave their flippant behavior..."

Benimaru turned to me the moment the attendants guided us to my seat. He held back before, following my lead, I suppose. I was ready to vent back at him, but Soei and Shuna beat me to the punch.

"Don't expect Sir Rimuru to act like you. The bleating of little minions like them would never be enough to disturb his mind."

"Exactly, my brother. Sir Rimuru has a heart as broad as the wide-open sea. It would be foolish for him to engage with the common crowd like that."

Um, sure. If that's what they say, I guess I'll just have to play along.

"Yeah, something like that. Benimaru, if you let *that* rile you, you've still got a lot to learn."

Of course, I *was* angry on the inside. But if Shuna and Soei were kind enough to misread my body language for me, I had to work with it. I spent a few more minutes lecturing them on the finer points of interacting with humans.

The seats were laid out in a fan shape, with us at the base, where the chairman would normally be situated. This put everybody's focus squarely on us—one desk and one chair. My associates had to stand behind me.

The chairman emceeing this session had moved to a safer seat on the second mezzanine. I say "safer" as compared to us. Being a demon lord must've put a *lot* of people on their guard around here, and having all their eyes on me made it terribly difficult to collect my thoughts.

So the meeting was formally brought into session, but that's when hell *really* began for me. I was trying to be shrewd, as haughty as my post demanded, but I couldn't lose my temper, either. I had to hold it all in, listening to everything the councillors said.

Hinata had clued me in on the agenda before I came here. First, on the subject of Tempest joining the Council of the West, the representatives were

debating on assorted conditions to impose on the deal. These could be broadly divided into three demands:

One: adherence to international law

Two: access to our economic sphere

Three: provision of military power

Number one was no problem to me. If we became a member, we'd have a duty to follow the law, big or small. The Council didn't have any right to be involved with the internal laws of other nations, which eased my concern. Each individual merchant would have to follow the rules of whatever country they were doing business in, and if any problems arose, they'd be resolved following those laws. Got a problem with that judgment? The merchants could file a complaint with their nations' embassy. Depending on how that turned out, it'd either become an international issue or the merchant would have to give it up.

Frankly, I liked that system a lot more than what I saw after the Founder's Festival. It established an international legal framework to preside over cross-border issues, complete with an international court and a judge from a third-party nation. In fact, that was part of the Council's role in this region, with representatives recusing themselves as the legislature debated issues involving them. Nothing too tricky about it.

Of course, to keep things fair, we needed to enact and announce a body of law for our own nation. That was an issue, but I had good ol' Raphael on my side. It had a full grasp of laws from all nations, and it used it to perfectly cover all the bases as it defined our own set for us. We already sent a copy of that to the Council, so all was well.

Providing access to our economy presented a few issues.

Given the lack of patents in this world, the trend was for whoever produced the best copy of something to win all the marbles. Before that, however, there was that "heavenly army" that attacked whenever our civilization got too advanced, an army of a million angels descending from the sky and razing our cities to the ground. That's why the Western Nations had no gas or electricity—not even steam engines.

But this didn't mean life was difficult. We had magic and, by extension, magic-driven items. Our attire didn't lose out to Japan at all, and while the transport of fresh foods was out of the question, our nations were good at food storage. There was some excellent magic being harnessed for building construction, leading to some very impressive work—I'm not sure you could replicate some of the castles and other standout projects with modern Japanese technology.

So everyone's core needs—food, clothing, shelter—were being fulfilled, and life was actually pretty pleasant in the cities. So what's the problem?

The problem was that, between Vester and Gabil's presentation and Kurobe's weapon and armor exhibition, word about our technology was starting to leak out, as shown by that bearded guy from Laquia asking about my magitrains. Yohm and Mjurran were commanding large groups of workers, of course, so this was expected. I didn't mind if people *knew* about our stuff, but I did mind the people who tried to steal it.

Or really, trying to steal it was one thing, but now you had people like that Laquian guy trying to make us build a railroad and calling it a business transaction.

"Laquia should share in this first!"

"How could you be so thoughtless? Sir Rimuru, the Republic of Zamund is far more worthy of serving as Tempest's closest partner!"

"Order! Now is not the time for debate between member nations. You're simply baffling Sir Rimuru!"

If the white-bearded chairman hadn't stepped in to quiet things down, we might've been bogged down forever.

Open markets, in themselves, weren't a problem, but I wasn't expecting an obligation to share all of our tech. If they see us as some kind of international handyman for them, I dreaded how they might try to use us in the future.

Now I saw why I had reason to worry about the things I did. And despite how depressed I already felt, the conference was still dragging on.

As for the third condition, a military power-sharing deal, we'd need to have some debate on that.

Following Hinata's word of caution, I had Soei do some more research for me. We know there were people who wanted to tap into our war power under the name of military cooperation, but the same was also true for us. Tempest would be responsible for managing the Forest of Jura; the proposal was for us to handle monster-related issues, and I was fine with that. That much I predicted from the start, and it worked better for us. Even in my discussions with Hinata, we agreed that Tempest would handle Jura defenses, while the Crusaders covered things in the Barren Lands.

My nation would cover the bill for this monster defense, which I'm sure the Council loved. After all, if we wanted to keep the economy running smoothly, world affairs needed to be kept stable. Nations wary of the Eastern Empire no doubt appreciated our defensive power as well—not that I expected it to happen, but if push *did* come to shove, we'd be there on the front line of it.

So yes, the Council definitely wanted to take advantage of us. That's why I needed to be sure we could do the same in return.

We would defend the Forest of Jura—that was a given. But the smaller nations also wanted to use our excess capacity to help protect themselves. There may have been fewer monsters venturing out from the forest, but they still couldn't defend against unexpected monster intrusions. Some flying monsters were particularly dangerous, and the nations couldn't afford to cheap out on their defense budget. But there were patrol soldiers and monster-hunting adventurers to pay, and if the Council didn't cover the cost, they'd have to make up the difference with taxes.

Even worse, if they had to wait around for the Free Guild to show up after a monster discovery, they couldn't prevent damage before it happened. Nations that had Luminism as their official religion enjoyed regular patrol visits from the Crusaders, but there wasn't an infinite number of them. They had a huge amount of terrain to cover, and I'm sure there were times when they were simply unavailable when needed the most.

That's where we came in. Each nation could pay us a defense fee, and then they'd be free to use us however they liked. At the same time, though, they'd be relying on us for national defense, so they wouldn't be able to ignore us any longer. It'd be a display of power for Tempest—and a way to expand our

influence on the Western Nations. The money they'd pay us would also strengthen our position—two birds with one stone, really.

And what if the Empire really *did* attack? Then, for better or worse, Tempest was right in the middle of their invasion route. If a fight couldn't be avoided, it'd naturally be well-advised for us to shore up our rear support. If they accepted our defensive forces instead of fearing us, we couldn't ask for anything better.

If we wanted to make this work, there needed to be an absolute, overwhelming difference in war power—enough to make other nations think they could never beat us in a war. It'd be ridiculous to entrust your defenses to another country otherwise. And if we could make the Western Nations take a “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” stance with us, our mission was as good as accomplished.

As each of the representatives gave us demands and played interference with one another, the chairman completed his preamble.

“...Those are the conditions placed upon the admission of the Jura-Tempest Federation. Lord Rimuru, do you have any objections?”

I had better give him some, or else I’d be consenting to everything. I could ignore the councillors’ inane commentary, but I better not commit any oversights with these conditions. I wanted to take advantage of these guys, but unless I could bind them down with a treaty, I was wasting my time.

Isn’t this the kind of thing we work out on paper first, *then* get a chance to debate on? That annoyed me a bit. What if I couldn’t give them an instant reply in this session?

I assumed this was another way of harassing me. But I had Raphael with me, considering all the oral arguments and using my own hands to write them down. Talk about omnipotent. So I had my friend think about the issues and come up with a rebuttal.

“Well, I’ve considered all of your conditions and prepared a list of my doubts and alternative suggestions for each one. If you can accept those, I have no reason not to go forward.”

I handed the documents I had written up to Benimaru, who took them to the

chairman. He accepted them, looking a bit overpowered by him.

“...Wha?!”

I had agreed to the general outline of the conditions offered—but I had changed a few of the stipulations to ensure I still profited, even if they took advantage of me. Raphael was kind enough to mark out all the sections to change for me, so (unlike an oral agreement) everything was set in stone after the fact.

The chairman, no doubt seeing us as mere monsters, looked at the documents—a complete, blow-by-blow rundown of the explanation he had given us—and blanched. I could understand his surprise when he saw my revisions in red pen, all but spelling out for him that he couldn’t pull a fast one on me. It was all Raphael’s doing, not mine, but let’s gloss over the details here.

“If you have any concerns, I’d be happy to discuss them.”

If he couldn’t accept my terms, there was no urgent need to join the Council. I’d just presume that my quest for general acceptance from humankind was still a bit premature and deepen my ties with the nations that already accepted us.

“No, no, there are no problems, exactly...but if possible, Lord Rimuru, I would like some time to debate these matters.”

The chairman, being no fool, must’ve realized that he couldn’t browbeat us like usual. He would carefully go over my revisions, and he voiced no real complaint about that. Not that I got any time to deliberate—but even if I protested, I wouldn’t have gotten any. So for now, I agreed to his request.

\*

Why was this happening?

The desk, kicked into the air, was suspended in space, slowly falling to the ground—and in the midst of this nearly stopped moment in time, Hinata’s eyes seemed particularly cold to me. She didn’t need to use her voice to tell me what she was thinking: *You’ve done it after all.*

With a heavy sound, the desk crashed to the floor. I buried my heel in it, crushing it beyond recognition. Too late to turn back now.

So I reclined in my chair as if I had planned all this, crossing one leg over the other. Then, giving a gloating stare at the councillors gaping at me, I heaved an internal sigh.

Look, I kept it bottled up at first. I had a reputation as a grown, mature leader for Tempest, and I took pride in having a heart broader than the ocean. That much, I think I've made clear from my recent actions. People called me a bastion of fortitude; I could even handle Milim with no problem. That broad heart of mine allowed me to laugh off and forgive all her selfish bantering.

But what if, instead of Milim, you had this room full of unattractive, obsessed, materialistic old men who never even bothered to hide the avarice glinting in their eyes? You could find the answer in that twisted desk in front of me.

After an extended, three-hour break, the meeting went back into session.

Here's where my problems began. In response to the documents I submitted, the representative created something they called a list of requests and handed it to me. Judging by the tired look on the chairman's face, this was done against his will, but I didn't have any sympathy for him.

A quick look through the list showed me that I could accept absolutely none of their demands. Here's a rundown:

- Open a magitrain line to Englesia, with Tempest handling all construction and costs.
- Provide high-quality weaponry and armor. Tempest is requested to help the Western Nations strengthen its military preparations.
- As the labyrinth that appeared in Tempest is a treasure to all humankind, add the Council to its administration team.
- Upon admission, Tempest will provide a preset amount of taxes on a yearly basis. Due to safety considerations, the representatives it selects must be humans.

And so on—there was a *lot* of nonsense written down.

I gotta hand it to them; they made me lose my temper in the space of three seconds. These conditions weren't even worth debating. This wasn't just an

unequal treaty; I'd sooner give up living with humans entirely than sign on to this.

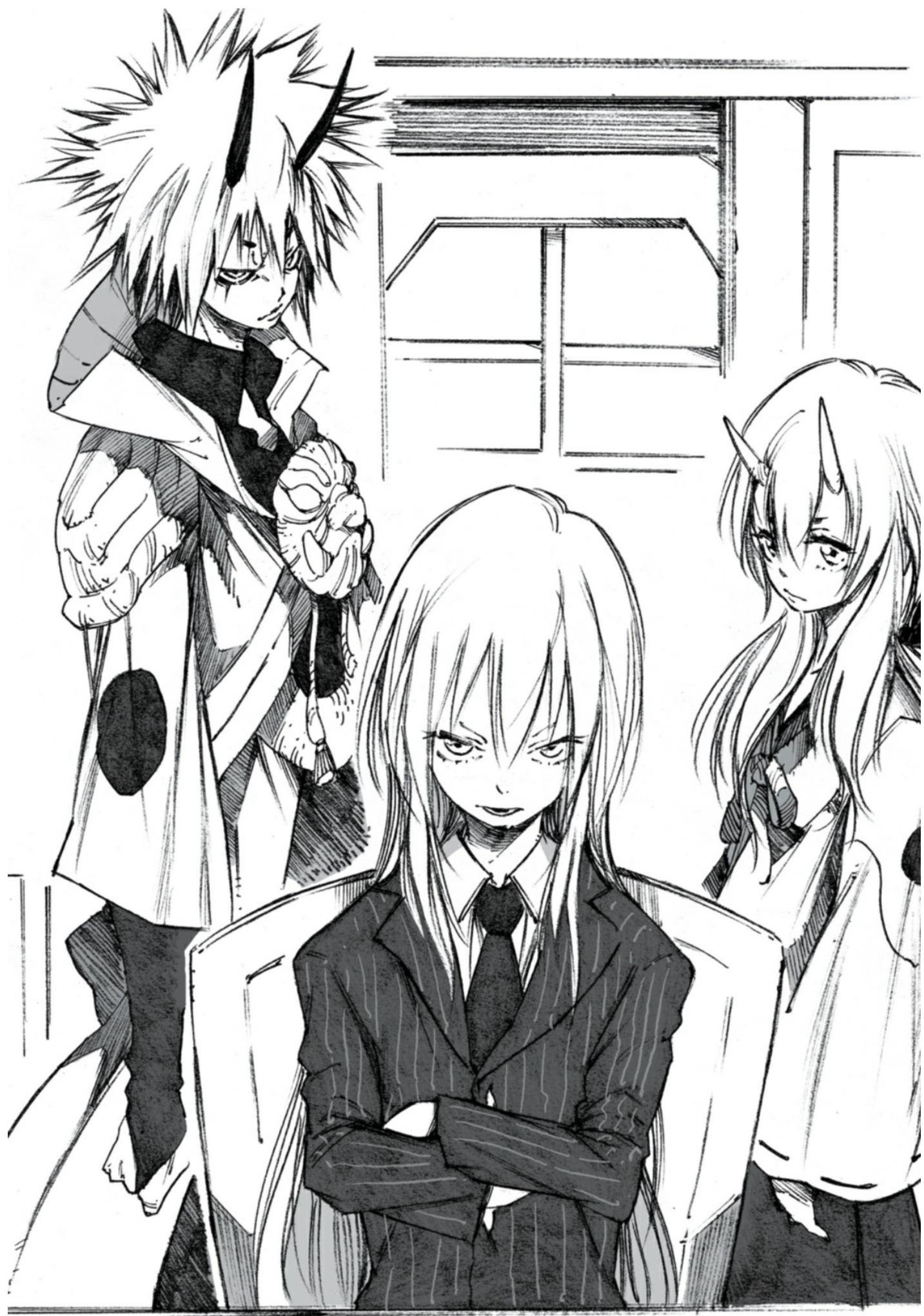
"All right, people. Are you making fun of me? You've been prattling on and on today, but what makes you think you've got the right to make demands to a demon lord?"

My kicking the desk to pieces made the hall notably quieter. Holding back my rage, I spoke directly to the chairman, currently hanging his head in shame.

"Sir Rimuru is asking a question. Don't just sit there quietly. Please answer him."

Shuna, smiling, delivered a follow-up blow for me, and I think *that* had more of an effect than anything I said. The councillors looked fully cowed now, some of them breaking into a cold sweat.

"I think you have the wrong idea here. Our nation has already almost completed a gigantic economic bloc of its own. The one reason we want to join the Council of the West anyway is so we can show the human race that we're not hostile to them. But if you don't want that, I've got no intention of forcing things along here..."



My voice rang quietly in the silent chamber. I wasn't shouting at all, but it seemed to make all the representatives' minds shiver with fear.

I wasn't using Lord's Ambition or anything like that. Against a human target, Lord's Ambition would cause sheer panic at best, insanity and death at worst. No need to break *that* out. And I wasn't brainwashing them at all, either—if I did, I'd be throwing all the goodwill I built with humanity out the window. I had no interest in living out my life with a legion of boring puppets who said nothing but yes to me.

No, this was just me being riled into destroying the desk and laying out my full opinions. But even that had a massive effect.

"N-no, Sir Rimuru, that was not at all the motive behind our requests..."

"C-certainly not! We simply provided our perhaps overly optimistic feedback out of a desire to deepen our friendly ties with you."

The browbeaten councillors desperately began making excuses. The more of them I heard, the more annoyed I got.

First off, why was the king of a nation only a "sir"? If I was convening with other kings and leaders, I'd expect that—but being called it by someone without a country to govern was the same as saying I ran no nation at all. It was a nation addressing a colony, and it demonstrated zero respect for us. I'm sure they looked down on us as a bunch of monsters. I could put up with being looked down upon personally, but if it was my whole *country*? Forget it.

I am a demon lord and expected to be treated that way, but this was even worse than I expected. My hotel was first class, and lot of the councillors here treated me with respect, so maybe I let my guard down a little—but still, this was horrible.

"Oh? Then what *was* your motive? Because to me, this sounds like you want my nation and me to work day and night for you as your slaves."

"No, not at all!"

"That was not our intention whatsoever! It was nothing like that—"

The councillors argued mightily. If these nobles were meant to represent

entire nations, it just made my head hurt. Even with a heart as tolerant as mine, having to negotiate with people like this was testing me. If Yuuki had made these sly old dogs do his bidding, then he must be the slyest fox of all. I wish I could follow his example, but I don't think I could.

*Suggestion. Would you like me to automatically handle this?*

Yes

No

It sounded like Raphael was saying something, but I'm sure I imagined it. Yes, it's a trusted, talented assistant, but it's still just a skill. It shouldn't be able to so freely speak its mind like that. I guess I've been relying on it so much, I'm starting to hear my own internal desires spoken back to me. If something like that were possible, I'd probably have Raphael give all my speeches for me, and it'd be—like—why did I suffer for so long, then?

I shook my head, attempting to shake the delusions from my mind, then stared back at the councillors.

...Crap. Now that my mind was cleared out, I just realized I had no idea how to resolve this situation. Haste makes waste—and all that. I just made things super-complicated for myself, and fixing it all up was going to be an uphill battle. The representatives were frantic for a solution, and honestly, so was I.

*Report. It is not a problem. As you intended, Master, I have confirmed the effect of the spiritual interference affecting the room.*

Um, what?

I wasn't intending anything there. I wasn't thinking at all. I was pissed off, so I reacted accordingly. And now—

*Report. With this quantity of samples, I have discovered the laws governing the spiritual interference. As with the subject Gaiye, the majority of councillors in this chamber are under the effect of spiritual interference from someone. Remove the interference?*

Yes

No

Well, I mean, sure...

I thought Yes in my mind without hesitation. The moment I did, the previously silent councillors began to speak up again.

"Well, of course Lord Rimuru is angry! How could we make up for this disgrace —?"

"Wait! These conditions weren't even brought up in our previous special session!"

"Who tried to slip these past us?!"

Things started to change pretty quick. Raphael strikes again. No matter the issue, I can always rely on it.

"Heh-heh... Looks like the councillors regained their senses," I defiantly muttered, as if this was my plan all along. I just wanted to look cool, really, but it sure elicited a response from Shuna.

"They certainly did! I *thought* they were acting a bit strange, but someone had taken over their spirits?"

Well, Raphael?

*Understood. It is a type of Spiritual Interference skill. It does not exert any influence on magicules, so confirming its presence took some time, but it is statistically impossible for so many people to possess such similar wavelengths. It was believed that canceling it would take time, but your anger wavelengths created an open seam.*

Right. Exactly like I pictured it—let's go with that.

"I don't think it was that strong," I ventured, without any evidence. "The spiritual interference gave the councillors a sort of tunnel vision, maybe?"

Shuna and the rest of my crew gave me looks of impressed respect.

"I see. So you placed pressure on them to shake them out of it?"

"That's right, Benimaru. I considered it all clearly before doing it."

Better phrase it that way, I don't want them to start imitating my temper tantrum just now. Plus, this gave me the perfect excuse for Hinata. We're all

good...

...but I still had my doubts. Who carried out that spiritual interference, anyway? Probably not Yuuki, I don't think; I doubted he'd take an approach that left so much evidence like this. If he did, he'd need some motivation to—but no point pondering over that. Now wasn't the time to pursue the culprit.

Right now, I needed to solve the problems staring me in the face. The newly awoken councillors were bearing down on a subset of the Council, the group who created that list of demands. There were more than I thought, but they still looked like all was well. They must've had some other scheme in mind.

Suddenly, I felt something odd. A few of them were looking toward a door deeper inside the chamber. Turning my ears toward it, I could hear several sets of footsteps. Did someone call the royal guard?

*Report. No such movements were detected, so it is believed this was planned in advance.*

Mm-hmm.

Maybe they set this up to have me cause a scene so they could arrest me? Against a demon lord, that took a lot of guts. Maybe it really *was* that sloppy of a plan—I could picture it—but if so, the people of Englesia and its surrounding nations must have been pretty oblivious to danger. They were so far away from the threat of demon lords that they must've gotten soft. The same was true of their councillors; there must have been a lot of optimists around there.

Or maybe these were the fools “scheming something” Hinata had warned about?

The moment that occurred to me, the door opened, revealing a dozen or so soldiers led by a larger man.

\*

“Well, *someone’s* sure in a lively mood! So you’re the fool calling himself a demon lord? You certain you can afford to act so high and mighty if you’ve only got three people with ya?”

The large man immediately began shouting at me the moment he came inside. He gave a vulgar smile as he made no attempt to hide his disdain for me.

This wasn't just rude; he was trying to start a fight, and there was no way to excuse it. My friends and I gave one another dumbfounded looks.

Hang on. This was part of their plan. They had some kind of deep design behind this—

*Understood. It is believed that this man has nothing of the sort.*

*...Oh, really? So he's just a huge idiot?*

"Um... My name is Rimuru, and yes, I call myself a demon lord. Are you confusing me with someone else?"

*Juuuust* in case, I thought I should ask. *Whoops, wrong guy* wouldn't cut it when the dust settled, so I tried to figure out the man's true motives.

Shuna's smile had disappeared, and Benimaru was so angry that he was now frozen in place. Soei was about ready to whip out the sword he had hidden on him, and weapons in the chamber were gonna be *real* hard to explain later. I was just as livid as them—in fact, I was so far gone, I almost wanted to laugh. That was how I remained coolheaded enough to ask the question.

But the results were pretty lacking.

"Yep. You're the one. He said that idiot's name was Rimuru!"

No mistake, then. Which meant I was safe doing him in, but...

"...Look. Can you quit it with that? I dunno what you want, but do you think you'll get away with that kind of lawlessness in front of all these witnesses?"

This wasn't something I could really say after bashing up that desk, but that was then. Let's use the law as a weapon to chase this freak away, because otherwise, I really *might* kill him—and if I didn't, I feared Benimaru or someone else would lose it.

But the large man kept at it.

"Moron! This is my big chance! Once I knock you around and put *this* on you, all of you monsters will be under our command!"

Uh, what? Knock me around? Under his command? What's he talking about? Maybe I really *was* a moron, because I didn't understand him at all...

*Understood. This fool is saying that he will defeat you and make you follow his commands.*

Yeah, I know! If you keep explaining things with a straight face like that, I really *will* look like an idiot.

And what's that in the man's hand? It was none other than an Orb of Domination, the very artifact I saw in use back when Milim pretended to be hypnotized. It looked real, but would that work on me?

*Understood. It is impossible to rule over my lord with the Orb of Domination.*

That's a relief.

*I don't know where this lumbering man found it, I thought, but I'd better break it before it puts anyone in danger.*

I stood up from my seat. It must've woken the chairman from his stupor, because he started shouting in a panic.

"W-wait, Lord Rimuru! This is some kind of mistake. No one in the Council is sponsoring this! Please, confirm it with Lady Hinata if you wish! She's an impartial party!"

He was respectful toward me, and I didn't think he was lying. Hinata didn't say anything about this; in fact, she warned me to stay on guard. I didn't think it'd be *this* in-your-face stupid, but for now, I couldn't do much except sit back and see how things went.

The chairman wasn't my enemy. Neither was Hinata. And I had a lot of allies among the councillors as well.

"I know nothing about this! What is going on here?"

"Who sent you here?"

"Those soldiers' armor bears the emblem of the Englesia royal family. Is Englesia instigating this?"

I could hear them shouting above the confused representative. Clearly, they couldn't have been involved. This wasn't something the Council hatched—it was the work of a smaller group gone clearly out of control.

Amid the chaos, one person made a coolheaded decision. That was Hinata. When the chairman stated her name, she stood up and stepped between the large man and me.

“Sir Reiner, what is the meaning of this?”

Reiner, was it? If Hinata knew him, was he famous around here?

“Do *not* come in here without permission! We are in the middle of a Council session. Soldiers like you are *not* allowed!”

Emboldened by Hinata’s actions, the chairman began yelling at the group as well. But instead of Reiner, one of the councillors answered him—Count Gaban of Englesia, I think his name was.

“Ha-ha-ha! Worry not, Chairman Leicester. I called them in here to discipline that lawbreaker over there.”

Gaban was all smiles from his seat in the second tier, close to the chairman.

“Sir Gaban, have you gone mad?!”

The chairman’s face went red as he shouted. I could see why. If a fellow councillor was involved, that kind of prevented the chairman from claiming the Council wasn’t in on this. And as long as we had an impartial observer in Hinata, this ridiculous farce could very well benefit me. I hated all this verbal abuse but decided to weather it for a bit.

“Sir Gaban! I was not informed of this!!”

This was Representative Johann Rostia, a prince, screaming now. He was among the more decent councillors, not placed under spiritual interference. I remember the disgusted look on his face when things first went awry. Looks like he was siding with me here—I presumed he was on the pro-admission side.

“Everyone, please, calm down. I know that we all fear the demon lord Rimuru. Am I wrong? And Sir Reiner here is the strongest man in all of Englesia. He is here to defeat Rimuru, rule over him, and make this member of the Octagram into his personal pawn. And with him...comes Veldora!!”

Even with the other councillors telling him off, Gaban remained unaffected, using his seat to formally declare hostilities against me. Several councillors

shouted their agreement.

If it was getting to this point, I no longer had any reason to hold back...but the situation was progressing so fast, I was getting left in the dust.

"I-impossible!"

"Unforgivable! How dare you disrespect the Council!"

"Indeed! Are you ignoring the will of the Council and prioritizing your own motives instead?"

Even more councillors stood up and began airing their grievances.

This was starting to look ominous. Some of the representatives didn't look well, hanging their heads. Given Gaban's dauntless behavior, he probably had another trick up his sleeve. And I was right.

"Order, please, gentlemen. What my knight Reiner says is true. And now the demon lord's been kind enough to come visit us. How could we afford *not* to use this opportunity?!"

With these words, a delicate-looking man strode into the chamber. This blond-haired figure wasn't a councillor but certainly acted like their boss. I thought I detected a murmur of surprise among the Council; I could guess he was pretty high up. But the next moment:

"Prince Elrick, what is going on here? I thought I advised you to refrain from any foolish behavior..." Hinata confirmed it for me.

Apparently, this was the honest-to-goodness prince of this nation—and not even a council could be rude around a prince. No wonder there was so much consternation in the chamber.

So was this Prince Elrick the mastermind behind all this? He had incited at least a few councillors, by the looks of it.

"Hinata, I am disappointed in you. You've grown fearful of the demon lord and abandoned your post as guardian of humankind."

"...What?" came the cold, low-pitched reply.

Wow. He really pissed her off. Now I wasn't sure I needed to act at all.

"Enough back talk, Hinata. All right? You may be the leader of the paladin forces or what have you, but there's no possible way you could best me, the head general of the Englesia royal knight corps. You can't even beat that wispy weakling of a demon lord—instead you lick each other's wounds. What a laugh! I bet you wet your pants running from him, didn't you?"

That vulgar smile was still on Reiner's face as he picked a fight with Hinata. Oh, man. Even *I* could feel the blood draining from my face.

"You..."

"Hee-hee-hee! Can't even reply, can you? I'm assuming I've hit the nail on the head? Well, Ms. Crusader captain... That's a ceremonial title I presume you obtained by exercising your womanly wiles on that dirty old cardinal? Yes, I'm sure it was a sorry fight indeed between you and that demon lord. And a demon lord with no interest in killing his adversary? Don't make me laugh!"

*Oh, now I'm taking the heat again. I really wish he'd stop.*

"But I'll hand it to you, Hinata. You *are* attractive. If you'll be my lady, I promise I'll take good care of you as a concubine. You know?"

*Ohhh, man. Now he's dead.*

Hinata's expression didn't change. She was the cool, reserved beauty she always was. But the colder she looked on the outside, the more her insides raged like bubbling magma. Her patience amazes me, it really does. I would've lost it hours ago.

"Now, now, General Reiner. Isn't that going a little *too* low? But I'm interested in the demon lord as well. I wouldn't want you to have him all to yourself, you know. What do you think?"

I felt an indescribable chill run down my spine. Was this Gaban guy coming *on* to me?! The thought, and this man, sickened me—and after today's events, it'd take a *lot* to move me at all. Good thing he was far away from me, because otherwise, I might've clocked him just now.

"...Prince Elrick, as the prince of Englesia, are you willing to allow this man, Sir Reiner, to say such things?" Hinata hid the anger in her cold voice as she asked the question.

Elrick just smiled. “Hee-hee-hee! Hinata, if you had cooperated with me, I would have given you much more honorable treatment. If you wish to blame anyone, blame yourself for angering Reiner. And yes—I forgot to mention this, but Reiner is more powerful than an A-ranked adventurer. And he’s not alone...”

With that, Elrick snapped his fingers. The door immediately opened once more, revealing a man in black, another in a green robe, and a group of people in overcoats with a familiar emblem on them. Come to think of it, I knew the first guy, too. It was Gaiye, the dude who got his head cut off by Delta the dryad. And those overcoat guys were definitely Green Fury, the team our avatars waged a life-and-death battle against.

So was the green-robe guy part of the Sons of the Veldt? He was hooded and wearing a scarf over his face, making for a mysterious, unknown figure—but he acted all upper-class, so I figured he maybe ran the Veldt or something.

“Allow me to make some introductions. This is Sir Gaiye, an A-ranked adventurer and now Reiner’s aide-de-camp. And this...”

Elrick placed a hand on green-robe guy’s shoulder. The theatrics made it clear just how self-absorbed he was.

“...is the leader of the world-famous mercenary group, the Sons of the Veldt. I assembled as powerful of a team as I could, as I thought defeating a demon lord with anyone less worthy would be poor manners. Yes, you see, there are dozens of people like you running around here. Just because you have a little strength to your name, you know, doesn’t give you the right to act like a king.”

He certainly had confidence. And if he wanted a fight, I was happy to give it to him—

*Report. Doing so would have a 100 percent chance of damaging your reputation.*

...Right? Even to me, a demon lord starting a fight in front of such an influential audience seemed like a poor idea. And my policy was to fight a challenger only after they conquered my labyrinth. If I started bending that rule for no good reason, I’d have to duke it out with every idiot I passed by on the street.

And what's more...someone in the chamber was angrier than me. People are strange that way. If someone else gets angry first, that actually has a calming effect on you.

"Let me ask you, Prince Elrick. What you are doing is antagonizing not only me, but the entire Western Holy Church," said Hinata. "Are you prepared to accept the consequences?"

"No need to worry. I will not cause any trouble for the Western Holy Church, nor for the Holy Empire of Lubelius. Just sit there and watch, and I will guarantee your safety."

Seeing Hinata fight to keep her cool, I forgot all about how angry I was.

But from the chairman on down, there were councillors attempting to defy Elrick's group. We weren't alone in the lion's den here; we hadn't been rejected by the Council. These were just some idiots gone out of control. Maybe it wasn't worth getting worked up about.

"That is not the issue. I have been asked by the Council to attend this session as an impartial observer. My role is to ensure its proceedings remain fair, and I am thus in no position to let your recklessness go unanswered. If this was the Council's will, that would be a different story, but please don't expect I will allow a single person to act out of line like this!"

Given their relative positions, Hinata was trying to reason with Elrick first. I doubted it'd work much. The words just weren't reaching him.

"Lady Hinata is right! This nonsense will not be tolerated in the chamber!"

"Prince Elrick, I heard nothing about this! And Sir Gaban, do you expect no repercussions from this?!"

"Lord Rimuru himself came out here for us. This treatment is going to spark an international incident!"

"This is unforgivable! Is this how the Kingdom of Englesia oppresses its people?!"

Rage, anger, ranting—more and more councillors were putting up a fight. Now I felt like I was in a theater, watching the events unfold from my seat. My

starring role might've been taken from me, but I didn't care.

"Without fairness, can you call it a Council at all?!"

Now the chairman was shouting. I cheered him on in my mind. *Keep it up!*

"Shut your mouths, old men! You can simper all you want once I've taken control of the demon lord!"

Reiner, meanwhile, was already up on his imaginary victory podium. He had already riled Hinata past the point of no return, so I doubted I needed to do anything. I figured we'd just ignore him.

"Prince Elrick, our agreement only covered our bodyguard services for you alone. Any hazardous behavior you engage in would void our agreement..."

Whoa. So the Sons of the Veldt leader wasn't in on this? And here I had bunched them all together in my mind. Good thing I learned the facts in time.

"Y-yes! The demon lord Rimuru is the most dangerous figure I can personally think of! That labyrinth he created is crawling with all kinds of insane creatures! You'd have to be a madman to come up with it!"

.....

Should I take that as a compliment?

Maybe all that fighting was worth it after all. The elementalist leading Green Fury was almost *too* scared of me now.

"Hmph. Nonsense. You cowards do nothing but get in my way."

Ah, but Gaiye's in the same boat with Reiner, eh? They seemed pretty alike—overconfident and turning a deaf ear to all outside opinion. He was flashing hateful looks at me now, although I really didn't know where the grudge came from.

Either way, the chamber was one step away from erupting into full-fledged combat.

\*

Elrick, taking charge in the midst of this stalemate, raised a hand.

"Order!! All of you, listen. Prince Elrick is speaking!!" shouted Gaban, who had

come down from the mezzanine to stand next to Elrick.

The prince nodded his approval, took a long, careful look around, and suddenly spoke. “Councillors! Now is the time to express your will to me! Will you join us, the heroes who will slay the demon lord? Or will you side with that nefarious lord and betray humankind? I, Prince Elrick von Englesia, know in my heart that the representatives before me will make the correct choice!!” He gloated like a stage actor.

“What,” I reflexively replied, “we’re gonna vote on it now?”

The prince nodded back at me, like this was common sense. After that wacky entrance he made, he still wanted to try upholding his honor? Besides, if we held a vote right now, there’s no way he’d win a majority of—

“Heh-heh! Why not? We must decide this democratically, by vote. Of course, I’m sure we hardly need to. The Council, you see, is firmly on my side.”

That piqued my interest. He was supremely confident, as if he already knew the results...which, if you thought about it, was ridiculous. Not even a prince could get away with this outrageous behavior in an international council like this.

So why was he doing it?

*Understood. He has likely bribed many of the councillors.*

Ah, I knew it. But I didn’t think he’d buy off representatives from foreign nations as well. It’d be an international scandal if it got out, so I discounted any possibility of that. Served me right for making the wrong assumption.

“Now, let us decide—fairly and honestly! We are about to defeat and take rule over the demon lord. All in agreement, stand up!!”

As the prince’s voice rang up to the rafters, several councillors rose to their feet with vile smirks. The collusion was obvious.

*Well, I suppose it’s come to this. Even if today’s turned out disappointing, I’ve got all the time in the world. If we’ve been rejected, then it’s our duty to accept those results.*

*Report. There are no problems. This is within expectations.*

Um...it is?

I was struck by the vision of Raphael letting a dark grin materialize on its visage. Come to think of it, Soei had done a lot of investigating, hadn't he? People's opinions of our nation; the financial states of all the countries; how the royalty and nobility approached them... He had even pored through the legislative proceedings of each member nation.

Raphael had examined all of it in intricate detail, and inside my Stomach, it had quickly created a set of documents for me. I took them out. It was a set of ledgers.

...Ooh! Secret ledgers! Were these *really* within your expectations, Raphael?

I couldn't believe this guy had actually found dirt on all the paid-off councillors. If I revealed these detailed lists of bribes given and received, I could take down everyone involved in one fell swoop. And now that I had incontrovertible evidence, this really *was* nothing more than a farce.

That's Raphael for you. No stone left unturned. It was honestly scary.

*Report. My lord will be victorious without needing to reveal that evidence.*

Hmm?

Before I could figure out what it meant, the vote was over. Several councillors stood up and started clapping. Seeing this, Elrick's voice boomed out again.

"We have our results. And the Council's majority agrees. The resolution has passed!"

Gaban and Reiner had similarly sinister smiles as Elrick gloated to the audience. They were ready to capture us at any moment...but not so fast.

Fewer than a third of the Council's members were actually on their feet. The majority were still sitting down. That fool Elrick was so sure of his plan that he declared victory without even looking at the seats.

Now the councillors clapping for Elrick realized they were the minority. They nervously looked around, faces growing pale. The results were clear. The majority was against slaying the demon lord—in other words, me.

Interestingly, I had more ledgers on me than the number of people standing

up. They made up more than half the Council, in fact, but I guess a lot of them had a sudden change of heart.

*Understood. It is believed that, after removing the spiritual interference earlier, they have regained their consciences.*

I see, I see. They regained their wits and realized how foolishly they were acting. Excellent. It meant the people seated right now had weighed the issue fairly and decided to side with me. The bribes were apparently good enough for some of them, but—

*Understood. It is believed that the spiritual interference stimulates the desires of its targets. It appears to exact a powerful coercive force on them.*

Huh. I kinda sympathize with them, then.

Between that and Masayuki's Chosen One, mind-altering skills are a menace indeed. Masayuki had no control over it, but it looked like *this* skill user could target individual people. I didn't know who it was, but it was definitely someone to watch out for.

That blond dude, maybe...?

Well, at least the freed councillors saw the light in time. They all seemed friendly enough to me, so maybe I could keep quiet about the bribes. Really, though, if the fate of nations can ride on the choices of just a few councillors, I think there might be some issues with the whole Council system.

If organizations like the League of Nations or the United Nations can't keep themselves pure like that, it's only a matter of time before they go rotten. Corrupt representatives ruin the reputation of the nation they represent. If you're going to leave nations' destinies to individual personalities and dignities, then I wish they picked the councillors here a *lot* more carefully.

But then, that's nothing for me to worry about. My concern right now was with the people who stood up. Anyone who kept their head down and engaged in injustice like this needed to pay for their crimes. Before that, I thought, we should open the eyes of the fools who still hadn't caught up with events.

"Hey. Take a breath and look closer at the room."

I kept myself composed as I spoke to Elrick.

“Hah! What are you—?”

He hadn’t noticed the vote yet. It’s amazing how much you could embarrass yourself when you were *this* stupid.

“What are you, a clown?”

“*What?!*”

“No, pardon me, Prince Elrick. It was just so comical, you see.” Even Hinata, coldly viewing this farce, chose this moment to join with me. She may have seemed frigid, but right now, she was bursting to fight.

I didn’t want to lose out to her, but Hinata’s lips were simply moving too fast.

“The majority of the chamber voted against your opinion. As the observer, I hereby declare that this vote was carried out in a fair, legal fashion. Of course, I’m sure the Council will hold an inquiry later to determine whether you had any right to call for a vote in the first place.”

“...Hah! I refuse to stand for this nonsense! Have you all forsaken me?!”

*Pfft!* I love it. His anticipated results failing to happen, Elrick was now carrying on like a child. Considering how much of a narcissist he was, seeing him break down like this was the height of comedy. Hinata was all smiles, and so was I. I could just feel all the frustration from before dissolve away.

“...Y-yes. Yes, Prince Elrick is right! Do you understand what this means, everyone? If you pull an act like this, we will rescind our nation’s support to—”

“Wait. What does *that* mean, Sir Gaban? Would you mind explaining it to us?”

The exhausted-looking chairman cut Gaban off right as he was shouting, spittle sticking to the edges of his lips. Something about that statement must’ve caught his attention. “Our nation’s support,” perhaps?

*Understood. It is excerpted in the previous documents.*

I looked back at them. Ah yes. Now I see the transactions in detail.

“Anti-flooding construction in the Kingdom of Raibach. Food support for the drought in Carnada. They’ve made many other promises of support to an

assortment of nations. And *this* is how they were meant to pay you back, huh? But if you're going to cut off that support after they stopped taking your orders, it's all but admitting to the malignant bribery you've been engaging in."

"Wha...?!"

"Why do you know about our internal affairs?!"

Elrick was silenced. Gaban was unable to hide his shock. I remained calm and lorded over them with a light smile. That was all I needed to bluff my opponents. I didn't really know what was going on, either, but if that's what Raphael said, I was sure there was no doubting it.

Now Elrick's allies were beside themselves with panic. The chairman, sensing my gist, was staring at them like a man possessed. The Council had just taken another turn—now things were tilting our way for good.

I saw one of the councillors try to sit down when no one was looking. None of *that*, thanks. Soei's Sticky Steel Thread had already kept them standing in place.

"Ah, I knew it," said the Sons of the Veldt leader in an indistinct, genderless voice. "We're not in the business of guarding someone looking to prod the hornet's nest."

I guess their business transaction with Elrick was over. Victory was ours. By now, our objectives were as good as accomplished...but there were still some fools here who refused to accept defeat.

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"Enough of this utter garbage! Prince Elrick, now is no time to give up. Once I defeat the demon lord, our problems are solved!"

"Ah—ah, Reiner!!"

"Y-yes, General Reiner. We still have you, the greatest weapon in our arsenal. What a sight for sore eyes!"

They didn't know when to quit, I guess. Now they were casting the entire Council aside to fulfill their aims. I doubted it would work, but then, I didn't know much about an idiot's thought processes.

"Are you trying to defeat me?"

"Of course, you fool! Or have you gotten cold feet now? Crawl up here and lick my boots, and I'll think about keeping this painless for you!"

Reiner's vulgar smile was back. He was flashing the Orb of Domination around, so I suppose he was still intent on stuffing that into me somehow. Gaiye, behind him, gave out some sort of order to his soldiers. They promptly moved to block the door. I suppose they wanted to keep everyone in here, to keep word of their blunders from getting out. The Sons of the Veldt had already taken a step back, but there were still a few upper-level adventurers on Elrick's side, weapons out and pointed at us.

"W-weapons in the chamber! Of all the foolish things...!!"

The chairman was screaming his head off, but the soldiers were keeping anyone from leaving the mezzanine. I stopped hearing him after a while, so I guess he got captured along with the other councillors.

*If it's come to this...*

...I thought, but Hinata moved first.

"As observer, I refuse to accept this reckless behavior. Also..."

Hinata smiled at Reiner, reminding him of all the insults he lobbed at her. She wasn't armed, since weapons weren't allowed in the chamber, but if she was, I'm sure she would've had her hand on the hilt of her sword by now. They're so dead.

"...Rimuru, I'll take care of this."

"Heh-heh-heh... Oh, this is rich. I am the strongest man in Englesia, and I say it's time to expose you. Some Saint *you* are! You might've gotten carried away, being touted as the guardian of humankind and all, but that ends today. It's time to give you a dose of reality!"

Never once reflecting on her actual skills, Reiner gave Hinata all the bombast he could muster.

And you know what? He *wasn't* weak. An over-A in rank, even. He could probably wage a pretty even battle with a magic-born like Gel mud. But he wouldn't know, would he? In a land as peaceful as Englesia, he was an

outstanding talent and font of strength, but he hadn't put in hours on the battlefield fighting monsters. That's why he was so oblivious to the threat they posed. Gaiye was the same.

"Heh... Would you allow me to engage the demon lord, then?"

"Of course! But don't kill him, Gaiye. Make sure you control the force of that holy sword I gave you."

"No need to remind me. With this piece of equipment, I'll never face failure again!"

Gaiye wanted to go against me. Whatever fancy weapon he got put him in high spirits, but it wasn't anything *that* extraordinary—kind of toeing the line between Rare and Unique. Plus, if he's relying on equipment and skills instead of actual talent, it's unlikely he had much of the latter to work with. Gaiye's another over-A fighter, but to me right now, he wasn't even a threat.

Faced with a foe like this, the honest thought in my mind was *Man, I really don't wanna have to deal with this.* But apparently, I wouldn't need to.

"All this time, I've put up with your humiliation...but you have been far too rude to Sir Rimuru, the man I respect and admire." Shuna stepped in front of me, her attitude suggesting she'd take no prisoners. Quietly, she walked up to Gaiye. Wow. She might be *way* angrier than me.

Looking around, I spotted Benimaru, frozen in place and not moving an inch. He was caught flat-footed, and when our eyes met, he gave me an awkward look. *Yeah, I get it.* We were of the same mind, and one glance was all it took to confirm that.

"Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How long will you continue to put me down?! Aren't you ashamed at all, Demon Lord Rimuru, hiding in the shadow of this poor little girl?"

Shuna was right in front of Gaiye as he continued to scoff at me. What did he expect from me? If Shuna was ready to kick ass, I didn't want to steal her thunder. And if Benimaru was reluctantly giving her the stage, I had to follow suit.

"Silence. There is no need for Sir Rimuru or my brother to bother themselves

with you. I am more than enough.”

“Hmph! If you say so. But you better not regret this, all right? Man or woman, I go easy on no one!”

With that, he took out his sword. It *was* a holy one—pretty cool-looking, I thought. But Shuna’s smile only widened. Her Parser skill must’ve already stripped Gaiye’s abilities bare for her, and if it did, I had nothing to worry about.

If something went awry, Soei was already poised to step in, so I decided to cheer her on instead.

And so, as the leaders of the Council and I looked on, the battle between our two groups began.

I might’ve tried to make that sound epoch-making, but the fight was over in an instant.



First off, Hinata against Reiner. This was like an elephant against an ant.

There was Hinata, dressed to the nines in the formal wear she picked for the Council. It didn't look too suited for physical work, but she still lunged at Reiner, not a single wasted motion in her approach.

"...Huh?"

Reiner, meanwhile, couldn't keep up with her at all. I couldn't blame him. She wasn't going at 100 percent force right now, but she might very well be stronger than a demon lord or two.

Reaching for his chest, she grabbed Reiner by the hand and shoulder and threw him straight off his feet.

As for Gaiye, he lived up to his word, offering no quarter as he slashed at Shuna. But that didn't alarm her, so she removed her folding fan and made a single swipe. That was all it took for Gaiye's blade to snap off.

"...Haahh?!"

His pained wail sounded less than heroic, but Shuna wasn't done yet.

"What garbage. I'm not going to make this kill easy for you. You said something about the A rank, if I recall, but would you mind fighting seriously for me, please? Don't tell me you're giving up just because your sword's broken?" She pointed the fan at Gaiye, egging him on.

"Damn... Damn you...!! A monster like you, acting like my lord and master...!!"

*Indignant* didn't begin to describe Gaiye's state just then, but Shuna was clearly toying with him. The talent difference was clear, and if he thought he could win, I had no idea what was going through his mind.

Still...

"Shuna's a damn good martial artist, isn't she...?"

"Yes. She's been learning jujitsu from Hakuro."

Shrine maidens are certainly versatile. Of course, Hakuro's jujitsu was the old style, suited for real-life combat. A lot of its moves were designed to kill, putting the art well beyond the bounds of self-defense. If *that's* the kind of thing they

taught ogre princesses, there was no denying that race's battle chops.

Shuna's follow-up attack continued. Gaiye had taken out a backup sword, but she kept toying with him, knocking him down with a foot sweep. His heavy armor backfired on him as he frantically tried and failed to get up.

Now she loomed over him, her fetching lips reciting a spell.

"I dedicate my prayers to my god. I seek the power of the mighty spirits. Now, heed my request..."

The prayer coursed through space and time to reach me. It didn't have to since I was right there—but that didn't matter.

"Huh? Whaa?!"

A multilayered magic circle surrounded the flabbergasted Gaiye.

"Wait! This—this magic...!!"

Oh, he knew it? He really *did* break the A-rank barrier, then. But understanding it and being capable of defying it were two different things. The spell was near completion, and there was no escaping it. Could he withstand or block it? I doubted it. After all, this spell...

"Ah—ahhhhhh...?! Stop—stop it...!!"

"...Consume all! Disintegration!!"

...is the most powerful of all holy magic.

A torrent of light swallowed Gaiye whole, consuming everything inside...or so it appeared. Just as I was thinking *Oh, great, she killed him*, I realized it wasn't the case after all.

"Ah—ah, ngh, hnnnhhh..."

The swirl of light disappeared, revealing a half-naked Gaiye. His legs must've failed him, because he was sitting down on the floor and weeping like a schoolyard kid.

Well hey, at least he's alive!

"Oh dear. My skills are still so *immature*; I suppose my magic didn't work. I knew I shouldn't have tried a spell I'm still practicing..."

She smiled the whole way through. I had to resist shouting “Yeah, right!” at her. Using Disintegration to strip only the armor off someone, after all, is an impossible feat unless you had perfect control over the spell.

...Really, though, it wasn’t *that* long ago since I had Shuna and Adalmann work together to learn holy magic. And she’d already learned the hardest spell? What a magic phenom she was. Her Parser skill must have been offering her tons of support.

Regardless, though, it meant she beat Gaiye without breaking a sweat.

That left Hinata, but the results were already clear as day.

“G-General Reiner! Stop playing around!”

“Silence that impudent woman at once. You must defeat the demon lord! We have no time for games!”

Gaban and Elrick, failing to grasp the situation, were shouting at Reiner in unison. Reiner couldn’t move. Hinata’s stare was just too withering for him. Only after that throw did he finally realize just how much stronger she was.

“Not coming back for me? Then how about I head over to you?”

The moment Hinata moved to take a step forward:

“Ah—ahhhh...?!”

With one of the most pathetic screams ever uttered in the world, Reiner buried his head in his hands and fell to his knees. A steaming liquid was leaking out from his crotch. Holy crap. Who was wetting their pants now, huh? It was so exasperating that I didn’t know what to say.

“Wha...? General Reiner?!”

“What—what has happened? As strong as you are, Hinata the Saint should pose no challenge at all!”

Seeing someone refuse to accept reality like this is scary, isn’t it? It made it so easy to issue the cruellest of orders to people. Reiner just kneeled there, tears and spittle intermingling all over his face. So much for that. It was a mismatch from the start, but I assumed this was the end of it.

With that settled, I looked around at the people standing by their ground-floor seats.

The most prominent one was Elrick, in the front row and acting strangely. The Sons of the Veldt were huddled next to him, but I doubted they wanted a fight. They were keeping a natural distance, appealing to me with their body language that they wanted nothing to do with this.

"All right, Elrick—sorry, Prince Elrick? You picked a fight with me, so what're you gonna do now? Keep going?"

"Ah, um, no..."

"And you guys who stood up. I'm assuming your home nations fully sanction your behavior today, right? So can I presume them guilty of the same crimes?"

"N-no, that, uh..."

"S-Sir Rimuru, please, one moment... I mean, *L-Lord* Rimuru..."

"Please allow me to speak for a moment!"

I was greeting them with a smile; they were keeping their pallid faces down. A few of them were trying their hardest to plead their case, but I ignored them. Soei had forced them to remain on their feet, so all these councillors who incurred my hostility could do right now was plead for mercy. Whether I engaged with them or not, they were powerless. This way, I knew I had the upper hand.

From the side, it may've looked like a pretty little girl nonchalantly lording it over a bunch of grown-ups. A rare sight if you ever saw one. Comical, probably.

No way a faceless crowd like this could ever oppress a demon lord. Their lack of common sense—or a mind too weak to notice reality—just lost them the day. And what a sloppy strategy! I can't believe they really thought they'd beat me and turn me into some kind of puppet demon lord. I suppose Hinata was right; they wanted to rile me into making the first move, but...

"So how to settle this...?"

Well, hang on. Over half the councillors were subjected to spiritual interference, their desires stimulated. Without me intervening, they would've

sided with Elrick, and his measure would've passed, putting me in a bad spot. No matter the internal circumstances, it was nigh impossible to reverse a completed vote. Things only worked out like this thanks to Raphael.

But clearly, someone's out to get one over on me here—

*Report. Murderous will detected. The target is the subject Elrick.*

Oh crap!

My Magic Sense skill was picking it up, too. Over a mile away, someone was eyeing this chamber with malicious intent. But what would they do from this far...? I promptly invoked Mind Accelerate and gauged the situation.

Via Magic Sense, I saw a girl with red hair and kind of a wild look. In her hand was something small, black, and metallic—a handgun.

Huh? A handgun from *that* range?! And I didn't know how far one could shoot, but—

*Understood. It is the Walther P99, a compact, lightweight, but highly capable pistol with an effective range of fifty-five yards.*

...I didn't need to know all that, thanks.

Maybe it's a really good gun, but if it can't clear a football field, it's pointless. Our chamber is almost in the center of Englesia, built inside a special security zone. Anti-magic defenses are built into its walls, sturdy enough that your run-of-the-mill attack couldn't even make a dent. Besides, any bullet fired would be subject to the physical laws of gravity and air resistance. Maybe it was enhanced with magic or skills, but if so, there was no reason not to use a full-on sniper rifle.

Of course, you needed to see a target to shoot it...and there shouldn't have been any way for the girl to see Elrick from her spot. Even if she had access to Magic Sense to pinpoint his location, there was a wall in our direct path, making a sniper strike impossible. After the recent assassination of Duke Meusé, security had been beefed up around the chamber. I was on my guard as well, and I had already confirmed that this building was a poor choice for an assassination strike from far away.

So her behavior shouldn't have meant anything to us. *Shouldn't* have. Or was she aiming for a ricochet that'd changed the path of—

The moment I had the thought, the red-haired woman fired her handgun.

In the midst of dilated time, I could see the bullet fire out from the barrel, flying at blazing speed...only to be swallowed into a black hole that appeared out of nowhere.

...Huh?!

As I goggled, the bullet disappeared.

*Report. This is Spatial Connection, a type of Spatial Motion.*

Spatial Connection was just that—a skill that connected two recognized points in space together. If the distance involved was small and the portal tiny, it apparently didn't take that much effort to deploy.

But I didn't have the time to listen to that explanation. The red-haired woman had used Magic Sense to pinpoint our positions, then aimed carefully and launched her skill so her bullet would reappear within close range of Elrick. Thanks to that, she was about to assassinate someone across a full mile of walls, homes, and who knows what else.

A small black hole opened up in the air, about a foot and a half from the side of Elrick's head. Coming out of it was a sure-kill bullet running at a quarter mile a second. It was a point-blank shot, and there was nothing blocking it from drawing nearer and nearer to him.

Slowly but surely, I watched it unfold. But I couldn't do anything. My voice wouldn't reach him in time. Nor could I move quickly enough to try to stop it.

*...It is not a problem. Launch the ultimate skill Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony?*

Yes

No

*Oh, that'll work?* I thought as I invoked it. And then... Whoa. Neat. Ignoring all time and space, the bullet tumbled into my hand, all its energy gone.

"...?! Are you okay?"

A disturbed-looking Hinata was already talking to Elrick as she approached him. The Veldt leader appeared just as shocked as he stole a glance at me. I said nothing as I checked up on Elrick. He didn't seem to understand what was going on and was just staring into space. Only a couple of us *did* know, really. But whatever happened must've triggered the building's magic security network, because alarms began going off chamber-wide. The session would have to adjourn for a while.

\*

"Soei, capture the assassin."

"I have a Replication on its way."

As we waited for the councillors to calm down, I carried out the tasks demanded of me. Already, there was an investigation happening nearby.

"You could kill a person with this?"

"Yes, it's called a bullet. You need a special tool to fire it, but there's not one near us at the moment."

"So the assassin was targeting Prince Elrick? But what for?"

"To frame the demon lord Rimuru, of course."

"Indeed, indeed. If Prince Elrick was killed at this point in time, suspicions would naturally turn to Lord Rimuru. It'd certainly complicate our efforts to admit Tempest into the Council."

"Yes, that was probably the real motive. These fools were likely set up as disposable pawns the whole time."

The security chief, Sons of the Veldt leader, Chairman Leicester, and Hinata were discussing matters here. I was certainly glad to be cleared of doubt.

Elrick was safe now, although he'd need to face up to the commotion he caused in the chamber later.

"Am—am I being targeted even now?" he asked, his face haggard. He might've been a fool, but I didn't want him dead or anything.

"I think it's all right now, Elrick—sorry, Prince Elrick. When the assassin missed you, that put an end to the ambitions of whoever wanted you dead. At this

point, there's no reason for them to try again."

By now, it was no longer possible to frame me for murder. Elrick was no longer of use to them, you could say, and therefore he had no need to fear for his life.

"B-but I'm the prince of a superpower nation. People could exploit me in so many ways..."

Ummm, you think so?

Maybe he *was* vulnerable, as someone in line for the throne, before he pulled all that nonsense today. But he wasn't officially crown prince, and there were other people in the line of succession, so at *this* point...

If Elrick had actually succeeded today, he would have been a hero, I suppose—but Englesia wasn't easy enough on its royalty that an idiot prince doing dumb things would be allowed on the throne. Maybe the people would sympathize with his motives, but they'd never forgive him for screwing up. After today, Elrick's chances of being King Elrick someday were as good as gone.

"But hey, life's not all about becoming king, is it? You'll probably need to atone for today somehow, but after that, why don't you try reconsidering your future a little? I mean, I became a demon lord just by sort of drifting along, but I never really *wanted* to be one or anything. But there's no going back on it now, so I figure I may as well take advantage."

"Heh-heh! A demon lord offering *me* comfort? I thought you'd be scarier... More vengeful."

"I'm not trying to comfort you. But generally, I'm a pacifist."

Elrick's shoulders slumped down as he resigned himself to his fate. "I was a fool to be tricked like that, Gaban. It's time for you to take responsibility."

"P-Prince?!"

"You were the one who approached me. I fell for your cajoling, and I must atone for that...but you had best prepare to do the same, Count Gaban."

Elrick had now fully given himself up to the security team.

It was pretty obvious that Gaban was the main person behind all this,

rounding up Reiner and Elrick and convincing them to cause this wild scene. I'm sure someone's using Gaban, too—that mystery organization, perhaps. I can't write it off as a conspiracy theory. It's probably best to conduct a full investigation, but not even Soei's found any clues yet.

If we can capture the sniper, though, maybe that'll lead to something. Let's hold out hope for that—and meanwhile, there's someone else I need to consult about.

"So, Gaban, there's something I wanted to ask..." I turned my eyes to Gaban in custody.

"Wh-what? What does a demon lord want from me?"

Even now, his attitude still had problems.

"I want you to tell me what you were scheming when you enticed Prince Elrick to join you."

"Hmm? I'm not sure what you mean. I don't know anything."

"Wh-what?! Are you abandoning me?!"

"And where's your evidence? Yes, I was asked by the prince to invite you here, but I *certainly* had no idea he would try something like that."

"You will not talk your way out of this, Sir Gaban. Both the other councillors and I in this chamber will speak against your case." Johann was having none of it, and neither were the assorted representatives nodding along with him—including a few being forced to keep standing. *No problem finding witnesses, then.*

"Behh... But it's true! I didn't know. The prince designed all of this! All I did was follow his orders!"

"Nonsense! You're the very one who procured the orb and brought the plan to me!"

"I can't say I know what you're talking about. Again, you will need to find some proof—"

Gaban was sticking to his story. And as sly as I'm sure he was, he must've been convinced that no evidence was left. Would it be hard to pin anything on

him, then? It'd probably damage his reputation for a period of time, but at this rate, I could see him returning to the scene after a while. That's the nobility for you—you can't take your eyes off them for a moment, and they'll never go down too easily. A more direct approach—with weapons—would be quickest, but that was a last resort.

As I thought about this, the door suddenly opened.

"His Majesty the King Aegil is here!"

The attendant's shout was audible across the chamber, and those responding to it immediately stood at attention. I was about to join them before Shuna and Benimaru stopped me. Yeah, me kneeling or whatever would've presented an awkward picture. Apart from Hinata and me, however, everyone was focused entirely on the new royal visitor. Even the chairman was bowing his head. That's the kind of respect the king of a nation like Englesia deserved.

King Aegil glanced at the councillors Soei had restrained. He didn't linger on them long before turning to me, his bushy blond hair going well with his curly mustache.

"I see my son's caused you some trouble."

"You could say that. But I think we've cleared up our misunderstandings?" I had no intention of exaggerating things. If human society could accept us, better to let a little rudeness now and then slide.

"...Ah. Very good. Then as his father, not as a king, I give you my apology and my appreciation." He lightly bowed his head at me—the king himself.

I was willing to accept that. "Consider it forgiven. But I don't want to see a repeat."

"Yes, that I am certainly aware of. I hope to build a good relationship with you."

King Aegil looked straight at me, providing me with what I felt were his honest feelings. I figured I should trust him on that. If he reneged, I could consider my options at that time.

"It'll be good to work with you, then."

"And with you."

We shook hands. He was also kind enough to forgive the busted-up desk, so as far as I was concerned, our reconciliation was complete.

"All rise!"

Everyone raised their faces. They had all overheard our exchange, but I supposed this formality indicated that it wasn't meant to be on the record. A king wasn't supposed to bow to a foreign power *that* readily, and I supposed King Aegil saw it as a last resort.

"F-Father..."

"Enough. You need some remedial education, I see."

"...Yes, Father."

"Mm."

With a nod, King Aegil turned to Gaban. "Count Gaban?"

"Your Majesty!!"

"You were talking about evidence. Were you expecting a quick escape because you thought I wouldn't intervene?"

"N-no, Your Majesty, not at all..."

"I have called for magical inquisitors. I will let them decide your treatment."

"*Gehh?!*" Now Gaban seemed concerned. He clung to the king. "P-please, forgive me! I will tell you everything, so please, Your Majesty, have mercy!"

His desperation might've evoked sympathy among some people, but King Aegil's reaction was merciless. "Take him away."

"""Sir!""""

One glance at his attendants, and his royal guard sprang into action.

"Now, Sir Reiner, Sir Gaiye... You'll come with us as well."

The guard began to haul them off.

"Stop! Let me go!"

“Who do you think I am?!”

They tried to resist but were stopped in their tracks by a group of hooded men that appeared—those magical inquisitors, I supposed. Reiner and Gaiye tried to resist as well, but the men had them subdued in short order, treating those admittedly powerful men like little children. I could tell these weren’t your average prison guards, no.

*Englesia really is a superpower, huh? And they got some pretty tough hombres working for them.*

*Report. It is likely a show of force, to prove to my master that they have powerful fighters at their disposal.*

Ah. One of those “don’t mess with us” things? This must’ve been their way of demonstrating that Reiner wasn’t the best Englesia could produce, an attempt to preserve their dignity. It’s hard being a king. I guess he had to stay on his toes to keep a demon lord like me from taking advantage of him. As if Aegil *wouldn’t* have used my power to make Englesia the world’s dominant force if Elrick had actually succeeded...

...Well, if you wanted to keep a legion of sly, cunning nobility under your finger, I supposed you needed that type of malice in you.

“Excuse me, then. And please allow us to handle this affair.”

With that, the king’s entourage left. They confiscated the Orb of Domination, too, by the looks of it, but I didn’t mind. I had already disabled it while no one was looking—it *wouldn’t* do to see it used for evil purposes. It also *wouldn’t* do for me to carry on about it any longer, so I let it go without comment.

Following an afternoon break, we continued with the legislative session. The councillors seemed a lot less energetic than they were in the morning hours, somehow. That was lucky for me, because I didn’t need to cajole them into passing all the day’s important business.

The following three resolutions were enacted today:

- Tempest is recognized as a nation.
- Tempest will officially join the Council.

- The Council's military rights will be assigned to Tempest.

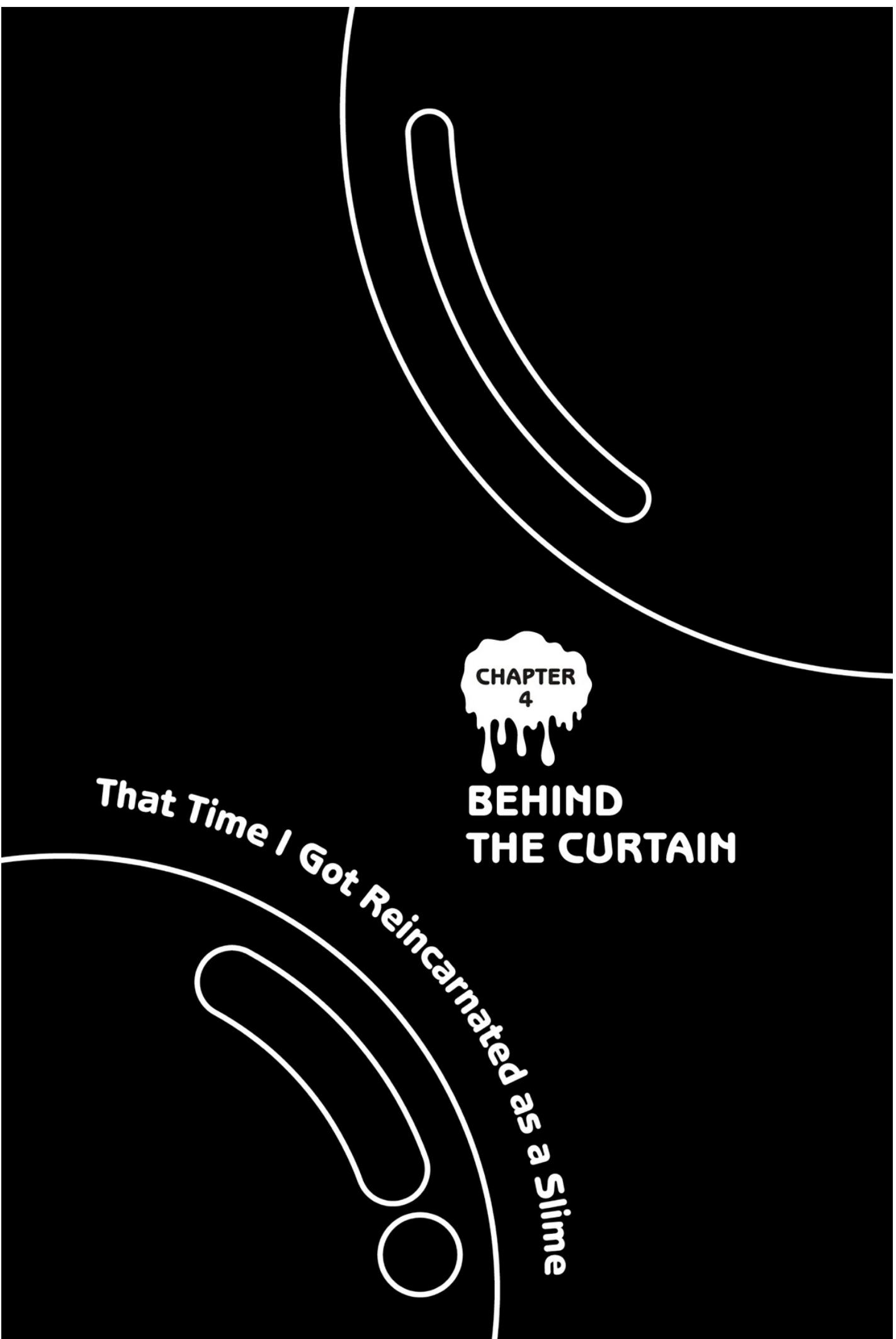
These were accepted without protest and passed, barring any issues, by unanimous vote. It was a long road to get there, but everything I wrote up for the Council was accepted in the end.

I'm really not good at this level of brinkmanship with a room full of hungry sharks. People can scoff at my ideas all they want, but having to feel out my opponent's mind and objectives just tires me out. I think I'll let Raphael handle that for me from now on.

*...Understood.*

Today it was brute strength that let me take control of my problems. But I didn't lash out first—it was Hinata and that charming young Shuna. In fact, I was the guy who saved Elrick's life. This amply demonstrated the broadness of my heart, I think, so I was pretty satisfied with myself. What's more, I had taught them all a valuable lesson: Attempting physical force against a demon lord was meaningless.

The session behind us, we left the chamber. It was a stormy day, but now, it was finally over.



## CHAPTER 4

### BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Glenda Attley, the beautiful ex-mercenary, pulled the trigger with every intent to kill.

The gun she had kept since she was summoned to this world didn't betray her. It was already a part of her body, to the point that it no longer even required maintenance. Combine that with her Sniper unique skill, and there was nobody who could stop her.

Sniper, as a skill, provided three abilities. One was Magic Sense, tuned to a perception level far beyond the norm; one was Compute Prediction, letting her read and understand the results of people's actions; and the other was called Control Space. This third ability, in particular, made Glenda practically superhuman, allowing her to connect any two points in space that she could picture in her mind.

Anything she had physical sight of was within gunshot range for her. She could shoot from directly above the heads of her targets, and she was free to ignore any obstacles in her way as she landed a bullet home. She could also ignore all gravity and air resistance, making long-range shots possible without a sniper rifle.

Put this all together, and Glenda had never failed a mission. But after her last blunder, she came to realize that there was always someone better out there.

*That was doomed. A monster like that's too much for me.*

The moment she saw him, Glenda realized how dangerous this opponent was. That man, Diablo, was impervious to her handgun. It wasn't a matter of physical attacks not working. Glenda had two types of bullets, a normal one and a magic-infused set. The first type was for when she couldn't leave any magical traces behind, but for monsters with physical resistance, Glenda concentrated

her own magical force into bullet form, an original magic skill of hers.

She treasured the ability to handle anything that came her way, and so Glenda truly had no blind spots. But Diablo didn't work that way. Her instincts warned her to run from him, her Compute Prediction skill foreseeing nothing but her death. Even with her standard-breaking strengths, she could see no possible path to victory—a hard lesson in reality for her to take that day.

And now Glenda had stretched her Magic Sense skills to their limits to carry out an assassination.

The bullet she fired appeared just a foot or so away from her target. Now, in the blink of an eye, it'd demolish his head—or it should have.

That eighteen-inch (or so) gap was very carefully selected. When connecting two points in space, the connection would fail if the destination point overlapped with a certain amount of mass. In other words, if the target unexpectedly moved, the connection Glenda built might cut out. That's why she settled on eighteen inches. Even someone with godly reflexes couldn't respond quickly enough to something that close, especially a bullet traveling at the speed of sound.

*That monster is one thing, but the prince of a kingdom is no sweat. Well, no point crying about it. I'll have to come up with a strategy for the next time I see him.*

She was much more confident about today's mission—but at the next moment, her face filled with surprise and foreboding. The bullet that was supposed to shatter the prince's head had vanished.

“No! What just happened?!”

The unthinkable had occurred, something impossible under any normal circumstances. She didn't know why it took place, but if someone had done something, it had to be that demon lord.

“Him! That devil bastard's boss! Did I underestimate *him*, too?!”

That was Glenda's initial reaction.

For a moment, she thought about firing again. Her perfect ambush had just

failed, so any further attempt had even less of a chance. She knew that, but it meant that she'd fail her mission. Her bosses—Maribel and the elder Granville—would never allow that. It made her hesitate, and thus she failed to escape soon enough.

"Heh. I would say so. You *did* underestimate Sir Rimuru. And I have no interest in forgiving you for that."

"Tch! Who're you?"

"My name is Soei, faithful Covert Agent of the demon lord Rimuru."

Glenda was shocked. But quickly, she resigned herself. The man didn't ask her name in return—not because he didn't care about her, she thought, but because that could wait until he captured and interrogated her. If she could just get away, she could keep what she knew concealed.

The assassination failed. And being captured afterward would be an even worse fate. Any further mistakes, and she'd be disposed of as useless. Glenda had seen many of her compatriots walk that road, and to her, getting away was job number one right now.

She squared up against her foe.

"...So you were expecting an attack?"

"Yes. Everything was worked out in Sir Rimuru's mind. If you want to resist, go right ahead. I have no interest in killing you, but the more you resist, the more painful this will be for you."

"Hah! How kind of you. In that case, I'll do what I want here, thank you."

Without hesitation, Glenda fired instead of waiting for a response. This was a single, regular bullet; she had sixteen left, but she doubted they'd work against the magic-born who called himself Soei. A magic bullet would, probably...but instead, Glenda took out her military knife, slashing at Soei with a refined, well-honed motion.

Soei dodged it with the minimum movement required. Glenda smiled at this. The knife was infused with her magical force, making it both a physical and magical weapon. She did this when facing foes where physical attack wouldn't

be enough, and Soei just revealed that he saw it as a threat.

Plus, Glenda had noticed another habit of Soei's.

*This guy's the type who hates extraneous motion. He may be more susceptible to simpler methods. Let's see how comfortable he'll be in a moment...*

She unleashed another attack—knife in her right hand, gun in her left. Unhesitant, she repeatedly pulled the trigger, gauging Soei's response. As she predicted, there was no reaction. He must've known they'd have no effect on him—but he kept his guard up, staying on the alert for her knife.

*Not bad. Maybe the strongest opponent I've ever had.*

Diablo didn't count in Glenda's mind. Foes she never had a chance against weren't tabulated in her records.

Soei's left pointer finger moved. Glenda didn't miss it, sensing the danger and instantly performing a backward somersault to dodge. There was now a sizable distance between them, and that was the right move for her to make, because in the next instant, an ultra-thin wire advanced upon her original position.

"Hohh. You have good instincts."

"Well, thank you. You're not so bad, either."

The light exchange was punctuated by a gunshot from Glenda. It wasn't a threat to Soei. He went straight at her, not bothering to evade.

*So simple. I'm glad to have opponents like these. They're so easy to deal with.*

Magic bullets didn't require any firing. They could be shot without a sound, so if she mixed one in with her regular bullets...

Now that her attack pattern was established, she'd strike with her *real* attack while his guard was down. That was Glenda's standard strategy—take a seemingly wasted shot and turn it into an instant kill. Even if you were expecting it, it'd be tricky to dodge it out of the blue.

And Soei demonstrated the same reactions all the other titans she defeated before did. He took the bullet in the right shoulder and was sent flying back.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! So much for you, handsome man. Rama fell for the same

trick. The more confident you are, the more effective a simple move like that becomes.”

Glenda laughed loudly—but her eyes were still alert, surveying the damage to Soei. Going easy after felling your prey was out of the question. That was the ironclad rule of the battlefield, and Glenda would never relax without checking her foe for a pulse. Besides, she didn’t think she killed him with a single shot anyway.

“...I see. More of a handful than I thought.”

“Being a sore loser now? Well, sorry. If you’ve seen my face, my only choice is to take you out.”

Soei, back on his feet, had lost his right arm. The fight seemed to be Glenda’s to win. That’s why she was more careful than ever as she pointed her gun forward.

*Magic bullets work on him. And now, with my next move, I’ll blow his brains out.*

Launching her Sniper unique skill, Glenda cautiously steadied her aim.

“Heh. Don’t worry. I’ve been asked to capture you. I imagine Sir Rimuru wants information from you, but he’s a gentle person. Cooperate with him, and you won’t be killed.”

“Don’t lecture me like that *now!!*”

With a shout, Glenda fired—three bullets toward his head, two toward his heart. Five magic bullets, whizzing straight to their targets. Then the first three made the leap in space, reappearing in front, above, and to the right side of his head. The other two quickly followed, materializing before his heart and at an angle behind it.

All five bullets hit home, shattering Soei’s body.

These Warp Shots were Glenda’s pièce de résistance. Magically created bullets, unlike their regular counterparts, could disrupt and scatter magicules. Even if he could regenerate his body, those shots made it impossible.

No matter what your skills were with a sword or spear, being targeted by

supersonic bullets from all directions would be impossible for even the greatest of masters to handle. Based on her past experiences, Glenda knew full well what she was capable of. That was the secret to her continued survival—and that was why she now checked to be sure Soei was dead.

His body was, in fact, collapsing into black smoke in front of her eyes. She breathed a sigh of relief. Since the moment she caught sight of him, a dark anxiety had been smoldering in her heart. It wasn't as vivid as it was with Diablo, but her instincts told her this was a dangerous foe.

"It's over. You were a tough one. I didn't have any capacity to go easy on you."

Glenda was so relieved that the words just fell out of her. But that relief came just a bit too early. Suddenly, behind her, she heard a voice that couldn't possibly be there.

"Oh, really? In that case, why not give up and let me capture you?"

She reflexively leaped out of the way. Turning around in a panic, she saw Soei himself standing there.

"Th-that's crazy! Didn't you die just now...?!"

"Heh. *You're* the crazy one. You think that was enough to kill me? I have no reason to lose to you anyway."

"Then I'll just do it one more time—*Whoaaa?!*"

Glenda froze. Anyone would. Unbelievably to her, she now sensed Soei's presence on all sides of her. She immediately activated Magic Sense, but it just revealed the very truth she didn't want to know.

"It—it can't be! Wh-why are all of these *physical* bodies?! That's ridiculous! What kind of joke *is* this?!"

"It's simple. I have a skill known as Replication. That is all. And while my Replications aren't as powerful as my true self, you should be proud that you defeated at least one of them."

Soei—or at least, one of the four Soeis in the room—offered Glenda his sincere compliments. But now, escape was possible.

“Goddamn it...!!”

With a barbaric scream, Glenda lunged at Soei—and at that moment, her desperate last stand began.



On a balcony overlooking a garden blooming with flowers, a girl, a boy, and an old man sat at a round table facing one another. It was Maribel, Yuuki, and Johann.

“We messed up. We botched it,” Maribel said quietly. Despite that, she didn’t seem too affected. She had predicted this, and in a way, it was part of the plan.

“What a disaster for Gaban, though. After all the devotion he had for you.”

Johann, seated in front of Maribel, was holding a glass of wine as he lamented the count’s fate. He may not have felt that strongly for him, but even he had just a twinge of sympathy for the man. Gaban, after all, was one of the Five Elders, just like Johann—or maybe *was*, by now. His fall was already in progress.

“Gaban was incompetent. All that time he spent living in Englesia—did he develop a love for its king, perhaps? He would certainly have brought them under his control faster otherwise...”

“Don’t be silly. Not even we in the Rozzos have reached into the central core of Englesia yet. Gaban couldn’t—”

“No. No, you’re wrong. It’s easy to seize the core. Just kill them all and leave a single infant remaining. And if that infant shares a blood lineage with Gaban, all the better.”

“Well, yes, if you put it that way, but...”

To Maribel, and all the bloodstained history she knew, this wasn’t that radical an approach. In fact, she thought it was the peaceful way. It kept the body count low. But Johann wanted to explain to her that Englesia’s security wasn’t about to just let that happen. It was an easy thing to envision—less so to act upon.

“But I’m interested in those magical inquisitors.”

“...Those unusual-looking people who served the king?”

"Yes. Impudent, aren't they? So impudent. They must've built up their military to oppose the Rozzos."

"What do you think of them?"

"Mmm, they're strong, I suppose. Gaban told me as much after he experienced them for himself."

Maribel was able to share information with those under her Avarice rule, to a certain extent. Anything her target learned, Maribel could tap into as well. Thus, she now used Gaban as a throwaway pawn. She wanted to learn about those inquisitors, so she had him engineer a crime so heinous they'd *have* to step up. All that foolishness aimed at the demon lord Rimuru was perfect for that, and considering Count Gaban was Englesian nobility, the magic inquisitors were bound to come knocking.

She saw all of that. And just as she hoped for, she now knew the secrets behind the inquisitors. In fact, they weren't anything too deep—just people infused with enough monster force to become magic-born. They hadn't worked and trained themselves to perfection, like the magic-born Razen of old Farmus.

To Maribel, these inquisitors—bereft even of sentience, a side effect of their bodies rejecting the monster elements injected into them—were just uninteresting toys. But they regained that sentience when not in magic-born form, so depending on what you implanted in them, they could work in a variety of environments. Their strength, each an over-A by themselves, was nothing to sniff at, either. As she saw it, they could be useful enough.

"How fearsome. So you approved of Gaban's scheme, even though you knew it would fail, just so you could learn that?"

"No. My goal was to help build up your trust. Now the demon lord Rimuru sees you as trustworthy."

"Do you mean...?"

No, he didn't need to ask. He understood it well enough. Her goal from the start was to eliminate Rimuru; the magical inquisitors were just a nice bonus. Maribel just wanted Johann to tell her about Rimuru's internal dealings.

*And if I don't give that to her, I'll be snuffed out as quickly as Gaban was...?*

He didn't think he was as incompetent as Gaban. But nonetheless, Johann felt an inscrutable sort of fear toward Maribel.

*You—you must be kidding. Here I am, one of the Five Elders, and this little girl is bossing me around...*

He may have thought that, but he would never daresay it. So he decided to return to their main subject.

"What do you think about pitting these inquisitors against the demon lord? Pin some manner of crime on Rimuru—"

"We can't. We just can't. All it'd do is anger the demon lord. Yes, the magical inquisitors are strong, but that's it. Nothing at all that could hold its own against a demon lord. It's silly even to consider it."

"That much so...? So wouldn't teaming up with the demon lord be our best bet, then?"

Maribel shook her head. "That won't work. It won't work at all. Besides, apart from Grandfather, every single one of you are suffering under a serious misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?"

"Yes. Yes, exactly. The misunderstanding that humans are equal to monsters. Do you understand why I proposed to Grandfather that we eliminate the demon lord?"

"Because he's building a new economic bloc that will eventually become a financial threat to us?"

"Right. But that's just our cover story. The *real* reason is because, in time, we'll be helpless against him."

Maribel, this little girl, struck fear in Johann's heart—and now this girl was looking fearful herself as she spoke.

"How do you mean by that?" Johann asked, pressing her to continue.

"The demon lord Rimuru possesses a staggering amount of war power. With *that* backing him up, what do you think would happen if he decided to negotiate with someone?"

"That...?!"

Only then did Johann stumble upon the true danger. In this world, wars between nations almost never took place—they needed to save their fighting ability for the monsters who threatened them. The Council stepped in to handle cross-border issues, and that inevitably meant those with the most economic strength were able to speak the loudest. Even the largest of states, such as Englesia and the former Farmus, didn't have enough of a military to make enemies out of every Council member.

"And you realize that their military's not their only asset, either, right? Being bound by rules is the same thing as losing your freedom...but if you can create the rules yourself, you don't have to lose anything, do you see?"

Tempest might follow the Council's rules at first, but after that, nobody could say. And if Tempest decided to spread its own values to the Western Nations, soon the entire region would have to take orders from them. The demon lord's rule would be complete—a totally peaceful coup. He could threaten them with warfare, he could apply economic pressure—but either way, the stronger nation always gained the power to punish others.

"It's funny. So very funny. And as time passes, there will come an era where everything will need to go through the demon lord."

"And—and if..."

If that happened, even Johann know where it led.

"But doesn't the demon lord seek to coexist with..."

Maribel stopped Johann with her cold eyes. "It's stupid. So stupid. Not just you, but the entire Council. They're all idiots."

Then she took pains to explain matters in a way Johann could understand. Essentially, things may be fine now, but the future was an unknown. If humankind, after forgetting about the threat of the Storm Dragon, ever did anything to cross Rimuru...

"I don't know what the life span of a demon lord is, but humans are such short-lived animals. If we don't stop the demon lord's ambitions right here, the Rozzos' one fervent desire is as good as scuttled."

A demon lord could always change his stripes. And while humans may come and go, Maribel absolutely refused to expect human values from such long-lived rulers.

"You see? So that's why ideas like partnering with a demon lord, or taking advantage of a demon lord—they're all wrong, down to the very roots. None of them would ever work."

Johann was silenced. Then, like the final nail on the coffin, one of her Blood Shadow troops chose that moment to make a magical call to her.

He was reporting on Glenda's defeat.

"No... They captured Glenda?!"

Johann looked shocked. "...Is that true?"

Not even Maribel could hide her surprise. Glenda's wariness was always commendable; no matter the danger involved, she always made it home alive. Maribel trusted her—not her personality, but that animal-like craving for life.

"I can't believe it. That clever, conniving vixen..."

Glenda was one of the standout results from the Rozzo family's secret summoning program, an otherworlder forced by their spell to remain faithful to them. Her strength was well-known by now, and the family treated her like a full-fledged tactical weapon.

The idea of her being defeated and captured was beyond belief for Johann. Elder or not, he was a normal human, and unlike Granville or Maribel, he could only think about things in standard human terms.

Maribel ignored his awestruck muttering as she pondered her options. *Defeating him is out of the question. But if we can take rule over him, all our problems are gone. We'll have to do it.*

"...We'll set a trap," Maribel said.

"A trap? What are you intending to do?" Yuuki asked, breaking his silence.

She turned to him. "Right. A trap. Your people are going on a ruins expedition trip with the demon lord Rimuru, aren't you? We'll set a trap there."

She wasn't asking for his opinion. This was a finalized plan, and it was set in stone.

"Right, Kagali's headed there...but I don't think that's such a good idea, y'know?"

"Why is that?"

"Because the demon lord Milim's joining them," Yuuki warned. "It'll be too dangerous to hatch anything."

In his opinion, they needed to win Rimuru's confidence first, then work out more of a long-term plan with him. But Maribel's mind was already made up.

"No. No, I can't have that. The more time we give him, the more trouble that demon lord will be. That's what my instincts are telling me. Yuuki, is there a way you can keep Milim from coming along?"

"That's even less possible. He's already eyeing me. If I try putting a stop to it, it's basically admitting that I'm tricking them."

"Fair enough. Then let's bring down the demon lord Milim as well."

"Huh?" Yuuki asked, dazed.

"That's ridiculous! Maribel, that's not just beyond reckless; it's beyond the realm of possibility!" Johann stood up out of his seat.

Their reactions were perfectly understandable. Even crushing one demon lord required a careful, foolproof plan. But two at the same time? It was deliberately giving yourself no chance.

But Maribel still smiled. "I will put everything I have into it. *Everything*, do you understand?"

"It's still impossible!" Yuuki cried. "You say 'everything,' but my Moderate Jesters are all busy with their own work right now. And—"

"I don't know how useful they are, but if they're not available, we'll proceed without them."

Maribel shushed Yuuki's objections before he could finish stating them. To her, the Jesters weren't worthy of consideration—or, to be more accurate, she

already knew a better force, a large one, that could take on demon lords for her.

"...But you know, Yuuki, I had you supply a certain something from the Dragon's Nest for me before. I think it's high time we use it."

"You mean *that*? That's such a bad idea! Not even *I* can control it!"

"Not a problem. It belonged to the demon lord Milim anyway—we're just returning it for her. Maybe we could say that Clayman was saving it as his last resort, and his surviving loyal troops set it off? Then Milim's rage won't be directed at us."

"If something goes wrong, it could cause untold damage to human areas..."

"And?"

"N-no, um..."

Johann attempted to talk Maribel out of this but was completely shut out. She might've been theoretically open to alternatives, but flat rejections would never grab her interest. And since Johann had no other suggestions, Maribel's strategy won the day.

As Johann struggled against her, Yuuki kept talking, trying to figure out her thought process. It made him realize this operation had a better chance of success than he thought. "...All right. In that case, Milim's likely to take it on herself. She'd stop Rimuru from doing so, for sure, and it'd be the perfect way to separate them, maybe."

"Hee-hee! Very good. Very, *very* good. And while the demon lord Milim's playing around with it..."

"We go in and take over Rimuru's mind?"

"Yes, precisely."

"But I've still got one worry..."

"The Storm Dragon?"

"...Yep, you guessed it. If we fail to take over Rimuru, and Veldora goes on a rampage, what're we gonna do then?"

That—or their target might fight back more than they expected, giving them no time to take over his mind. If it came to that, Yuuki would have no choice but to kill Rimuru. He attempted to voice his concerns about that, in a roundabout away, but apparently that was an acceptable consequence of her plans.

“No need to worry about that. No need at all, Yuuki. Don’t worry about a thing. Just focus on defeating the demon lord Rimuru.”

Yuuki didn’t defy her. In the end, he did what he was told. “...All right. If you say so, I’ll believe in you.”

Maribel gave him a nod.

Thanks to what her grandfather Granville told her about demon lords, Maribel saw much deeper into the world than most.

If Rimuru should fall, and Veldora the Storm Dragon flew into a rage, the demon lord Luminus would likely step in to handle it. Paradoxically, that would actually be better for her than Rimuru keeping up his current rule.

He and Luminus had already joined forces—which essentially meant that Luminus left management of the Western Nations to him. The Queen of Nightmares herself, someone who saw humankind as little more than vampire food, had let the Seven Days Clergy do that before, but—as shown in Granville’s own fall—they were no more. He had lost Luminus’s protection, and with that, the authority he had to influence the Western Nations.

From now on, Hinata the Saint would doubtlessly gain more political clout... and considering their relationship, the rising rule of the demon lord Rimuru would grow even firmer with her.

*No matter what, I’ve got to stop that.*

And as she secretly thought this, it didn’t matter if she needed to expose the world to the threat of Veldora to do it.

Maribel and Yuuki spent the next little while fleshing out the details of their plan. By this point, there was no room left for Johann—all he could do was pray they succeeded. Thus, these magic-born, packing as much malice as they could into their intricate plans, began to devise a way to suppress Rimuru for good.



After that long, long session was over, we all regrouped back at the café. I was relaxing in my seat, the tie on my business suit loosened. I could've used Spatial Motion to come home now, but Soei still hadn't caught our culprit, and there might be some unforeseen snags, so I decided to stick around for a bit.

But...man. That conference was so exhausting. Prince Elrick of Englesia's intrusion, that guy Gaban pulling the strings behind him, all the councillors whose support they enjoyed...but it all ended with their mouths agape.

Gaban was a high-level noble, I guess, but even he got taken away by those scary-looking "magical inquisitors." The other councillors in on the conspiracy were saved from that by diplomatic immunity, but thanks to the ledgers I submitted to the authorities, I think their home nations will be investigating them shortly. They'll lose their posts, no doubt, and a lot of them looked pretty alarmed about that, but they had it coming.

Even a lot of the councillors who *weren't* involved at all treated me with, shall we say, "noble" indifference. I let the innocent ones go, but judging by my ledgers, a lot of them were criminals indeed. So I planned to alert their home nations about my evidence as well. The more the merrier, and all that. That ought to shake up things a bit among those fools, a lot of whom used their posts to fatten up their own coffers. The sooner they were gone, the easier things would be for me later.

I sipped my coffee as I thought all this over. "Well, a lot happened today, but now I'm glad Hinata and Shuna got angry before I did. *I am* the demon lord here, so I figured it wouldn't look too good if I started bashin' heads in first thing."

"Oh, I didn't 'get angry.' Some of the councillors were being discourteous in their diplomacy, and I just offered them some etiquette lessons."

"Neither did I, Sir Rimuru. I just helped a few rude gentlemen see the errors of their ways. If I was *truly* angry, there wouldn't have even been a pile of ashes where they once stood."

Hinata and Shuna smiled at the same time. Perfectly in sync. It was a little

frightening. Against that sheer impact, all I could do was nod and say “Uh, yeah” back.

“But it *was* a good experience for me,” interjected Benimaru.

“Hmm?”

“I mean, I got too angry up there. My mind became a total blank, and I didn’t know what I should do about it. If Shuna had waited any longer to act, I might’ve torched every human in that room.”

I nearly did a spit take with my coffee. Yeah, I sure *thought* Benimaru was coolly eyeing the proceedings. I was glad to see him act all mature for a change—but he was actually so enraged that he lost hold of himself. Guess I shouldn’t have been so impressed. But man, was that close. If I oversaw a bloody massacre in there, the entire human race would have it in for me.

“Look, whatever you do, *don’t* do that, all right?”

“Ha-ha-ha! I was just kidding!” Benimaru tried to laugh it off with a breezy smile, but he couldn’t fool me. He was serious. I’d need to pick a representative to send to the Council before the next meeting, and I better choose damn carefully.

We were still talking, me finishing my coffee, when Soei’s report came in.

“Sir Rimuru, I have captured the assassin.”

I figured he’d manage the job fine, and I was right. What a talent—always doing a perfect job with the work I assigned him.

“She was an able fighter, to be sure. She didn’t give her name or any other information about herself...but she referred to you as that devil bastard’s boss.”

Hmm. A crack professional assassin, no doubt, one who wouldn’t divulge her identity that easily. But “devil bastard”...?

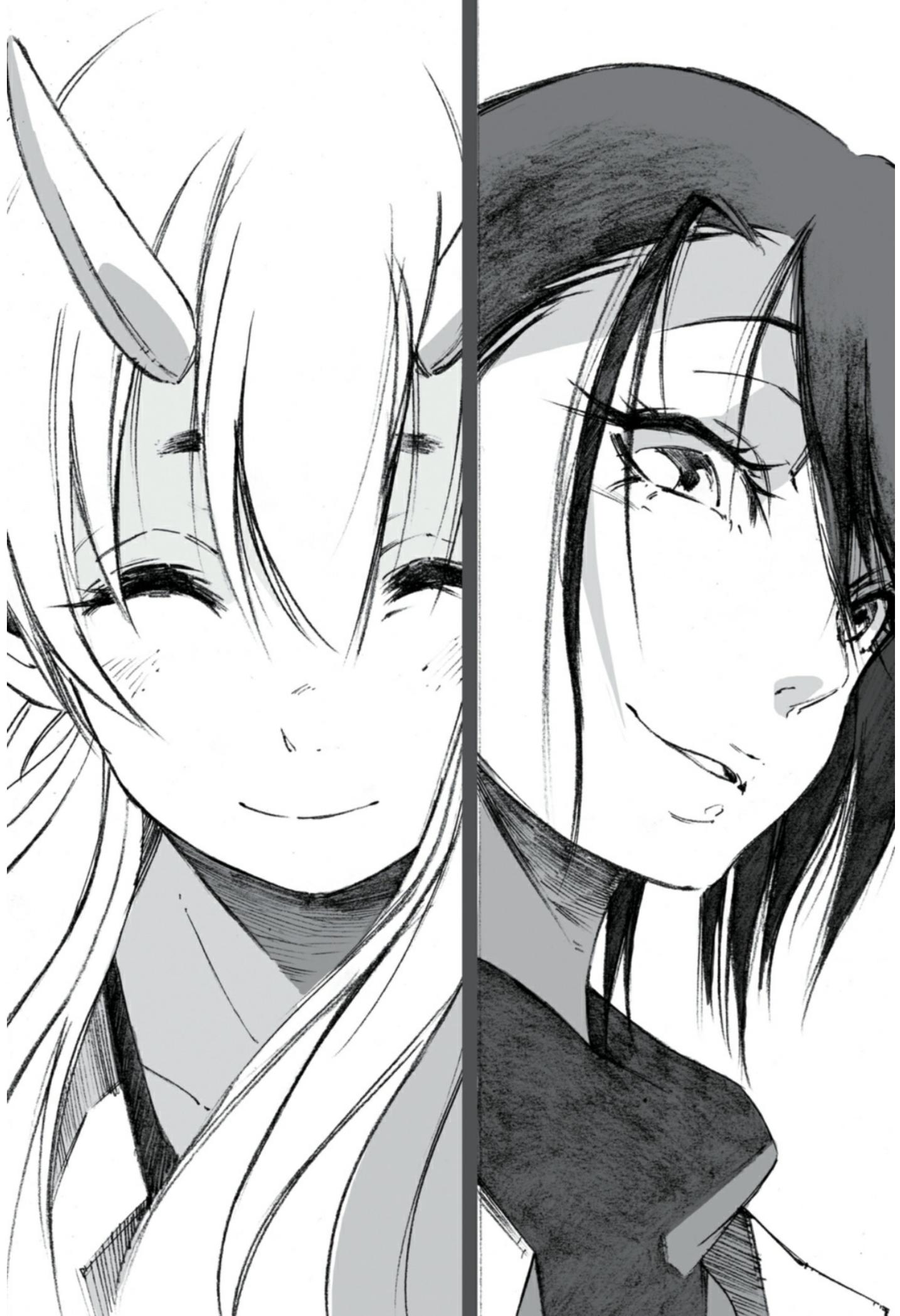
“Did she mean Diablo?”

“I couldn’t imagine anyone else.”

Made sense.

I didn’t receive any report along those lines from Diablo—at least, I don’t

*think* I did—but he's the kinda guy who treated even Razen like a snot-nosed kid. If he and this assassin ever fought, chances are the girl didn't even register in his mind. It reminded me once again just how sky-high Diablo's standards were.



Razen himself, after all, was a human strong enough to be worthy of a magic-born title. The way Hinata described it to me, there was almost no person stronger than him in the Western Nations—and if he called him a wimp, then Diablo's sense of judgment must've been completely out of whack. I should probably teach him more about what passes for "strong" in this world.

I ordered another cup of coffee as I considered this. Shuna, Hinata, and Benimaru were going with tea instead, as well as some cake for dessert... *Whoa, you too, Benimaru?! Guess I might as well join in, then. I'll never say no to a good shortcake; that's my favorite.*

So I had the waitress deliver coffee to us both when Soei arrived. The waitress was clearly blushing, which Soei prudently ignored as he drank it black. Coffee really completes the picture with him, although I personally sided more with Benimaru and his sweet tooth.

Thus, we enjoyed our drinks as I asked Soei, this perfect specimen of a man, for his full report.

"...And that's everything for now."

He wrapped things up by the time I got to the end of my second cup, using Thought Communication to replay the memory of what he saw to everyone. Based on that, it looked like Soei managed to make this assailant throw every type of offense she had at him. She was pretty beautiful, too, but Soei showed her no mercy. It was kind of like cheating in an old-school online game, taking advantage of some bug to get infinite energy. Letting your opponent think they had a chance to win—and just laughing in the shadows the whole time. If you can get your foe thinking they've almost won, that's when you can get *truly* malicious, forcing them to use all their items and so forth. That's the strategy Soei must've used to get information from the assassin.

Of course, this wasn't a game—and in an intelligence operation like this, you had to know how to read the story behind your target. Soei didn't mess that up at all; I think he deserved praise for a fine job.

"Good work. You always impress me, Soei."

"I tested out the strategy you described to me, Sir Rimuru, and it proved

surprisingly effective. The key is to show yourself struggling a bit first, isn't it?"

*Um...?*

*Oh. Right. I think we did talk along those lines.* I definitely recall talking to him about spy movies, but maybe we discussed online games, too? It was such an inconsequential conversation that I forgot all about it. I internally apologized to Soei—didn't mean to implant any "malicious" ideas in him.

"Ha...ha-ha-ha. Glad to be of service."

"No, I still have so much to learn. She eliminated three of my Replications."

"Oh, did she? Well, at least we can get some clues about our enemy now."

"Yes. I will handle the interrogation."

*Interrogation, huh? Hmm... Should I say something about that?*

As I considered whether to, Hinata interrupted us.

"You know, I wasn't sure whether to speak up about this, but I'm sure you already know anyway, so... The assassin Sir Soei encountered used to serve under me. I didn't know what kind of powers she was hiding, but it sounds like she was more trouble than I thought. Now I see how she managed to beat Rama. If a bullet appeared two feet away from *you*, you probably couldn't react in time, either."

"Who's Rama?"

"Oh, sorry. He was a man in my force, one of the Three Battlesages. Glenda beat him, and later he started working for her."

Maybe Hinata could dodge a bullet that close to her, but most people couldn't. There was no doubting the danger Glenda's skill posed.

But this Rama guy was a Battlesage-level fighter, huh? That made him potential demon lord material. *Serious* strength. And—

"Soei talked about one of his Replications getting blown off its feet. That was probably a hand grenade, wasn't it?"

"Oh, you mean that exploding ball of hers?"

"Yeah, that. It doesn't sound like magic, and I think it's a weapon from my old

world."

*Understood. It is believed to be magically generated by the subject Glenda. It is a force somewhat similar to Materialize Weapon, allowing her to bring things in her memory into reality.*

M-Materialize Weapon?! So she's not only a born sniper, but she's got *that*, too?

According to Raphael, the full-on Materialize Weapon let you fully regenerate any weapon in your memory. With Glenda, the skill wasn't quite as well-defined, so she could only create imitations with similar effects to what she pictured. Even that, however, was enough of a threat.

"I agree with you. I haven't seen a real one, but it sounds like the ones in movies and stuff. Should we assume Glenda's an otherworlder, too?"

"I don't think there's any doubt about that. Especially if she's using her memories to create Earth weapons." I sneered triumphantly at Hinata.

She leered back at me. "Why do you know that?"

Oops. She's sharp. I was still keeping Raphael a secret. Better talk my way out of this. *That's what I get for being a know-it-all*, I thought. "Oh, just a hunch. When you get to *my* level, you start to get hunches like that."

Benimaru looked over to me, wonder in his eyes. It comforted me a bit as I gauged Hinata's reply.

"All right. But do you think I could help interrogate her? There are a few things I've been meaning to ask Glenda if I had the chance. Saare and Grigori never returned, either, and I think she might know something about them."

Good. She let it pass. And if she wanted to talk to Glenda, I had no reason to deny her the chance. There was no need to hide our prisoner, and I definitely didn't want Glenda exposed to whatever awful things Shion did to *hers*.

It sounded like Glenda had an encounter with Diablo, one she fled from immediately. The whole Prince Elrick thing was nothing to do with us, really; so as long as she gave us her information, I wouldn't get rough with her. I guess Soei gave her quite a fright already—not physically, but in the "break your

heart” kinda way.

Whether we’d let her go, on the other hand, was a tough question. She was a tougher foe than we thought; she might be dangerous if set free. But I wasn’t sure handing her over to Englesia was such a great idea, either. Let’s save that question for later.

“Okay. Wanna join me?”

“Please,” Hinata said, nodding.

For now, we’d need to go meet Glenda first, gauge her demeanor, and figure things out from there. We decided to get going.

By the way, I covered our tab at the café, just like I did yesterday. I didn’t exactly appreciate Hinata’s check making its way over to me, but should I have forgiven it like the generous man I am, or should I have said something? I’d hate to be called cheap.

Then again, worrying about little things like this would probably get me pegged as a member of the lower class. The question weighed on my mind as we put Englesia behind us.

\*

“Ughh, *Chief*?!”

We were all back home, meeting up with one of Soei’s Replications there. There we saw the captured Glenda open her eyes, only to find Hinata right in front of her. And she screamed in response.

This was in a plain old reception area, not an interrogation room. Benimaru and Soei were guarding me on both sides, and Hinata was there as well. We were all having tea from Shuna as the interrogation began.

“It’s been a long time, Glenda. Glad you’re doing well.”

Hinata went first, coldly looking down on her. She never did go easy on her opponents, and while Glenda was thrown at first, she regained her composure quickly.

“Hah! I guess this is it for me, then,” she brazenly said. “If you’re gonna kill me, go ahead. The fates of captured spies never change much in history.”

"Silence. All you need to do is answer Sir Rimuru's questions."

Soei was being just as merciless with his follow-ups. "Sir Rimuru, should we amputate her limbs to train her to be a little more complacent?"

*Um, no thank you.* And if Soei said he'd do it, he really would, so...

"No, no, just because we've got healing potions..."

"Ah, meaning we can give her that painful experience time and time again?" Shuna interjected. "That does make sense—"

"No! I mean, just because we have healing potions, it's not nice to go so far with this!"

Seriously, stop. Shuna was smiling and nodding her agreement, but Hinata's eyes were killing me. Not even I would go that far against a woman. And Glenda didn't seem completely disinterested in talking—I felt like we could negotiate something.

"All right, Glenda. We haven't met before, have we? I'm the demon lord Rimuru."

"...Hello. I'm Glenda. One of Lady Hinata's old troops and part of the Three Battlesages."

For her part, she understood that jokes and bargaining wouldn't work against Soei. She provided her name, at least, perhaps figuring I was better worth giving answers to.

She certainly knew Diablo, and I could see it if she ran after realizing she couldn't win. Very few people who shout out "*kill me*" actually want to die. I felt safe assuming she was attached to her life. But I was also interested in why she betrayed Hinata. Even if she didn't reveal her client for this murder attempt, maybe she'd be more willing to discuss other matters.

*Well, regardless of how open she is, I'll just have to ask whatever I can.*

I began with a calm approach.

"So you were definitely aiming for Prince Elrick. Is that right?"

"Yeah."

"And was that in order to frame me for it and get me kicked out of the Western Nations?"

"Probably. I didn't hear any reason. I was just told to do it."

All right. That didn't seem to be a lie.

"Can I ask the next question?" Hinata asked, eliciting a nervous shiver from Glenda.

"What is it?"

"I assigned you to a commercial hub city so you could have more freedom of movement. I told you not to listen to what the merchants there told you, but had they already won you over by then?"

"No comment there."

"Were you ready to betray me from the beginning? Because you were ordered to?"

"...No comment."

"I'm thinking your backers are the group controlling the Council. Who are they?"

"....."

"I always thought it was strange. The Council would sometimes make these moves to indicate they had an eye out for the Western Holy Church. I figured there had to be a spy, and you were my prime suspect. I was waiting for a chance to expel you, but if you tell me your employer's name, I'm willing to subtract from your sentence."

"I told you, no comment!"

"No? All right. One more question. Did you believe in Luminus?"

"*Tch!* There's no god out there. If you want me to believe in *that*, pay me—"

The next instant, Hinata had her rapier out. With a pure, melodious clang, I stopped it with my own sword.

"Whoa, Hinata! Not the head! You interrogating her or killing her?!"

"...I didn't intend to."

"You liar! You had every intention of it just now!"

Eesh. Gonna have to keep a constant vigil, I see. Hinata absolutely would've decapitated her. I managed to react because I had an eye out, but we came *this* close to losing a valuable information source.

"It's all right, Sir Rimuru. I can use her as a test subject for my resurrection magic."

Shuna was there smiling, like always.

"That's true. And I can use divine miracle resurrection as well. There was hardly any problem with it."

I wasn't sure how much of this was an act. Both Hinata and Shuna were griping at me now, but I didn't really think it was okay to kill someone just because you could resurrect them later. I didn't think so, but there *was* a certain type of persuasive logic to it. It's strange.

"Look, can you just shut up for a second, Hinata?"

Time to tag back in. This was going downhill really fast, so I better have Hinata cool off for a bit.

So. My turn again.

*Raphael, do your stuff!*

*...Understood.*

Raphael eagerly accepted the challenge. I simply voiced what it told me.

"I'm assuming a professional like you isn't gonna just tell me everything because I asked nicely. So you can just listen to me instead, okay?"

Hmm. Interesting. Prod her and gauge what she knows from her reactions, then?

"Try not to lose your poker face, then."

"Hah! You better not look down on *me*. I don't need you to remind me!" Glenda's up to the challenge, huh? *So who's gonna win this?* I wondered, as if I were part of the audience.

"Unique skills often take root in people's souls. You're a good example of that. Yours is bound fast to your soul with a powerful force."

"Huh. Didn't know that. So?"

"So in that conference I attended, a lot of the councillors were tarnished by their vast, greedy desires."

"Uh-huh..."

"These desires were forcibly planted into them. There's a force involved that can directly impact people's souls, and I think that's what guided their moves."

"....."

"And you're under that same influence, Glenda."

"What?"

"In your case, though, your unique skill is providing protection to your soul, so this influence hasn't fully clouded you yet."

"Ngh..." Glenda wordlessly scowled. Maybe she couldn't find a way to deny it—it was kinda news to me as well, but still.

"But as amazing as your unique skill is, there are people out there who can see it for what it is."

"...You mean with Appraiser's Eye?"

"Certainly. Dragon's Eye, from the demon lord Milim, is more famous. Not that I'm up on this stuff, but there's an old story about how *Milim can see everything*, right? Apparently, that's really true. One glance at someone, and Milim has a general idea of what kinds of skills they have."

That was true, although she couldn't guess someone's internally manifested skills and couldn't give you details unless the subject invoked them. She could gauge their strengths, as well as whether a given skill was "extra" or "unique" in nature. It was just harder to give you finer details—for example, if someone had two or more unique skills, she'd have trouble telling whether it was two skills or one *really* powerful skill.

I was actually the same way, too. My Analyze and Assess was now accurate

enough that I got a hazy insight into the skills of other people, and I also learned how I could conceal mine from others, the way Guy Crimson had hidden his own magicule count. When I first met Guy, I assumed your skills stayed hidden unless you showed them off to people. I was wrong—like I said, an Analyze and Assess skill forged well enough can detect them, with the one being assessed none the wiser.

Looking back, I was pretty lucky, actually. Thanks to having four different ultimate skills, Guy must've taken one look at me and assumed I couldn't be toyed with. Raphael was the one skill I absolutely had to keep under my hat, so that was the watchword for my future moves from that point forward.

So I switched my way of thinking and assumed there was no way to hide skills, but that was actually pretty possible. If you've built up a skill to the point that it's completely your own, you can actually defend Analysis skills from picking up on it. It wasn't perfect yet, but that was the result of the experiments I had been doing.

"What are you trying to say? Yes, I have a unique skill. But even if it's protected me from the desires, so what?"

My little pause there must've irritated Glenda. Hearing about these outside influences inspired her to play along with me. I wanted to give her an answer, but Raphael's roundabout descriptions were getting a bit hard to grasp. Parsing it into something I could reasonably explain took some time.

*Suggestion. Use Haste Thought?*

Yes

No

Oh, yeah, there *was* that. I thought Yes, cursing myself for not doing that in the first place. Now let's hurry this up and get Glenda on my side already.

"Whether your mind's clouded by greed or not is none of my business. But one thing's for sure: Your employer's got a pretty powerful unique skill running. That's true, isn't it?"

"No comment...but I guess there's no denying it, either."

"Thank you. So, building on that, there was a man at the Founder's Festival whose desires were being harnessed like that. His name is Gaiye, and Shuna took care of him at the Council this afternoon. The other festival visitors weren't subjected to interference that way, but some of the merchants were. And if a large number of people are brought under a skill's influence at once, chances are that the skill user is physically nearby. That's what I thought."

"....."

Gaiye was completely hooked by it, but the farther away you got from the skill user, generally, the weaker the skill got. Masayuki's skill was another monster, but the rumors that spread around about him only added to its synergy. That foundation is why the skill propagates so much further than he means it to.

Influencing people's desires, meanwhile, was purely dependent on the skill's power itself. Beyond that, the user could utilize their strength or some other element to enhance the effect if they wanted. Basically, though, if you told me our skill user attended the Founder's Festival, I'd certainly believe it.

Along those lines, I had a suspect in mind. Someone I speculated about enough that I had Soei look into her. "Have you ever heard the name Maribel Rozzo?"

Raphael sure was cutting to the chase. The name came straight from the dossier Soei prepared for me.

"...!!"

She might've been trying to hide it, but Glenda gave me an ever-so-slight response. So that was a yes.

"My Analyze and Assess skill is pretty good, y'know. Not only can it detect what skills a person has, but it can also tell if someone's hiding one of them. I was sensing the latter all throughout the Founder's Festival, and one of the people I got that vibe from was that girl Maribel."

I could see Glenda grow paler as I continued. I couldn't tell if she was getting hot or if it was a cold sweat running down her cheek. Either way, she was getting nervous.

“Y-you—”

“Maribel Rozzo, you said? The Rozzo family... Hmm. I see.”

“Ah...?!”

Hinata interrupted Glenda just when she was about to say something. I should've been annoyed, but looking at Hinata, I didn't need to be. She had a delighted expression, like she had just found the answer. Glenda, meanwhile, made it clear that something had gone awry with her plans.

“Granville Rozzo. The founder of the Rozzo family and a former Hero. I'm sure you know him, too, don't you, Glenda? That—and he was the real person behind Gren, the Sunday Priest and head of the Seven Days Clergy...”

Just as I thought—Hinata was at the truth now. I could see her mentally connecting the dots on the people she knew.

“Seven Days, huh? Those guys we met before? I heard they had all died, but Granville's still alive?”

“Nicolaus said he landed the final blow, but we're talking about someone who ruled over the Western Holy Church for centuries. I wouldn't be surprised if he survived it.”

So Maribel was the skill user behind all this greed manipulation. And Granville Rozzo—Gren from the Seven Days—was the head of her family. Mm-hmm. And if Gren's the kind of monster who can survive for hundreds of years, he's likely got the Council in his pocket.

“So should we assume Gren's our mastermind here?”

“No doubt about it. He's using Maribel's powerful skill for some kind of scheme of his.”

Hinata and I were now comparing notes, ignoring Glenda entirely. We basically had our answer, and Glenda had just lost her value to us.

“Goddamn it! Why do you know so much? I didn't even *tell* you anything! This is basically the same damn thing as me *revealing* it all!”

*Mmm, yeah, sorry about that. You picked the wrong team to mess with, is all I can say. Raphael's too much of a talent to compete against.*

"I suppose they might think you did, wouldn't they?" I said.

"Well, that's what you get, Glenda," said Hinata. "A fitting end for a traitor."

"Dammit. I... I... They're going to kill me..." Seeing Glenda whisper to herself, face drained of color, I felt a little bad for her.

I had no intention of killing her; now that I had my info, I was ready to hand her over to Englesia. But...yeah. Wherever she went, she probably wasn't gonna be alive much longer. I figured she had the talent to flee to safety, but judging by how unnerved she was, she was dealing with some pretty ominous odds.

"Is this Maribel girl that powerful?" I decided to ask.

"...She's not that big an issue. But summoned people like me are bound by spells that we can't resist. The moment they decide I've fled from them, they'll crush my soul, and that will be the end for me."

Gee, *that* doesn't sound nice...

"So you didn't betray Luminus out of your own free will? It was because you didn't have any other choice?"

"Well...it's complicated. I wanted to throw myself upon the mercy of my god, but Granville's eyes were on me. Really, there was nothing I could've done about it."

Maybe I was right to sympathize with her a little. Hinata was still giving her a cold look, but I think she wasn't so angry now. She wanted to murder her less, at least.

"No, you're right about that. If your soul's shattered, not even Resurrection can help you then."

Wow. Guess even Hinata can be gentle sometimes. She was still stern, but now she was looking for a way to help Glenda. But could I undo that spell?

*Understood. It is not a problem. Remove the spell?*

*Yes*

*No*

*That was easy.*

And so it was off.



"It's over now," lamented Glenda. "Maribel... She's reading my emotions. I may not have intended to betray her, but she's gonna judge me now..."

So I let her in on what I just did.

"...What?"

"Yeah, no need to worry. We're all done with you, so go live whatever life you want. I'm pretty sure *she* thinks you're dead now."

"N-no, um, I wasn't talking about that. You mean to say you undid the curse ruling over me?!"

"Yeah, pretty much. But lemme just remind you: You get hostile with me, and I'll show you no mercy."

"Yes, I suppose I'll look the other way," Hinata said. "If I kill someone Rimuru let go, he'll never let me hear the end of it. But keep this in mind: You have betrayed Luminus herself. The Western Holy Church will never forgive you for that."

Glenda was a strong girl. A threat. But now that she was free from the rule of Maribel or whatever, we didn't have much reason to remain hostile. If she started trouble with us again, we could always do her in then. Personally, I didn't think she caused *that* much of a headache, so I was ready to forgive her. Hinata seemed willing to do the same; I guess she felt she couldn't be so narrow-minded about someone I let go free.

Besides, in a way, Glenda really *was* just following orders—not with her brain, exactly, but with the influence of the curse forced upon her. This time, I was willing to give her a slap on the wrist.

"So right, you're free to go. If you want to stay in my nation for a while, you're welcome to, but if you cause any trouble—"

"W-wait a... I mean, *wait* a second! You're really letting me go?"

"Uh-huh. I don't really feel like killing you anyway."

"If Sir Rimuru has forgiven you, we have no reason to defy his will," said Soei.

"Not that you're much of a threat anyway," Benimaru added.

They were willing to go with me, too. I didn't much appreciate the way they phrased it, but they didn't seem to have any complaints. They *didn't* see her as a threat, I imagine—which I wasn't too sure about, but to them, it was the truth. She'd never beat Benimaru's full effort, much less Soei's. Glenda struck me as the kind of woman who took a profit-and-loss approach to living, so she'd never do something stupid like challenge an unbeatable foe. Letting her go didn't seem like that big of a problem.

As I convinced myself to take an optimistic approach, Glenda turned to me, kneeled, and said something extraordinary.

"I—I have a request! I'll tell you everything I know, so could you please give me some employment? I'll do anything you want, even dirty work, so please!"

Benimaru and I looked at each other, passing messages with our eyes:

*Now what?*

*Do whatever you want.*

But "*employment*"? What about the money? I had more to work with, but we were still sorting out salaries for my top officials. Working for free was still the norm around here.

"Hmm... I appreciate the sentiment, but we're still busy developing ourselves. We're pretty far behind in terms of organization, so we're not paying anyone a salary yet..."

Times like this, you gotta just be honest. No point trying to smooth over things.

"...Huh?" Glenda froze. But the next thing she said surprised me instead. "Well, I'm used to that. I was stationed with the Master Rooks in the Holy Empire of Lubelius, but they didn't pay us there either..."

Dang.

Even the Three Battlesages, the best Lubelius had to offer, didn't get any money. They were paid in goods—and any money they needed, they were expected to scrounge themselves. They had an illustrious name to leverage,

though, and I'm sure they got treated like kings wherever they went. Sometimes they'd receive payments for resolving crimes, too, so they led pretty decent lifestyles.

"Wait, so you get nothing, either, Hinata?"

She sure racked up a hell of a bill at the festival...

"Tch... No. Lubelius is an advocate for equality, so there's no public salary at all. We all get paid in goods."

That was a surprise...but also a relief. Lubelius has a long, storied history, and it made it *this* far without salaries. Maybe we shouldn't be in any hurry to enact them, either.

By the way, thanks to running the Crusaders and the Imperial Guard, Hinata *was* given access to some of the government budget. Between that and monster-hunting rewards, her income was actually pretty upper-class.

"And yet you made *me* pay for you?"

"Quit sweating the small stuff! I'm just saving money."

She brought the kids all kinds of stuff, but with me, it's all "Ooh, gotta save money." And actually, did Mjöllmile pay her the labyrinth reward fees yet? The thought just occurred to me, but I didn't want to prod *that* hornet's nest. I was too scared to ask, so I didn't.

"But I'm pretty well-known around the Western Nations. Even if I'm free, I don't have any work waiting for me. No nation's gonna hire me now, and I'm not cut out for adventuring work. Besides, you're on the cutting edge in culture here, so if you can guarantee me meals and a roof over my head, I'm good!"

Judging by how desperate Glenda was sounding, I doubted she was trying to deceive me.

And I had reason to believe her. If Lubelius was in pursuit of the Three Battlesages, everyone would have to assume a betrayal was the cause. She'd never find a nation willing to employ someone as politically touchy as her. Even if she became an adventurer under an assumed name, I could get it if everyone kept a prudent distance. If her cover got blown, she might have Lubelius *and*

Granville come after her, too. Any kind of stable life was impossible.

"Yeah, I guess you'll have a hard time of it without support from somewhere."

"Right? So please, Sir Demon Lord! I know you don't believe a word of this, but I swear I'll stay faithful to you!"

There's no way I *could* believe it. But somehow, I just couldn't find it in myself to hate her. She was the classic spy-film femme fatale, and I couldn't just abandon her.

"Can I leave her to you, Soei?"

"As you wish, Sir Rimuru. I have no objection."

"Great. Thanks. And I can't have her turning traitor, so deal with that if it happens, okay?"

"Absolutely. In terms of battle strength alone, I would rate her above Soka, so perhaps I could establish a special-ops team for her that answers to me."

"Oh, kinda like a team all the problem kids get thrown into?"

"Something like that, Sir Rimuru. I'd like to scout out members locally and elsewhere."

*Soei's got some ideas brewing, doesn't he?* Diablo was still off searching for an army, so it wouldn't be fair to turn Soei down. Let him do what he wants.

"Right! I'll leave all that up to you! You can work out a budget with Mjöllmile later."

"Yes, Sir Rimuru!"

We wrapped *that* up fast.

"Can you not call me a problem child in front of my face?"

Glenda was whining about something, but if she had an issue, she oughta try to win my trust first. Either way, she was now part of our team.

\*

Before leaving Glenda to Soei's management, we decided to have Glenda tell us everything she was aware of. It was no longer an interrogation, so we decided to talk over dinner.

"In the dining hall, you pick up these boards with menu items on them and take them to the window over there. There's a selection of three items each day, plus a regular special. If you get promoted to management, you'll get to order one item of your own, too."

"Oh, really? Because *my* meals always get picked for me."

They were always good, I felt, but I never went through that board trade-in thing. The managerial dining hall brought food over to you without having to say or do anything. That—and Shion and Gobichi would occasionally rent kitchen space so they could develop special new meals of their own, but that was another story.

"Today's special is our most popular menu item," Shuna explained with a smile. "Normally, you'd either reserve it with merit points or get in line early for a chance at it."

Ah. I always thought the desserts were really fancy here. I guess I wasn't alone.

"We always get this, don't we?"

"Yeah. I make sure I get my share."

Benimaru and Soei order the special, too? I wondered what Soei meant by that. Did he have one of his spies stand in line for him? I hope he's not resorting to silly cafeteria antics like that.

With the dishes on our table, dinner began.

"Right, so let's begin with—"

I was trying to talk to Glenda...but she was completely focused on her food, a woman possessed. It *was* good, I'll admit—definitely worth being called a special. So I decided to wait. It's nice to have more pleasant conversation during a meal anyway.

After we were done:

"Up until now, I always thought money was the most important thing in life. But today, I've changed my mind. From now on, I live for nothing but merit points!!"

If she meant it, she was way easier to take down than I thought. But whatever. If that's what motivates her, then hey, knock yourself out.

"All right. So what do you know? Give me the unembellished truth," Soei pressed.

And Glenda finally started to talk.

First, about the Council. This organization was under the control of five senior councillors, known as the Five Elders. These were headed by Granville, whom we had discussed earlier. As for the other four? Amazingly, one of them was Count Gaban, the mastermind behind today's events. Prince Johann of Rostia, one of the councillors relatively supportive of me, was another.

"How come there are so many differing opinions among the Five Elders?"

"That's how Maribel likes it. She pits the Council against one another so they can keep the mainstream faction the strongest. It's kind of fixed, you could say, but to the people involved, it's a serious battle for survival."

Hmm. A way to encourage activity within the group? It'd be more efficient if they all worked together, but that'd open it up more to stagnation and corruption. You often hear about family-run companies getting ruined by whoever was at the top. Besides, if Johann successfully earned my trust, it'd be easier for him to learn more about our inner workings. If they had booted us out today, then fine; if they didn't, now Johann was no doubt ready to extend his feelers toward us.

"It's all kind of malicious, isn't it?"

"I wish we could just burn it all up instead of deal with it."

Just hearing about all this made my eyes water. You had to know who your friends and enemies were, or else you'd quickly be ruined. That's how they did things in the nobility—and if I didn't know that, I would've been on the cusp of trusting in Johann. Maybe taking Glenda in was the right thing after all.

The other two elders were Margrave Cidre, tasked with protecting the northern regions of Englesia, and King Doran, leader of a small military kingdom also called Doran. This meant two out of the five elders were Englesian, which showed how much Granville valued that nation—close to the Holy Empire of

Lubelius, far from the Forest of Jura, and one of the safest countries in the world. He must've marked it as the nation most worthy of serving as his political and economic center.

"So why do they see me as the enemy? I'm so harmless! I wouldn't hurt a fly." I kind of let that slip out. It seemed to surprise the group.

"Huh? If you keep picking the kind of fights *you* pick, of course people are gonna be hostile."

Pardon?

"Yeah, I thought you were picking fights with people, too. Diablo told me all about how Sir Rimuru was going to have the world economy in his grip before long, so I thought you wanted to take over the Council."

*What?! And hang on, Diablo's saying stuff like that?*

"That was my intention as well. My information gathering was part of that effort, I thought."

*Well, no, I'll admit that was what it's for, but...*

"...Don't tell me you didn't even realize you were doing it?"

*Not you too, Hinata! Why's everyone looking at me like that?* "N-no, um... I'm not gonna say I *didn't* mean it, but I didn't intend to hurry things along *that* quickly. So for now, I just wanna keep things to peaceful negotiation..."

Hinata sighed and rolled her eyes. "If some new merchant comes along and ruins *your* marketplace, you won't find a lot of merchants softhearted enough to forgive that, either."

Oof. Maybe not.

"Well, all right, all right. We were gonna clash in the future anyway, so let's just treat ourselves to the main support of economic activity in the Western Nations, all right?"

"That was my intention all along. My job's to shore up their defenses, but..."

"And I will investigate the Rozzo family and the Five Elders."

In a way, it was good that we knew our enemies now. Befriending Glenda was

an unexpected windfall, and thanks to that, we had a direction to go.

"Okay. Be careful on that. I don't want to wage a two-front war against Yuuki and the Rozzos."

"I'm aware," Benimaru said with a nod, while Soei gave his own agreement.

I was taking a wait-and-see approach with Yuuki as we waged information and economic warfare with the Rozzos. There were no real bullets flying around, at least, which made things easier on me.

So I was about to wrap things up, wondering if I was worrying too much about this, when Hinata stopped me.

"Wait a minute. Yuuki and the Rozzos? Why are you suspicious of Yuuki?"

I was thrown for a moment, but then I realized Hinata might be oblivious to all that.

"Well, thinking about it, if you look at the list of people who know I'm a reincarnate involved with Shizu—and who could've leaked that info to the Eastern merchants..."

"Yuuki's about it, isn't he?"

"Pretty much. And while I'm at it, I think that Roy, the guy who played the role of a demon lord, was killed by this guy Laplace, member of something called the Moderate Jesters. Sorry if I'm wrong about that."

"No, I appreciate it. I don't have any stake in that, but if he's working against us, I can't stand for that."

She was willing to accept Laplace and his cohorts as our foes. She gave a cold, cold smile, one that froze my spine in place. *Man, that's scary.* I definitely better make sure I don't rile her.

After that exchange, Hinata stood up, preparing to head home.

"Ummm, actually, about that..." Glenda timidly spoke up. Guess she still had something to say.

"What is it? If you wanna say something, don't hold back. Did you remember something else?"

Then she dropped the biggest bombshell of the day.

"By Yuuki, you mean the grand master of the Guild, right? He's connected to Johann of the Five Elders, but I'd say he's pretty much under Maribel's complete control."

*Huh? Yuuki's being manipulated?!*

"Are you serious?"

"I'm not shameless enough to joke at a time like this."

*No, I bet not. "...Well, why didn't you tell us sooner? That's important!"*

"Um... You know, I answered directly to Granville for the most part, so..."

Essentially, two people had the right to give Glenda orders: Granville and Maribel, although it was Granville nine times out of ten. As a result, Glenda didn't get to talk with Maribel often or get much of an insight into her mind.

I picked her brain a little more, seeing if I could get anything else. We learned about more of her underlings, as well as the Blood Shadow, a group that handled the Rozzo family's dirty work.

"That *is* a problem," said Shuna after a moment of reflection. "It might be that whoever's controlling Yuuki drove him to leak your secret for some reason."

Hinata was lost in thought as well. It looked like we'd need to reconsider matters from the ground up.

.....

Even Raphael was thinking in silence for once. That's a rarity, but if it couldn't come up with an answer, worrying about it might be a waste of time.

What we needed here was a clear solution. If thinking won't solve a problem, we can think later. When taking an exam, it's always smarter to leave the tougher questions for later—wasting valuable time was never a good idea.

"Well, either way, Yuuki's still suspicious, so let's keep an eye on him... Actually, wait a minute."

As wary as Yuuki was, I couldn't imagine him trying to spring something on me. But if he was under someone's thrall, that was another story—and since

that someone's the clearly hostile Maribel, maybe the assumptions I've been working with were wrong all this time, huh?

"Hey, if Yuuki can't defy Maribel's orders, you think he might be scheming something no matter *what* his position is?"

Yeah. That's the thing. Maribel wanted us out of the picture, and she might be willing to use Yuuki for that goal, keeping her own hands clean. Trying to avoid a "two-front war" was the least of our worries.

"That doesn't sound too good, does it?"

"Given that we're in the info-gathering stage, the Rozzos can't make any flashy moves, I imagine. But..."

"Soei and my brother are right. You're about to venture into the ruins with Yuuki's assistant, the Guild vice-master Lady Kagali, yes? They might be planning something in there..."

Mmm. Looks like everyone's reached the same conclusion. Maybe the wait-and-see approach was too optimistic.

"I can't lie and claim that's not a worry of mine. Maribel and the Rozzos can always say they didn't know what Yuuki was doing, too. They can pin all the blame on the Free Guild and cause a rift between us..."

"...And that would ruin your plans, Sir Rimuru."

"If we stay on the sidelines like this, they might strike first."

Mmmmm.

But I felt we were already on guard enough. Security was stepped up across town. They could try to rile up our townspeople, but it wouldn't go that easy.

So...

*Suggestion. You could deliberately open a soft spot to lure them in.*

That's it!

"Perhaps we could cancel the expedition?"

I shook my head at Benimaru. "No. Actually, let's take advantage of it. Milim will scream at me if we cancel it, so let's go through with it. Let's go in as

prepared as we can for anything that could pop up—and when it does, let's engage it!"

Milim was looking forward to exploring the ruins. It was like a field trip to her, something to take her mind off homework, and she'd fly into a rage if I told her it was off. I didn't want to create yet more problems for myself, so I really wanted to avoid that.

"But wouldn't that be dangerous?"

"With Milim there? And I was going to take Shion to guard me anyway."

"Ah, that should work, then. I'm sure she'll be glad to hear that, given how she was on home duty."

Benimaru had no complaints, so Shion it was.

"And I'll take Gobta and Ranga along, too. That should be more than enough of a fighting force, shouldn't it?"

"Understood. We'll make sure nothing happens in town in the meantime!"

"And I'll help my brother strengthen the barrier around it."

"I'll keep a steady watch for any unusual movements between countries—especially the Five Elders Glenda mentioned."

"Thanks. And we have Veldora in the Dungeon, so if things get *really* bad, turn to him." I gave each of them my approval.

"Well, I need to bring all this discussion back to Lady Luminus," said Hinata. "Be careful, all right? Because you have a tendency to get careless sometimes."

"Quit reminding me!"

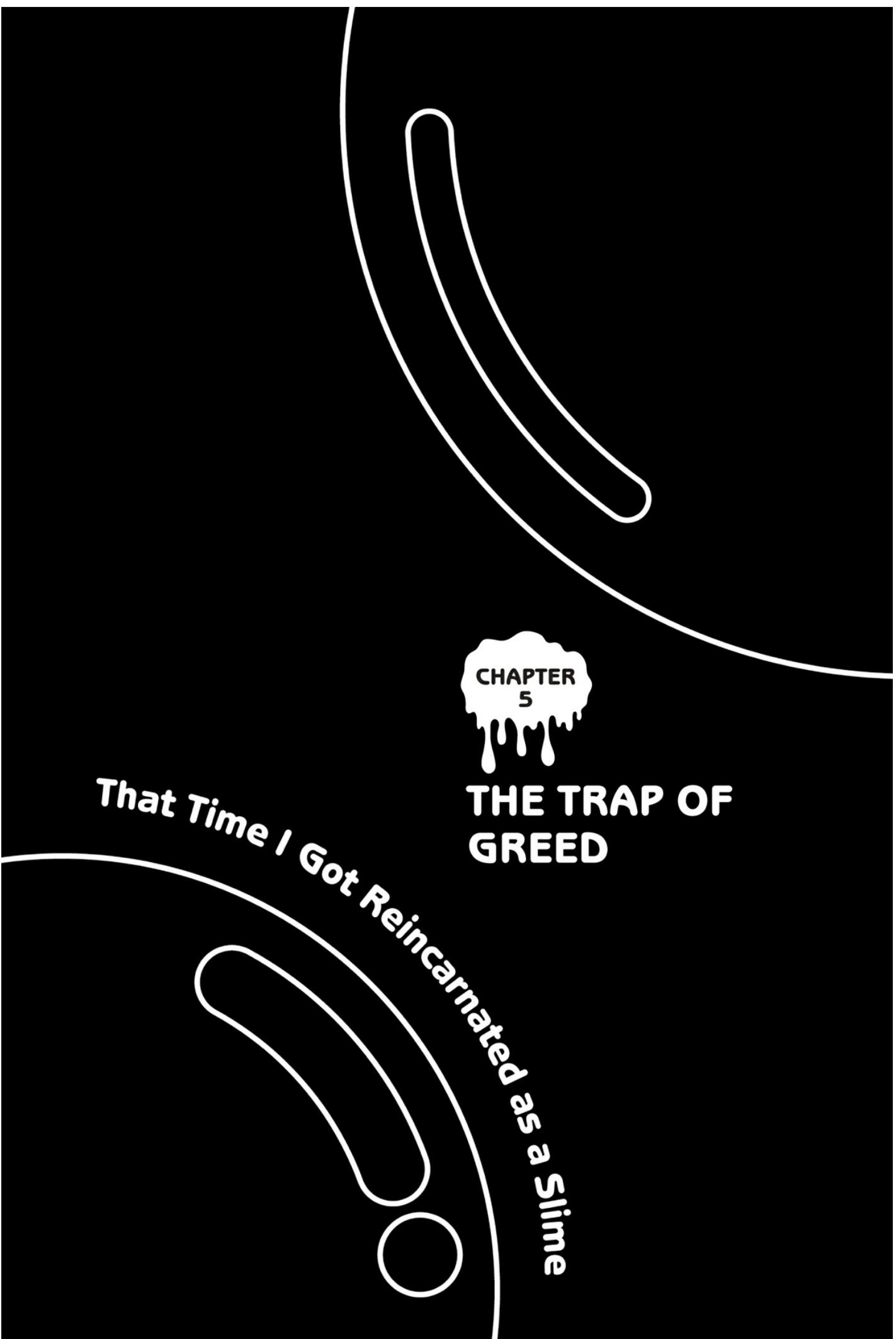
So she magically willed herself back home. She's usually cold to me, but sometimes, in her own way, she can demonstrate legitimate concern, too.

Was this her idea of flirting?

*Understood. No.*

No dice, huh? I was hoping I'd get to dream a little, but reality isn't so kind, is it?

Anyway, we had our walking papers. Now we just had to prepare for the big day.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE TRAP OF GREED

Once I'd rounded up all my officials together, I shared everything I learned with them, introducing Glenda and ensuring they accepted her. This, of course, meant exposing Glenda to their surveillance; she'd need to earn her trust with all of them.

I also introduced her to Kaijin and Kurobe, so they could get a chance to examine her handgun. She oughtta be able to restock her ammo here, too. Maybe we can even mass-produce those things? Honestly, I'd like one, too. I wasn't gonna put them on sale, but maybe I could give them out to important people on some kind of licensing system. *They'd be cool to have, too*, I wickedly thought as the days passed by.

Soon, the day of our ruins expedition came. We were all set to go. Our expedition outfits were perfect, and I even had a prototype gun on my side.

It had piqued Kaijin's interest enough that he produced a mold during the off-hours of his research. Dold then carved a seal into them that used magical power to trigger a small explosion inside the chamber—no gunpowder needed and no ejected cartridges. All you needed were some elliptical bullets, and off you went. It was sized at a third of an inch and could hold sixteen bullets. It used a blowback system that made the bolt retract with each shot, in order to load the next bullet and eliminate the impact of the explosive charge.

The construction was more like a toy than anything, but even this had the power of a .44 Magnum. That was thanks to the gun's magisteel make, which improved its shock resistance, and the inscription-driven explosive charge also delivered the maximum amount of power possible.

By the way, the force of this gun depended on the type of bullets used. Normally, it'd use plain old lead bullets, but for monsters, we also had magic-

infused mithril shots. The force could differ depending on how much magic you put in, so you could say this weapon needed the right person using it to excel.

In terms of classification, it was a Rare, albeit one that could hit as hard as a Unique. A really interesting weapon to have around, one that even surprised Kaijin's team as they made it. With the capability it had, I'd really like to make it standard-issue with our new troops, but as mentioned, that was up for discussion.

Frankly, this was something we'd normally never do. In a way, I made it to play out the classic tropes more than anything; I was reluctant to formally adopt it. We'd have to see how things went, perhaps lending it out only if we determined it to be truly necessary.

Such as today, for example. Carrying this around definitely completed my look. Any man's got to have a little classic adventure in his life.

"Ooh, this is really cool! The way it kind of recoils in my hands feels so awesome!" Gobta cried.

See? Gobta and I share the same good taste. Typically, these were for lending out only, but let's give Gobta one as a present.

"You see what I mean, Gobta? But don't go pointing it at people, all right? It's dangerous."

"Of course not! I'll be real careful!"

He was overjoyed, while Ranga looked on jealously. *Ranga, you can't use that thing. I'll give you a fancy scarf, though, so make do with that.*

"Hee-hee... I have Goriki-maru V2 with me, thank you. Not to mention the clothing you chose for me, Sir Rimuru..."



"Shion, no going on an expedition in that, all right? Safety's our top consideration here!"

She must've really liked the clothing I gifted to her, because Shion wore it every chance she got. But it was meant for fashion, not exploration.

"A pity..."

Her head drooped down as she changed to her normal suit. That wasn't exactly a great improvement, but it was her de facto battle gear, so ah well.

"Rimuru, what do you think of me?"

Milim was practically jumping up and down with excitement.

"Ah... Looks good on you. Definitely worth getting for today."

Like Gobta and me, she was in expedition gear we obtained for this day.

"You bet! It feels good—and talk about easy to move in! Can you *believe* how many pockets it has? So cool!"

She was in shorts, which I wasn't sure was such a great idea, but they suited her, so we'd go with it.

"That it is. Be sure to thank Shuna, okay?"

"Okay!"

"That's right!"

Thus, we were all in high spirits as we headed for our meeting point—the Free Guild headquarters in the Englesia capital. The plan was to head to the Puppet Nation of Dhistav from there.

Kagali was waiting for us at the front entrance.

"Good to see you again. We have a lot to do today!"

"I guess this is the first time? I'm Milim. Good to meetcha!"

"My name is Kagali. It's a pleasure to meet you as well."

They all smiled at one another before Kagali guided us forward.

"Milim?"

“Mmm... I don’t think there’s any problem. But it’s a little...um...”

“...?”

Kagali gave our conversation an odd look. She worked for Yuuki, so we eyed her with suspicion, just in case. I was having Milim check her out with Dragon’s Eye just now, and it sounded like something caught Milim’s attention—but nothing especially problematic. It still bothered me, though, so I resolved to keep my guard up.

“Our team’s all here, so let me introduce everyone.”

Rolling her eyes a bit, Kagali began introducing the expedition team to us. They were lined up in a row, waiting for us in an open area near the HQ. It was a team trained by Kagali herself, and the more talented and experienced among them would be joining us today. They all volunteered for the job, around ten men and women in all, even after being told we could be attacked. Some of the passers-by were giving them curious looks, but nobody minded. They seemed well trained enough.

Their equipment, meanwhile, was the full, complete deal. Not the make-believe stuff we had on, but a lot of heavy stuff—thick upper and lower clothing, with large backpacks. Each of them carried tools for the role they played in the expedition—walking sticks, pickaxes, shovels, you name it.

“We’ll carry your equipment for you, Sir Rimuru, but where did you put it?”

*We didn’t have any. Just these cool new outfits.*

“No, um, we didn’t prepare anything, so it’s just this.”

“Huh? That’s an amusing joke.”

*Yeah, I know, but...*

“Look, you really shouldn’t have any of your skin exposed. You might get stung, and it’s easier to get hurt that way, right?”

Work clothing did its job best if it covered all your skin. Plus, Milim’s outfit was just downright slovenly.

“Hmm, you think so? But my skin’s protected by an aura at all times, so I’ll be okay!”

“Yeah, but you wanna have Kagali get mad at you?”

“You’re just the same as her! From my perspective, you’re both far too lightly equipped! You’re treating this expedition like a walk in the park!”

Oof. Harsh. What was so bad about this, really?

“All right, all right, all right. We’ll be fine, okay? I may not look it, but I’ve got a lot of adventuring experience!”

To be more exact, I had gone light since I didn’t really need to camp outside anyway. That was better demonstrated in person than explained at length right now.

“Well, if you insist...but if you have any trouble, please let us know at once.”

I doubted we’d have that much trouble. We were treating this like a fun outing, but we *did* have an eye out for danger. I made sure Gobta, Ranga, and Shion were all aware of that.

Time to head out, then.

“Right. I have a wagon prepared for us...”

“Huh? We don’t need a wagon, do we?”

Kagali stared blankly at me. I stared blankly back at her. What? I mean, it’d take, like, two months to reach Dhistav by wagon. That was never an option.

“What do you mean?”

I invited the quizzical Kagali to just take us out of town for now. Once we found ourselves in a deserted area, I used Dominate Space to open a transport gate straight to Dhistav. This process was familiar to me by now; if I’ve been somewhere before, it was easy to open a gate there.

“All right, come on in. It won’t disappear on you or anything, so don’t panic.”

The dazed expedition party began talking all at once.

“You’re kidding me! How far away do you think we are...?”

“Truly...a demon lord is an amazing thing...”

“Impossible. Now the majority of our preparation has gone to waste...”

I felt a little bad about that, but—hey—at least I looked cool.

\*

So we were at the Puppet Nation of Dhistav.

The first people to greet us were the dark elves, lined up at the castle entrance and bowing deeply.

“Welcome to Dhistav! You must be exhausted from your journey!”

The elder among the group stepped up to me. I say *elder*, but she looked maybe in her twenties, a woman with blond hair and dark-brown skin.

“Oh, no, not really. But do you have rooms for us?”

“Of course. We could provide individual rooms for each of you, but if necessary, we have larger group rooms as well.”

I gave them advance notice, so they were entirely set up for us. For now, I figured we could drop all our stuff in the larger group room.

“Okay, let’s head to the group room first. We can keep our luggage in there, so maybe we can get a tour around the castle today?”

“Very well. I’d be happy to guide you.”

The elder guided us into the room. I told the team to drop their stuff there, and they did so, walking like out-of-sync robots.

“Um, what is going on here?! It hasn’t even been an hour since we came together, and we’re already at our destination?!”

“This is insanity! I must be going insane!”

“What? Individual rooms? They’re treating us like guests in this castle?!”

I guess the robotic walking was because their brains were still catching up to all this. It was a departure from the usual sort of expedition, and I suppose it confused them.

“Sir Rimuru has directed us to look after all of you. If you run into any issues during your stay, please don’t hesitate to inform us.”

The elder flashed a soft smile at the dazed team as she spoke. That was enough to make them face reality. I watched them all, warm fuzzies running

over me.

Then we took the team on a tour of the castle, the former residence of the demon lord Clayman and a place that brought the word *opulence* to new heights. The dark elves were fully maintaining the palace, and everywhere I looked, it was spotless.

"This is gonna be yours once the expedition is over, Milim, but I think all these people still want to live here."

"Mmm. Yes, I see that. Let's have them provided with regular food and supplies."

"Thank you very much, Lady Milim."

"Don't worry about it! You're my people, too, so if you carry out your roles, that's great."

Wow, Milim's really getting smarter. Frey's efforts must be paying off.

Impressed, I asked her some more about the castle and whether she had any issues with it. It's a big palace, enough so that it had space for all the dark elves. There was no surrounding castle town—dwellings for magic-born existed, but they were all out working under Geld right now. The elves were tending to them as well, for when they eventually came back.

"And this is the entrance into the ruins. It's divided into three sections, with the deepest one serving as a crypt. Only the higher officials among us are allowed to enter, and only the demon lord Clayman himself knows what lies in the middle section and beyond."

Hakuro mentioned this in his own report, but the ruin entrance was right inside the castle.

"So you know how the topmost section is structured?"

"Yes. All the treasure in the top section has already been recovered, so we are currently using the area for our residences."

There were so many empty rooms inside that it could easily house over a thousand beds.

We opened the door and went in. It was supposed to be underground, but

the space was filled with a soft light.

“What’s this light...?”

“Ah yes, this is a perpetual magic-driven effect. It is synchronized with the passage of the sun, so it gets dark at nighttime.”

“Heavens! Magic from the distant past is still in operation today?!”

“This... This alone is a huge discovery. It’s being treated as the most normal of things in here, but I’d like to thoroughly investigate it...”

“Is this magic active in the other sections?”

“Yes. I had a glance deeper in when I accompanied Lord Clayman, but the central section was just as bright.”

The elder patiently answered all our questions, a back-and-forth that continued for a while to come. I could see how excited the team was, and that energy was starting to rub off on us.

“Better stay out of their way, Gobta.”

“Right! Gettin’ kinda nervous, huh?”

We whispered at each other as we looked around the first section. It looked pretty lived in, so I could believe the dark elves called it home.

“So if you live in here, you don’t see any monsters come up from below? ’Cause if there’s a crypt, I’d expect ghosts ‘n’ stuff...”

The elder snickered at Gobta’s query. “No, no need to worry about that. There is only one door leading to the underground, and only Lord Clayman could open it.”

“Hmm?” Milim raised an eyebrow. “Well, if it won’t open, let’s just break it down.”

“Certainly. One swing of my blade, and all shall be pulverized!”

“No! We need to examine it first! Please, no breaking anything!”

I rushed in to keep the extremists from having their way.

“R-right. Good point. Better be more careful than that, Shion!”

"Yes, that was close. If I didn't hear that, I would have lost hold of myself."

That's just what I was anxious about, but at least they were open to guidance.

So we made our way through the rather extensive ruins, past the dark elves' settlement and up to a single, very large door, the same size as the first but with a very apparent magical seal on it.

"...Ah. This appears to be part of a defense mechanism powered by ancient magic. It might wake up the entire city defense system if we touch it."

"Defense system?! Is it still active?"

"We'll need to be careful. If we trip it, the expedition might have to be called off *very* quickly."

Kagali stiffened as she gave the warning, and her team's faces all tightened up, too. I wonder how Clayman got this thing open.

"Was Clayman involved with running these ruins or something?"

"No, he came to the forefront only just recently. I doubt he was involved with them before that point."

"I think he managed to undo this magical seal. Follow the correct procedure, and I think it should open without complaint."

*Mmm, yes, yes. Even Clayman could tackle this one, if he had enough time. Didn't he have some unique skill along those lines?*

*Affirmative. Manipulator, the power to convert information into encrypted messages that can be sent and received.*

Right, that one. He could probably use it to decrypt whatever data he saw, which was a good way to analyze and break open magic seals like this one.

By the way, have I obtained that skill yet?

*Understood. The skill was an inferior version of the powers my master already has, so it was dismantled and absorbed as energy. As a formality, Control Terrain has been added to Control Laws.*

Ah. No wonder I didn't hear about it. If it's not worth reporting, Raphael doesn't tell me about it. But if Clayman could do it, so can I. It's *really* Raphael

doing it, but whatever.

“This could be a long battle.”

“Quite a challenge to start out with. But this is still a good environment compared to what we’ve dealt with before. Let’s settle down and start deciphering this!”

The team was enthusiastic about getting to work, for sure. Meanwhile, I laid a hand on the door. The energy flowing through the veins in the earth, I could tell, was spreading out across the wall as it went through the magic seal.

“I see. If we break down this door, that’ll knock out all the light in this section. All this energy would be diverted toward eliminating the intruders, and then it’d heal itself once everything was safe again, perhaps. Staying in operation like this for over a thousand years... This is the work of a highly advanced civilization of magic.”

It was Greek to me if I was alone, but thanks to all the support I had here, this was pretty easy to follow. It was even kind of fun, like a puzzle.

Working my way through the magic seal like a worksheet full of mathematical problems, I managed to figure out how to open it.

“Oh, here we go. Run some magic power through here, and that’ll open up an input window for an encrypted spell.”

I turned back toward everyone...only to find the team staring at me, jaw down on the floor. Oops. In an instant, I knew I had gone too far. It was so much fun analyzing it, you know, but this was *their* job, wasn’t it?

“Sorry, kinda got carried away...”

“N-no, not a problem at all.”

Kagali offered me some comfort, but I really felt like I was stepping on some toes here. Butting in too much would be regrettable, so I decided to sit back and fluff up Ranga’s mane for a while...

...but with the kind of gang I brought along, that wasn’t gonna happen.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I just solved it, too!” Milim was already bounding around the door.

"Oh? I'm pretty stumped, I guess." Meanwhile, Gobta was bringing a quizzical hand to his head.

Several of the team members were debating among themselves, voices and eyes bright.

This all happened thanks to a question from Kagali.

*"Sir Rimuru, would you mind explaining how you deciphered this?"*

I was deep into giving Ranga a grooming session, but if she was asking, I had to answer her. So in front of an eager-to-learn audience, I went over the steps I took to decipher the magic seal.

"First, before you examine the complete shape, you need to examine what kind of magical formula has been added to it. Then you divide that formula into individual sections."

"So you look for the newest spell first?"

"Right. You're figuring out which formula will keep the complete shape from working right if you take it out, and then you repeat that as you try to grasp the core features of the spell. After that, it's just a matter of taking all the correct answers and stacking them atop one another."

"I see..."

"So get rid of the false data and keep the spells that work correctly?"

I had heard this was a team of elite explorers, and they certainly were quick learners. Just a little advice from me, and their understanding grew deeper and deeper.

"So with trap spells, they're usually complete packages in and of themselves, right? They're kind of like leaves and branches coming out from the main tree, separate from the flow at the foundation. That's assuming the main purpose of the spell isn't to activate the trap, of course, but..."

"...Hmm. So they're in the main flow of the seal, but we can't afford to ignore them, huh?"

I guess my experience educating children was paying off. The team found my teaching style really easy to grasp. Having so much success lifted my spirits, so I

kept on demonstrating my approach to magic seal analysis.

In the midst of this, Milim went and got the door completely unsealed. A few others followed quickly after her, but it was then that the dark-elf elder spoke up again.

"Everybody, we've prepared dinner for you. I'm sure you're tired from your long journey, so why don't we finish up work for today?"

Only now did I realize we were into the evening hours. Yeah, the real expedition could begin tomorrow. *Let's wrap things up for now—we can get the door open for good soon enough.*

"Okay, wanna stop here?"

"Sounds good. It feels strange describing it as a *long journey*, but we can get down to business starting tomorrow."

With Kagali's agreement, our work ended for the day.

\*

The next morning, Kagali formally opened the door, her fully equipped team lined up behind her. A blue light flickered as the door silently slid away.

"And there we go."

The team cheered. "Well done," I said as I took a step inside.

In this middle section, the light wasn't as bright as above. It was more of a dimmer glow, eternally shining from candlesticks installed in the stone walls. Another impressive piece of magical technology—not real candles, but magic-driven illumination.

As I walked along, astonished by them, Milim came up to me.

"It feels a lot more oppressive all of a sudden, huh?"

"Yeah. The ceiling's a lot lower, and it feels like these stone walls are closing in on us. Pretty narrow corridor, too. I bet this is set up like kind of a maze."

The corridor was maybe six and a half feet wide; two people standing next to each other would feel a little cramped. Milim and I were on the small side, so it wasn't a problem, but the people carrying large packs behind us probably had a

rougher time of it.

“Sir Rimuru, who should we have up front?”

If this was a mazelike area, we’d have to figure out a path to take at every fork in the hallways. There might be traps in place, too.

“We can detect traps for you as the leaders. Do you mind if we stay in the front?”

“If you don’t mind handling that for us.”

“Sure thing! With me around, you’re safe no matter *what* shows up!”

Milim gave a reassuring nod before I could speak up. Nobody had any issue with that, so we were now leading the whole team, Kagali and her assistant behind us. Shion and Gobta took up the rear, serving as bodyguards for the rest of the team; Ranga was in my shadow; and the elder was watching the door for us. I couldn’t wait for dinner from her tonight.

I ambled along, using Magic Sense to survey the path ahead. The corridor was stone, but sometimes we’d pass by murals on the walls—very pretty ones.

“Wow. These murals alone have a lot of artistic value.”

“Do they?”

“Sure. They must be depicting scenes from ancient times, so they’ll be great to research. They’re really worth a lot.”

“Hmm. You know, thinking about it, they *do* remind me of things I saw way back when.”

Oh, right. To me, it’s the faraway past, but to Milim, this is probably just a nostalgia trip. That’d make anyone a bit emotional, I bet. Better be careful with our expedition here—I wouldn’t want to add any more damage to the wear and tear of time.

Our explorations continued apace, with no booby traps to speak of. We were now taking a break for lunch.

“All right. I’ll begin cooking, then.”

“Oh, wait one minute. The elder made some box lunches for all of us, so let’s

go with those.”

I stopped a team member as he was trying to start a campfire, then took out enough lunches for everyone. It must’ve looked like I conjured them up from nothing, but they were in my Stomach, of course. That kept them well-preserved, making it a useful skill for long journeys like this.

“Umm...”

“Is that even possible?”

I could hear people whispering about me. Let them. Despite their confusion, they readily accepted the boxes.

“Oooh, this *does* look good,” exclaimed Milim when she opened it up. On the menu today were sandwiches with tons of veggies, eggs, and smoked meat. Dark-elf cuisine was all about uniquely heavy sauces; the one used here was a bit like mayonnaise, doing a great job of softening up the rather hard buns. If people still had trouble biting through them, that’s where the vegetable soup came in, poured into large wooden bowls. It used a hearty chicken broth, giving it a nice, tasty body that really worked its way into the veggies for a satisfying treat.

“I have lots more, so don’t be shy!”

The moment I shouted it, I was mobbed by team members, empty bowls in hand. Milim was first in line, so I guess she was a fan.

“We almost never get food this good outdoors. You’re making us a very happy team today.”

I couldn’t help but feel Kagali was needling me a little when she said that. I had just resolved not to butt in too much, after all, so I could read between the lines—but if she thought this was cheating, I hoped she was willing to overlook it.

“Well, you know, I’d like to avoid using fire in this place if we can.”

“Fire?”

“Right. We don’t want a fire to go out of control in here, and besides, we’re underground. I think we’ve got good ventilation so far, but just in case, you

know?"

"You were thinking that far ahead, huh...?"

"I wouldn't worry so much if we were outdoors, though."

That was the truth. This was a tight corridor, and there was no ready source of water. If something happened, we might not have an escape route. That's why I felt it prudent to bring along box lunches from the start.

Also, bathroom breaks.

"Um, by the way, if any of you want to go to the bathroom, I'll set up a transport gate back to the entrance, so take care of that during our lunch break, okay?"

With that, I flipped the figurative switch on a transport gate. Some of them gave me "you're kidding me" stares, but...you know. I figured they would probably just do their business behind a rock or something otherwise, but I wanted to avoid that. This path eventually leads to a crypt, after all, and I didn't want to profane it.

"I think you're worrying too much. And the dead might not care anyway."

"...No, I think we could learn from that."

Kagali agreed with me. That was nice to see.

So while everyone's taking a bathroom break:

"Hey, is it all right if I try out something real quick?" I said to Kagali.

"What's that? Coming from you, I'd really like to know."

"Well, in the labyrinth I run, one popular strategy right now is to rely on Elemental Communication. You have to be a shaman or elementalist to access that, but it lets you immediately discover the best path to take."

"Really? Because that sounds real convenient."

Oh, Kagali didn't know about that? I guess you wouldn't, unless you're intimately involved in that stuff.

"Hey! Um, I'm a shamaness! Can you tell me more about Elemental Communication?!"

Ooh. Lucky break there. I felt a little self-conscious about casting the spell myself, so perfect. The volunteer who spoke up was a woman versed in spirit magic, so I gave her a quick lecture on Elemental Communication.

“Oh. Okay. Yeah, I get it!”

She was geared toward the wind element, which made conversation between her and the spirits a relatively smooth process.

“Wow... Now we really *won’t* get lost, huh?” she said. “The path goes into a dead end up ahead, so we’ll want to go back three intersections and turn east. But this is gonna be hard to map out...”

Kind of. If you just listen to the spirits’ voices all the time, you’ll tire out the communicator. So you’ll want to get the path down on paper...but of course, I had Raphael handle that for me, creating maps I could produce on paper with so much accuracy that you’d think I used some mapmaking software package.

But hang on...?

“Isn’t there a magic spell that puts any diagram you can think of on paper...?”

There definitely was, I thought. I saw it in the book *101 Wild & Wacky Spells* I found in the library.

*Report. Search complete. It is the illusory magic Thoughtography.*

That’s the one!

Funny how there were still a lot of useful, important magic spells I *didn’t* know, but *this* kind of nonsense stuck in my brain so easily. I got some good slime cells in me, you know, so my memory skills are even better than before—but with stuff like this, it’s like I was back to my old human mind again.

“Hey, anyone here know illusory magic?”

“Oh, I’m a mysticist! Still in training, but...”

“Okay, try learning this spell for me, then. Also...”

My friends and I all used Thought Communication to share ideas with one another. That would’ve made things easier, but if you wanted to teach something like this to a regular person, magic was still your best bet.

I had just the thing for a time like this:

*Suggestion. The best option would be the illusory magic Channeling.*

Ooh, there's that, huh?

So I taught Thoughtography and Channeling to the young man who volunteered his mysticist skills. He gave it a quick whirl—and right away, he was drawing up maps with ease.

“Wow! We’ll never get lost now!”

“In fact, if we use this magic, we could draw out the full structure of these ruins...”

“This will make future expeditions so much easier!”

*Well, I’m glad everyone likes it.*

“A map’s fine and all, but it won’t show us any traps or magic-driven mechanisms! Don’t drop your guard!” Kagali’s order brought the jubilant team back to earth. Impressive of her to notice that danger without me warning her about it.

For today, we decided to go ahead and make our way to the bottom of this section first. We wound up reaching it before dinner.

\*

Day three began in front of the door to the third and final section.

We decided to split up, one team disabling the magic on the door and the other continuing their exploration of the middle section. I had given them an on-the-field tutorial on this yesterday, so today I was just supervising. Milim, Gobta, and Ranga were on the exploration team.

“Not much to do, eh, Sir Rimuru?” Shion said.

“In that case, why don’t you go make some drinks for the workers?”

“Right away!”

Shion was right; we didn’t really have much to do. But the team was still lobbing questions at me now and again, so I was enjoying it.

Cheerfully, Shion set up a table, pouring coffee from a flask into the cups she

had lined up. It was an oddly moving sight. Just a little bit ago, letting Shion touch anything that might go into your mouth was verboten.

“All set! Care for a quick break, everyone?”

We all settled down to relax a bit, the team enjoying her coffee as they had a moment of peace. We still had an eye out for potential attacks, of course, but for now, nothing seemed forthcoming. Hopefully, I wasn’t overthinking matters—but now that I was away from Veldora, Maribel and her cohorts might see this as their big chance. If they were going to act, it was now or never. I’d need to stay on my toes as I saw how things went.

That—and I needed to keep Kagali and her team guarded, too. I ran a quick Analyze and Assess, but nobody seemed suspicious among any of them. They all had the abilities they claimed to have, and there was no sign they were under anyone’s control, whether via their desires or not. If they *were* brainwashed, then my eyes—or Raphael’s eyes, really—must be deceiving me.

I felt safe in dismissing that possibility. But what if they weren’t brainwashed, but following orders they truly believed in? That could happen, too, so I couldn’t rest easy yet, but none of them were a threat to my life.

So I sat back and enjoyed my coffee.

After a while, Milim came back carrying a ton of stuff. “Rimuru! Look at this! I found so much booty!!”

To be accurate, she was riding on Ranga empty-handed, while Gobta and the other team members were loaded down with swag.

“Check it out! They’re all so perfectly infused with magicules. This alone ought to be a huge harvest for us, huh?”

She was right. Most of their booty was battle equipment. And while they were no doubt fine pieces in their heyday, crafted by talented artisans, the magisteel inside them had settled down and vastly upgraded their abilities.

“Ooh, you’re right. There’s not much artistic value, but you could still use a lot of this stuff today.”

“Right? And look! This one *has* to be a Unique!”

It was. Extremely valuable. Not the sort of thing you'd want to have lying around, I thought. It aroused my suspicions.

"Where did you find this stuff? Because I doubt Clayman left it untouched without a reason..."

"Well, there was actually a trap I set off by accident, and a bunch of these golems came lumbering up to us. They were carrying all this!" she explained.

*Um, that sounded like something I shouldn't ignore, there...*

"You set off a trap?"

"Ah! Um, no, no! It went off the moment I stepped into this one corridor! I think even *you* would've had trouble avoiding it!"

"Yeah! We used magic to detect traps with every hallway we went down. We weren't bein' careless or anything!" Gobta added.

Milim and Gobta claimed they were being careful, and judging by testimony from the rest of the team, they weren't lying. Something must've been programmed with certain biological life-form patterns, repelling any intruders who didn't match them. If you didn't know the acceptable wavelengths beforehand, it was impossible for anyone to deactivate. The only logical way through was by force.

"Sounds like you had no choice, then. Some of these traps are pretty complex, huh?"

"Oh yes! It sure taught *me* a thing or two. We should set something like that up in our own Dungeon."

A corridor that only allowed preselected people through? Maybe this whole section of the ruins was designed to ward people away from the crypt.

"Then perhaps we should assume there are lots of other golems bearing Unique weapons. Their weapons must've *evolved right in their hands* while they were on standby over so many years. It's boggling to think about..."

Kagali was right. Good thing we had Milim and Gobta with us. If this expedition team were by themselves, there was a decent chance the golems would've killed them.

"Nothing might've happened yesterday, but I bet there are more traps like that in this section of the ruins. But no need to panic. Let's try to act more carefully from tomorrow forward."

"Right. It'll be a while before we have the door analyzed, so tomorrow—"

Just when Kagali was voicing her agreement, the earth began to shake. A gigantic burst of energy shot across the entire region, including these ruins. Fragments of rock fell from the ceiling, adding to the stress and terror.

"...?! What was that...?!"

"We gotta get outta here! It's gonna cave in!"

Kagali raised her voice to calm her team. "Pipe down! That was just a single jolt—it's not an earthquake. A structure this solid won't fall that easily. Just stay calm and start evacuating."

That was enough to restore order among the team, a testament to how well trained they were.

"So what was that?" the cool-as-a-cucumber Gobta casually asked.

"Hmm... Some kind of shock wave just ran across the surface, I think. A pretty big one, too, so it might've affected the palace..."

I had a transport gate handy if we needed it, so I wasn't panicking as I answered him. Still, though... Like Kagali said, it wasn't an earthquake, but some kind of localized energy blast, which meant it had to be man-made.

But just as I was thinking about going back up to look over things, my instincts reacted.

*Report. Hostile force detected. At this point in time, the ruins' defense system has activated. A large number of activating golems have been detected. There are also other intruders going into the ruins.*

Alarms began to blare, followed by a mechanical-sounding voice.

*Intruders into Amrita detected. Eliminate at once! Intruders into Amrita detected. Eliminate at once!*"

The repeating voice made the danger crystal clear. Now things were critical—

the surface wasn't guaranteed to be safe, and we had an emergency inside the ruins.

"You're kidding! Did these ruins—did Amrita's defense system just go off by itself?!" Kagali's cool, unaffected demeanor was gone now.

"There are intruders coming inside," I said. "Maybe they set off some kind of trap. Too bad the golems won't listen if we tell 'em we're not involved."

And frankly, I was starting to doubt Kagali herself. She was right near the door. Maybe she could've set off the defenses while I wasn't paying attention? And look at the timing. Other people entering the ruins just when the alarm goes off? That *had* to be deliberate.

"You notice anything, Milim?"

"No, I didn't hear a thing."

Milim could pick up all Thought Communications and magical conversations around her. Trying to hide anything from her was pointless, but she didn't overhear anything unusual. I thought the intruders might've been connected to Kagali, but maybe I jumped to conclusions.

So she's innocent?

*Report. Cannot reach a conclusion. If there is a soul-corridor connection, it is possible to engage in a hidden Thought Communication.*

So I couldn't feel safe yet. I really hated having to protect a potential spy while dealing with enemies... If she would've been kind enough to reveal herself and ditch me at this point, it'd make things a lot easier. But oh well.

"We're in a bad situation. I think the intruders must be from the organization coming after me," I said.

"Ah, it's really true..."

"So that earthquake, too...?!"

"But what kind of fools would take on a demon lord?"

The team seemed honestly surprised about all this. I didn't question any of their motives. I supposed I'd have to brace myself and keep them protected as I

fended off this adversary.

“Well, don’t worry. I promise I’ll step up to keep you all safe.”

They looked at me, surprised. Well, *that’s* mean—did they assume I’d abandon them all in here? We were getting along pretty well; I kinda hoped they trusted in me more.

“Just what you wished for, huh, Rimuru?” said Milim.

“Yeah. Though I’m not too sure whether they caught me or I caught them. We’ll have to see right now.”

Just as Raphael predicted, the enemy took the bait. I won’t ask how they managed to get in. With the kind of talent they had to choose from, it’d be a snap to sneak past the dark elves up top.

Well, let’s take this opportunity to end things here. I was anticipating this, and I debated over how to address it. There was nothing to panic about. Quickly, we all moved into our planned intercept positions.

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The second tremor came along.

“What’s that? I really don’t like the sounds of that!”

Even Gobta was growing concerned about events outside. But I didn’t have the time to answer him—because now, I could see it. An ominous dragon, advancing upon us from faraway skies.

“Whoa. That’s real bad...”

It was hard, inside the ruins like this, but I used Magic Sense to follow the magicules to the outside. There I could see a dragon, as vicious as they came. It looked like Veldora on the outside but a measure larger overall. Its skin was ragged, festering, almost rotting off, and its massive aura was exploding out of control. One look told me it packed a massive amount of magicule energy, far beyond what an “awakened” demon lord possessed. This was a Catastrophe-level threat.

“That bad?”

“Yeah. Looks like a dragon, but it’s way beyond an Arch Dragon. It’s probably

stronger than a Dragon Lord, even. Maybe it's one of Veldora's siblings...?"

"S-Sir Veldora?!"

It was outside the whole framework of what defined a dragon. My only guess was that it was a True Dragon—but it didn't have Veldora's grandeur or personality at all. Maybe *grandeur* was the wrong term to describe that doofus, actually, but this dragon just seemed *different* from him, fundamentally.

"That...!!" Then Milim suddenly opened her eyes wide. "Rimuru! I, um, I think I got some business to take care of. That dragon..."

She squinted into the empty space in front of her, then used Spatial Transport to vanish from the scene.

Judging by her panic, I could see where this was going. If Milim was freaking out over something, it was usually of her own doing—and that meant the enemy found one *serious* skeleton in her closet.

"I really can't believe this, but I think that's Milim's dragon 'friend' she sealed away long ago. It didn't get resurrected; someone's unsealed it and is controlling its will now."

"Wha?! Is that true, Sir Rimuru?"

"Yeah. I'm feeling these intense shock waves. Not even I might be able to beat it."

I was telling the truth. Charybdis, made from the remains of Veldora's power, was like an insect compared to this; the sheer hatred and rage was overpowering. I doubted it would ever stop until it destroyed the whole world... and the scary thing was, all of its emotions were painted over black in my mind. Maribel's emotional takeover skills were controlling that thing.

"...A Chaos Dragon. I never thought I'd see such a tyrant in this day and age...," Kagali murmured, and I firmly agreed.

Thank heavens Milim was here! I was sure she could beat that guy and put it back to sleep for us. Then I wouldn't have anything to worry about. For now, we had our own things to take care of.

"Gobta, Shion, we have guests to welcome."

“Roger that!”

“I’m on it. Those puny little dolls are no match for me!”

I thought about opening a transport gate to evacuate the expedition team to the surface, but I didn’t think I’d have the time. An organized legion of golems was now here for us, bearing down at full speed as we stood in front of the door.

Shion stepped forward, brandishing her large sword. Unfortunately, it caught on the corridor’s low ceiling.

“Dammit! Check your surroundings!”

“S-sorry! Just a little mistake.”

A “little mistake” could cost you your life. It cost *her* a bit, judging by the spear from one golem that was now stuck inside her. That nonsense left her wide open, and I really wish she’d get it together for a change.

“It’s too cramped to fight in here. I don’t know what’s beyond, but maybe there’s a bigger space in the third section.”

“Then maybe we can have them hurry up with deactivating it—”

“Nah, at this point, I’ll just do it myself.” *Sorry, guys, but time’s up.* “Ranga, help those two.”

While Gobta, Shion, and Ranga bought time for me, I quickly wrapped up the door for us. The alarms were still blaring; all the traps were activated. I wanted to avoid violence in here to keep the ruins as intact as possible, but luckily, the door opened without much of a challenge.

“Get inside!”

Heeding my words, the expedition team quickly ran down the stairway inside, none of them demonstrating a hint of panic. Kagali followed behind, and I joined her, protecting her back as we all went into the crypt area.

The dead were asleep here, but it didn’t look the part. It was an enormous, brightly lit space, large enough to house a broad, grass-covered plain. I almost forgot everything as I marveled at the landscape—but now was no time for surprises.

Soon Gobta was down the stairs, the golems not far behind, and the battle began anew. Now, however, things were turning around. Shion had full freedom of movement, and now she was pulverizing those golems.

At this point, I didn't want to let anyone escape. When I strike, I strike hard, and my foes probably think the same way. After all, they were trying to keep me isolated in here, even if it meant risking the wrath of Milim. I didn't think they'd go *that* far.

Honestly, I probably underestimated Maribel. But no more.

*...Understood. Shifting into full-power battle mode.*

Quietly, I finished my preparations. All restrictions I placed on myself were removed, to get myself ready for the enemy to come. Now I just had to wait for the ringleader.

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There were a large number of golems, but we had the advantage. Shion was kicking up a huge ruckus, and Ranga was going berserk. In between them, Gobta was destroying each golem with the gun he had, one at a time. He even had enough time to reload at regular intervals. Seeing how in control he was, the expedition team looked pretty reassured.

"Um, I'm surprised there was actually an attack, but what kind of force would attempt to attack a demon lord? Even waking up a Chaos Dragon for it..."

Kagali must've been curious about that. She seemed disturbed, the concern clear in her voice. If it was an act, she was good at it, but I still didn't know what lay in her heart.

"Sorry to drag you into this."

"Not at all! If there's a living Chaos Dragon out there, I wouldn't feel safer with anybody else, Sir Rimuru."

"Yeah! We need to report this to the Guild HQ and figure something out."

"But if the demon lord Milim loses, there's not much we can do, is there...?"

"We need to survive this first! I don't know who deliberately set off the trap, but that was *such* an evil thing to do."

I was seeing some optimistic opinions among the team. They sure knew how to mentally switch gears on a dime.

"I told you I was gonna protect you, right? And if I win, we're good."

I tried to keep it casual as I calmed them down. I had Gobta and Ranga here, not to mention Shion. And Milim, strongest among all the demon lords, wasn't gonna let a Chaos Dragon beat her. It wasn't a *good* situation, but it wasn't a *terrible* one, either. We had to kill our foes, survive this onslaught, and address our anxieties. Simple.

Kagali must've been relieved a little, because she didn't say anything else for a bit. I turned my eyes toward Gobta's battle, waiting for the adversaries to come.

"...You have many foes, Sir Rimuru," she whispered. "Is that because you're a demon lord?"

I was unoccupied while waiting for my enemy, so I casually replied to her:

"It wasn't voluntary on my part, but yes."

"Why is that?"

"The Kingdom of Farmus provoked me. With Clayman, my foe was messing with me, so I had to respond. Hinata the Saint had the wrong idea about me. In every case, it was started by the other side; I just played along. In a way, it was self-defense."

"It was? So you never start anything, Sir Rimuru?"

"Well, maybe I can't say *that*. With this particular enemy, it's kind of a conflict between motivations. Our philosophies don't mesh. This would've happened sooner or later anyway, I think."

"You can't resolve it without fighting...?"

"Sure we can. But that resolution would probably never come until I swallowed up the other side. If they didn't want that, they were probably right to do this."

With the twin superpowers of Dwargon and Thalion at their side, Tempest would have no reason to lose in an economic war with the Western Nations. If

the enemy did nothing, I'm certain that we would've annexed them all, financially speaking. Raphael's way faster than a quantum computer; I wouldn't stand for anyone dissing it.

"...Oh? So you think the other side's justified in this, then?"

Hmm... Are they? Maybe we could've accepted the differences in our principles and agreed to some mutual concessions. If we were never gonna get involved with one another again in the future, that might've worked. But if *they're* justified, then so am I. I had no interest in doing whatever they said, and they didn't want me ruling over them. And if that's how it was, confrontation was the only choice.

In a way, economic warfare is even more terrifying than the kind with guns and tanks. There's no defined surrender in one, and as long as the other side doesn't fall under your umbrella, it never ends. Thus, you could say that my foes turning to military warfare was a stroke of luck. This way, once they realize they can't win, they'll have to admit to defeat. But even if that was their only choice, the question of whether it was "just" or not is another issue entirely.

"Well, justice can mean a ton of different things, depending on your viewpoint. I'm not saying I'm absolutely correct, but if I retreat here, that's going to worsen my position. The only choice I have is to fight..."

It's not that I couldn't have taken a more modest path. But if I bent, all my friends would've gone down with me.

"Even so, if you respected the other side's position and tried talking to one another to search for a better relationship, don't you think you could've avoided hostilities?"

That's a tough one. How should I answer it?

...I didn't have to worry about it. A young girl's voice answered for me.

"It's impossible. So impossible. People have endless desires; you can't ask them to be patient. And if the other side bends, the demands get bigger and bigger. That's part of being human."

Right.

If I conceded, I'd like to believe the other side would understand. But that's just not realistic. If I were just another citizen who could believe in fairy tales, maybe I could've given you an earful of all that idealistic stuff. But from a politician's point of view, there's just no way I can believe in that nonsense.

And I guess my adversary thought the same way.

"You know, I think the exact same thing. I'm the demon lord Rimuru. You are?"

"Good to meet you. My name is Maribel. I'm your enemy."

Somewhere along the line, all the golems had been defeated. There, I saw a girl I caught sight of at the Founder's Festival—the enemy I anticipated and one far bolder than I ever imagined. I figured she'd be the sly sort who didn't venture out herself, but I wasn't expecting to see her right here in front of me.

And it wasn't just Maribel. Three others were next to her—Gaiye, looking completely changed; a man in knightly clothing; and Yuuki Kagurazaka.

The sight disturbed Kagali and the team.

"G-Guild Master?! Why are you here?"

"No... Were you after the demon lord's life?"

"You're kidding me! Then why did you order us to explore the ruins?!"

Yuuki demonstrated zero response to these questions. Just as Glenda said, he must've been under her complete control.

"Sir Yuuki, what is the meaning of this? Are you turning your backs on us?"

Kagali's voice was full of anger. It sounded like that came from the heart, but that didn't matter anymore. I really wanted to end this farce soon and go back up Milim, but before that...

"Yeah. You certainly are my enemy. But before we fight, there's one thing I'd like to ask, if that's okay," I said.

I turned my eyes toward the blond-haired girl. The expedition seemed thrown by my choice, but I kept watching silently. By this point, I suppose they've thrown their lot in with mine...or maybe they've been taken in by this girl's dark

atmosphere. That shiny blond hair; those lips the color of cherry blossoms. Maribel, this girl who may or may not be just ten years old. Deep down, though, she was cold, just too different from anyone else on the planet.

“What is that?”

“Join me. Then we can avoid all this needless conflict.”

“Laughable. So laughable. *You* should join with *me*, Demon Lord Rimuru. You’re going to lose right here. If you don’t like it, submit to my rule.”

“Your approach isn’t a match for my policies. The way you do things will lead to unnecessary wars. It’ll make countless innocent people suffer, just to keep the riches of a few safe.”

“Yes. I’ll admit to that. But so what? It’s completely natural for the powerless to be exploited. It’s survival of the fittest with monsters, too, is it not?”

“Oh, it is. But I don’t like that.”

“Well, it’s stupid. It’s so stupid. Do you believe in a bunch of insipid nonsense like ‘We’re all equal’?”

“No, I’m not a total idiot. But everybody needs to be given an opportunity. Some people just can’t manage to do anything, but you can’t cast away people’s values *that* easily, can you?”

Some people bloom later in life; some have hidden talents. You have people who hate working but have unbelievable artistic talents. With Maribel’s approach, once a gap opens between rich and poor, it’ll be impossible to close again. And I just couldn’t accept that.

From the moment they’re born, people are unequal. That was a given. You could probably count the monetary fortune a set of parents gives to their child as a kind of talent. But a life where you’ve given no opportunity at an education—just constant exploitation—meant ignoring the potential in all of us. In a word, it was a waste.

People have an infinite potential for talent. Throwing all that away is unthinkable. But...

“Ridiculous. So ridiculous. I can’t believe a childish dreamer like you is a

demon lord. Your stupidity is simply unbelievable.” My argument didn’t move Maribel.

“Is it? Well, all right. Then let’s determine which one is right. There couldn’t be an easier way.”

“Gladly. Let me teach you how reality works.”

Our arguments would never mesh. Only through a fight would we ever reach a conclusion. I did feel sad about that, but I could accept it. That’s the way it is. The human race will never see a day when everyone truly understands one another. But that just proves how diverse we all are.

Thanks to the process of evolution, we’re a living contradiction. Only the victor can proclaim how just that is. And Maribel and I—two sets of “justice,” opposed in principles—were about to clash against each other.

\*

“Smash him down!”

At Maribel’s signal, Gaiye moved first. Perhaps it was his hatred that made him lunge at me, eyes bloodshot. He had been taken away by the magical inquisitors, but maybe he escaped or something?

“*Pfft!* The likes of you challenging Sir Rimuru—” Shion shouted as she attempted to get in Gaiye’s way.

But Yuuki stopped her. “I’ll take you.”

“Oh! How interesting. No one weak enough to let that girl rule over them can defeat me!” Her eyes shone red—that’s a sign Shion was dead serious. With a tremendous aura, she readied her giant sword. The battle was underway.

Leaving her to work things out, I looked at the other man in the group. He seemed stronger than a paladin, but Gobta was engaging him now. Ranga was with him, but honestly, I had my concerns.

“Gobta,” Shion shouted, “time to show us what the Big Four can do!”

Oh. I totally forgot. I *did* kinda put that in place, didn’t I?

“You got it! Okay, now lemme show you something really good! ... Transform!!”

With that callout, Gobta and Ranga merged together, turning into a cool, werewolf-style figure that didn't have a hint of Gobta to it. Right. *That* could probably work. And unlike the last time I saw it a month ago, Gobta's apparently learned how to control himself better. Now he was conducting himself perfectly, no longer battered around by Ranga's strength. He was facing a foe who could most likely beat the Ten Great Saints, but I figured Gobta could probably manage.

Trusting in that, I focused on my own enemy.

...Oops, but before that. Gathering my aura into my left hand, I casually hurled it at Gaiye.

That was all it took to render him into dust and erase him from this world. Stained by Maribel's desire, he had obtained powers beyond his own, it looked like—but to me, he was just a distraction.

"You wanted to fight me, huh? Well, glad you got the chance before you died." It was sort of a blunt way to address the dead, but hopefully he'd be satisfied with it.

"No...?! What was that? What *was* that? That power...?!"

"What was it? That's me taking this *seriously*. And now it's your turn. You don't need to understand who you made your enemy. I'm going to gobble you down until you can never get resurrected again, so have fun nourishing me." I offered that little speech out of politeness before our battle.

Now that I was serious, I didn't want anyone to expect kindness from me. To me, Maribel was now my enemy. I was going to kill her. It couldn't have been more obvious.

*Let's end this fast and go help out Milim*, I said to myself as I took a step toward Maribel.



Maribel now realized it—just who she was up against. This was a member of the Octagram—and one of the strongest people in the world.

"Hey, is it me, or is Sir Rimuru lookin' kinda scary now?"

"Shut up! That's no way for part of the Big Four to talk! Listen, Gobta; that is the true form of the Demon Lord Rimuru. Ah, look how gallant and imposing he is! I, Shion, am truly happy to bear witness to this!"

"Oh, uh, really? I think his 'true form' is, y'know, how he usually goes around, and stuff..."

"Yes, and that is quite fetching, too, I will admit. Hee-hee! But I'm sure Diablo *so* regrets not being able to see this right now. Hee-hee-hee! I will be *sure* to tell him all about it. For an *extended* period of time."

Maribel could hear that conversation, but to her, it just sounded like mockery. Her mind was on other things. She needed to focus on Rimuru.

*This is no joke. Not a joke at all. The demon lord Rimuru must've found his experience at the Council to be incredibly humiliating, but he didn't seem that angry about it. That's why people called him gentle, but that's so inaccurate.*

Yes—to Maribel, a riled demon lord was not a foe to trifle with.

She had powered up Gaiye as best she could. He had taken on more power than your average magic-born, well beyond any human standard. Some of the older-guard demon lords, like Frey or Carillon, might've had a difficult time against him. After all, Gaiye had sacrificed the rest of his natural life span, burning up all the energy in his soul to borrow this outrageous force.

And yet Rimuru had defeated him with a single passing blow, as if burning a pile of trash. That was how outclassed Gaiye had been. Not just a child against a grown man; not just an elephant against an ant.

Maribel's soul held a stronger force than Gaiye's did. She had been resurrected, traveling to and surviving in another world, and presently, her mind was in a realm beyond human comprehension. But even so, she sensed that the demon lord Rimuru was now a threat.

Thus, she immediately broke out her final option—Holy Field, the most lethal of barriers and a killer move against any monster. Ever well prepared, she had already stationed her Blood Shadow troops around the outer rim of the castle grounds for this.

"You can threaten me all you want, but now it's time. Time to see just how

much more intelligent we are than monsters!"

As she bragged to Rimuru, she used her magical communication skills to send an order.

"Whoa! I feel all heavy..."

"I remember this. And it's even stronger than it was then. This must be its true force."

The Big Four werewolf stopped, confused, as his compatriot the ogre grinned defiantly.

*How annoying,* Maribel thought, gritting her teeth. As the name Big Four suggested, they both possessed unusual strength. Gobta, the werewolf, was the kind of champion to earn second place in battle tournaments—and the ogre he was with was just as formidable. They were joined by other magic-born, people Rimuru brought with him to the Council.

*Their sheer power is ridiculous. If I tried a frontal attack, I'd have no chance, even if Veldora never showed up. But...*

But now things were different. The demon lord overestimated his skills, and now he exposed his defenseless underbelly. Maribel chuckled to herself. *That mistake will be their doom.*

But her conviction was wishful thinking.

"Ah, I thought so. I anticipated you making this move. Did you think I wouldn't prepare for it?" The demon lord Rimuru grinned at her—and the next moment, the Holy Field disappeared as quickly as it deployed.

"Wha?! What did you do?"

"Well, I'm walking around here all but asking to be attacked, so of course I had my people keep watch around the castle for me, right? Maybe you thought you had me in a trap, but I was just using myself as bait to trap *you*. I figured, after all, that if you wanted to enslave me with greed, you needed to be on-site."

That was his response to Maribel—and at that point, Maribel understood everything. The missing Glenda hadn't been rubbed out at all. She'd betrayed

her.

*Yes... Yes. The only one overestimating their skills is me...*

And with her last resort exhausted, she was at a major disadvantage.

Gaiye was dead. Yuuki had the advantage but still wasn't overpowering the ogre. The other one—Rama, the Battlesage burning to avenge Glenda—was struggling against Gobta the werewolf. Both of them had been powered up by Maribel's greed, but the reality of it—the fact that neither could emerge victorious—showed just how strong the enemy was.

Maribel would have to step up herself to change matters. The petite, doll-like girl was about to expose her true nature.

Combusting her own soul, Maribel went beyond her limits. All she hoped for was victory. She couldn't make up for falling in that trap, but this was exactly what she wanted the whole time.

A chance like this wouldn't come again. She knew that. And thus, she had no regrets. "Time to get serious. I'm going to wager it all to kill you!"

"Right. And I'll reply with my full force."

Following that signal, Maribel started running.

With a bound, she unleashed a kick on Rimuru, her physical skill far from childlike. The attack was fiercer and heavier than a tank round, forceful enough to bend an iron beam—but it gave Rimuru no distress. He lightly parried it, then used his momentum to throw her body down.

Maribel reached out to the ground, leveraging her rebound to spin out of harm's way. Dodging Rimuru's follow-up attack, she launched Avarice as a sort of return gift.

"Die! ...You will thirst for death!!"

Waves of darkness attacked Rimuru. This was Maribel's finishing move, a strike that took the living's instinctual lust for life and flipped it on its head. That was Maribel Rozzo—a girl who used her own will to perfect her unique skills. This one, too, was a sinful one, harnessing the most primordial emotions in the human body. No one could resist the enhanced siren song of greed it played,

and there was no longer any doubting Maribel's victory.

*Yes... This couldn't happen any other way. I am reluctant to kill him, but it's not the worst outcome. It'd be far more foolish of me to leave such a dangerous man unchecked...*

If she had her way, she'd rule over Rimuru instead. But he wasn't the kind of foe who'd ever accept that. So Maribel opted to grasp complete victory for herself instead.

Surrounded by the black surge, the demon lord Rimuru stood there, seemingly not attempting to resist.

"It just wasn't enough. No one, no matter how strong, can do away with their thirst for life. And that's what makes me invincible."

It was true. She was all-powerful. Against Frey, Carillon, or an awakened Clayman, she probably would have won. Even Hinata the Saint would have faltered in the face of her skills. That's how strong the unique skill Avarice was.

But...

"Sorry, but my Analysis just finished up. Now it won't work on me."

Rimuru had triggered his ultimate skill—and at that moment, Maribel's chances of victory were zero...

...for while she was all-powerful, she was all-powerful within the dimension of that ultimate skill.



Raphael was right after all. Maribel had a Holy Field prepared. Granville was the boss of the Western Nations, so I was right to assume she had adopted it.

She was such a master at it that it scared me. But it also played right into my hand.

Now, the ever-eager Gabil, as well as Hakuro, Soka, and all her fellow troops, had something to do. It had been a pain keeping them calm over the past few days of no action. I certainly was glad I didn't disappoint them.

But...man, look at this girl Maribel. She was strong. Definitely strong. I felt that

for myself when we were tussling earlier—and when she exposed me to those dark waves, that really made my spine tingle. I wasn't worried at all about the possibility of dying, but if she fired that at one of my other officials... Well, the thought scared me. Anyone besides me would've died for sure. If I had to guess, *maybe* Diablo would be the only one to survive. Well, maybe Shion, too, but anyone else from Benimaru on down wouldn't have a chance.

Maybe it was time to train their spirits—their souls—a little more, I thought.

Completing my Analyze and Assess like Raphael requested, I gave Maribel her final warning.

"Sorry, but my Analysis just finished up. Now it won't work on me."

I wasn't going to let her control other people, but if she was willing to retire to a quiet life and not bother anyone...

Yes, even I knew I was going easy on her, but she looked like a ten-year-old girl. If I had to kill her, the guilt could've been gargantuan. So, you know, it'd be nice if she could surrender for me. (Of course, I guess I can coldly reason like this because I'm no longer human myself, but...)

"...Don't give me that. More. Give me more. Even if I consume everything I have, I'm going to seize victory!"

Unfortunately, my words failed to reach her.

Our principles were never gonna mesh anyway; I was preparing for an ending like this. But now that it was really happening, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness.

Maribel flew into a crazed flurry of physical strikes. Regrettably, none of them affected me. *Well, if we can't understand each other, so be it.*

"All right. I'm going to make this painless for you. Feel free to stew on your loss inside of me..."

With that, I set off Belzebuth's Soul Consume. Or tried to. But just then, with a loud *boooom!!* I saw Shion get sent flying from the corner of my eye. Turning toward her, I realized that Yuuki had just drilled a kick into her—and despite her Ultraspeed Regeneration, she couldn't get back up to her feet. This was *very*

unusual.

“Shion?!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Maniacal laughter drowned out my shouting. It came from both Maribel...and Yuuki, as if harmonizing with her.

“Well done. Well done, indeed. I underrated you, Demon Lord Rimuru. I underestimated you. I had no idea you were this kind of monster...”

“That’s true. I didn’t think you could win against Maribel. But I can’t have you forgetting that I’m right here, okay?”

Yuuki, fresh from besting Shion, stood before me. The black waves from Maribel were now crashing upon him, stronger than ever before.

*Understood. The subject Yuuki Kagurazaka’s power has just skyrocketed. The subject Maribel Rozzo is apparently using the unique skill Avarice to transfer her power to him.*

How many cards does she have in her hand anyway? Now I gotta deal with Yuuki, too? I knew he was only under the influence of her Avarice, so I wanted to subdue him if I could, not kill him.

“Tch! Don’t hate me if I kill you.”

“I’d say the same to you!”

With that exchange, he and I moved in sync.

There was a flurry of kicks, sending both of us hurtling through the air. Something like this had happened before to me, but this time, we were both serious—and now we had these two rivaling powers clashed against each other. Yuuki was stronger than I thought, certainly more of a physical specimen than Maribel. He fought Shion and pretty soundly beat her, so he had to be a phenom. I had no intention of going easy on him, but maybe it’d be tough to resolve this fight quickly.

I thought over my options as I faced down Yuuki...then I spotted Maribel moving around a bit, trying to catch me unawares. *Uh-oh. That’s bad, but I got my hands full with Yuuki right now.*

Turning her back to us, Maribel began fleeing toward the middle of the crypt. I wanted to pursue her, but Yuuki stopped me. Ah well. Not like Maribel can escape. Now that I fully grasped the wavelengths of her soul, I could find her no matter where she hid.

For now, Yuuki had to come first. I turned my eyes back toward him.

\*

My peripheral vision told me that Kagali and the expedition team were attending to Shion. She was awake, but it didn't look like she could stand up—something she looked pretty pained about, but there was no quick solution to that.

If Yuuki left her in such bad shape, I couldn't afford to make light of him. But I wasn't worried at all. As Raphael put it, a unique skill can never work against an ultimate skill. The strength of our relative souls was at the crux of it. If someone awakens to a power that surpasses unique skills in all dimensions, you needed a strong enough heart to go with that. Faced with that kind of spiritual strength, there was no way a unique skill could have any influence.

The only thing that could beat an ultimate skill user was another ultimate skill user. No matter how much power Maribel gave him, Yuuki couldn't beat me. My victory was as good as assured...but the next moment, my confidence was thoroughly crushed.

"All right. Time to get real."

With that, Yuuki unleashed a right roundhouse kick. It was just the same as before, and I easily blocked it with my left arm. But the next instant, my entire upper arm shattered, as if it burst open.

"...Huh?"

I backstepped to safety, honestly surprised as I blankly stared at my arm.

*Concern. The Universal Barrier of Uriel, Lord of Vows, has been broken. This is believed to be due to the subject Yuuki Kagurazaka's extra-singular Anti-Skill constitution.*

Um, wait a minute. So my Absolute Defense doesn't work on him?! In fact, is he pretty much nullifying all my attacks right now?

*Affirmative. Anti-Skill is a spiritual-body constitution that suppresses magic and skills. It is likely that only holy-blade skills and certain other Arts will be effective against him.*

So something like Meltslash could work?

This wasn't a joke any longer. He seriously managed to break down my ultimate skill. I'd never be able to comprehend all the details behind that, but his "constitution" was terrifying news to me.

"I thought you couldn't obtain unique skills or special stuff like that!"

"That wasn't a lie. I *did* say that my physical abilities have developed beyond normal, didn't I?"

I wanted to yell at him about that, but he was right. Besides, if his mind was being controlled, there wasn't much point complaining at him anyway.

But what'll I do now? Yuuki's attacks work on me, but mine don't work on him. I'd just be wasting time as it is, and if this is what it's come to, I can't get hung up with trying to keep him alive. I really wanted to, since we shared a homeland and everything. If he was deliberately my rival, that's one thing, but mind controlled like this? I felt real bad for him.

Facts were facts, though. Yuuki wasn't someone I could beat while going easy. Steeling my resolve, I drew my sword, sending my aura up and down its jet-black blade.

"Ooh... Nice katana there."

He took out the knife hanging from his side with his right hand. Then he took out another with his left, a small, single-edged sword. With these two blades, he held his hips down in an unusual stance—nothing I had seen before; maybe it was self-invented.

Seeing him square up, it finally dawned on me. Losing my skills and magic worried me, but Yuuki wasn't impervious to physical attack. Anti-Skill constitution or not, if I cut him, he'd bleed.

*That's why some Arts will work, huh?* And in my case, my skills even affected my punching, which is why that didn't do much. Would it be more effective if I

didn't enhance them with my aura?

*Negative. A correct answer cannot be determined due to lack of information.*

Roger that. Let's just try it, then.

Planting my feet on the ground, I slashed at Yuuki. He blocked it with the sword in his left hand, his physical skill letting him easily match my speed. But I had experience trading blows with Hinata, which helped both my sword skills and my confidence.

Staying calm, I looked ahead two or three strikes. Even if skills didn't work on Yuuki, Predict Future Attack still worked just fine, since it used Raphael's computations to discern his behavior.

Yuuki preferred to defend with his left-hand sword and attack with his right-hand knife. It usually went the opposite way, I thought, but everyone has their own preferences. Both of his weapons were made from purified magisteel, metallurgically evolving for vast power gains. Even among Unique weapons, they were in a class of their own—maybe even Legend-class, in fact.

Those were a threat, but then I made an unexpected discovery.

*Report. Anti-Skill is not applied to weapons.*

*Whoa. So using weapons actually weakens Yuuki. That little tidbit doesn't mean much for anyone besides me, but to Yuuki, that's a real blind spot.* If these were just regular old attacks, Absolute Defense gave me nothing to fear.

I decided to risk Yuuki getting a hit on me.

"Ha-ha! Dropping your guard, Rimuru?"

Pretending to lose my balance after a parried katana strike, I left myself open to him. Yuuki thrust with his knife, as if it was attracted by a magnet; there was some special feature to it that let it expand and contract, which messed with my sense of distance. To Yuuki, it probably felt like a surprise attack, expertly tossed into my single moment of vulnerability—but I planned the whole thing.

The knife was aimed squarely at my heart—but then I stopped it. I touched it to make sure; turned out it contained a special poison that would affect my nervous system. If he really stabbed me with it, even I would've taken damage,

but that was just pointless theorizing now.

"Well, too bad for you! It hurts more when you punch me, y'know."

"No way. This is insane...!" Yuuki's eyes widened. But I had no obligation to listen to his complaints.

Instead, I mercilessly unleashed a new sword strike, one I had just finished developing. It was called Stormbreak, a combination magic-and-Art move inspired by Hinata's Meltslash. The magic in question was Storm magic, as provided by the skill Veldora, Lord of the Storm. Veldora's magic was scarier for its secondary damage than its primary—once it opened up a wound, the destruction would begin from there, eventually breaking down your entire body. Stormbreak was the same way, a sure-kill Art that ate into its target's life force.

Thanks to his unique constitution, however, the strike I landed on him didn't trigger that effect. There was now a large gash across his chest, but it still wasn't a lethal blow.

"Ngh..."

With a groan, Yuuki glared at me. I tried to look into his inner thoughts, but a black mist blocked me from seeing anything. Maribel's desires had fully infected him. If I could clear all that away, I wouldn't *need* to finish him off, but...

*Understood. Interference is blocked by Anti-Skill.*

...but no dice.

Then there was just one thing to do.

"I've won this. I wanted to release you from Maribel's rule, but I guess I can't do that. I'm gonna go a little strong on you, but no hard feelings, all right?"

I would damage him almost to the point of death, knocking him unconscious. Then, while he was knocked out, I'd go take care of Maribel. If that eliminated her effect on him, then great.

I readied my sword against Yuuki. Sadly, punching him with my bare hands didn't deal him any damage. The energy that Anti-Skill cancels even included the kinetic energy from my fist. It's crazy, I know, but Yuuki was a very special

case.

Waiting until the best possible moment, I applied power to my sword. I wanted to strike him with the blunt side of my blade—good thing it's sturdy enough not to break, but if I applied too much, I was liable to cut Yuuki in half. Striking the right balance of power was tough.

But just as I readied my sword, preparing to smash it down on him:

"P-please, wait a minute! I beg you, please reconsider killing Sir Yuuki!" Kagali started shouting. I turned her way. She was on her feet, attempting to run up to Yuuki.

"Whoa, look out! Yuuki's under Maribel's control!"

"No, it's fine! There's no way someone as strong-willed as Sir Yuuki could have his heart taken by a little girl like that!" She clung to Yuuki, ignoring my warning. The expedition team was following her lead.

"Yeah! She's right! The Grand Master's not *that* much of a wimp!"

"That's true! He's always going by the beat of his own drum! There's no way anyone could exploit his weaknesses!"

"He's the kinda guy who'd beat a dragon just to show off to us!"

He was certainly well loved. If they were defending him *that* much, I was starting to look like a villain. *Look, if there was a way to keep from killing him, I'd use it, all right? But I can't go easy like that right now. I'm just taking the option that's best for the situation. Can't you see I'm carrying my katana backward?!*

I mentally begged them to take a closer look as I watched Kagali and the rest. They were coming up from behind him, trying to get his attention. If *that* was all it took to break Maribel's influence, we wouldn't be having this problem.

But:

"I'm not trying to kill him, either, okay? So—"

*So get out of my way,* I tried to say. And at that moment:

"Guys..." Yuuki whispered the word, his face twisted in pain.

*Report. Change detected in the subject Yuuki Kagurazaka. The desire-driven spiritual interference appears to have been canceled...*

...What?!

Seriously? We're going with *that* "happily ever after" ending? I could barely believe it, but my sense told me Yuuki wasn't after my life any longer.

*You gotta be kidding me!* I thought, but I had to accept it.

\*

With Yuuki back to normal, the only foes left were Maribel and the Chaos Dragon.

"Looks like I caused you some trouble there, so forgive me for that. But you saved me, Rimuru!"

"Y-yeah. Glad you're okay," I replied, trying my best not to look like I was okay with him dying a moment ago.

"Hey! Gobta! Get this done with already!!"

I needed to change the subject, and yelling at Gobta did the job. Soon after, his battle was over.

Shion was safe. Yuuki's Anti-Skill effect wasn't permanent, so her Ultraspeed Regeneration sprang back to life after a bit. She glared at Yuuki, still in a rage, as I tried my best to calm her down.

"This is a humiliation. I still haven't trained enough..."

When the anger left her, the sadness came rushing in. I tried to calm her once more, telling here there'd be another time.

Gobta, meanwhile, looked pretty exhausted. "I told that guy Glenda was alive, but he just wouldn't listen to me..."

Now that he was used to handling the power of Ranga, Rama wasn't much of a threat to him. Between Gobta's sense for battle and Ranga's hyper-instincts, that wolfman form was a huge upgrade. Ranga stayed conscious for it, too, apparently, keeping a honed eye out for external threats. The way they divvied up responsibilities during battle kinda reminded me of Raphael and me. No wonder they're such a force.

So why did Gobta have so much trouble in battle? Because he learned that Rama, his opponent, was burning to avenge Glenda's apparent death. Being a kindhearted goblin, he couldn't find it in himself to kill him.

I had asked Raphael to undo the spiritual interference in Rama's mind. He had used the power in his soul a little too much, but it looked like he'd survive. He was perfectly awake as well, and he was believing our description of how Glenda managed to survive.

That should have wrapped things up...but sadly, it didn't.

*Well, we can't sit around for long. Judging by the intense shaking we're feeling, Milim still hasn't managed to seal away the Chaos Dragon. I really wanna go help her.*

"Rimuru, I'll go chase after Maribel."

*Yeah, but Yuuki, you're... Wait, you're not wounded? It healed up? "Your wounds are okay?"*

"Oh, yeah. Kagali can use healing magic, so..."

*Huh? Why is he stating that like it's an obvious fact? "I thought magic didn't work on you..."*

"Oh, no, it's fine. I can turn these properties of my body on and off."

"....."

I was too exasperated to reply. Yuuki was giving me a breezy smile, which was *so* unfair. Hinata's body could purify magicules, or something like that, but she didn't have a flip switch or anything. And Anti-Skill was way more powerful than that. He could control it with *that* much precision...?

It just seemed so unfair. But ah well. I needed to address his offer.

"You can beat her?"

"It'll be easy, if I don't let my guard down. I mean, being controlled like that; I can't let her go. It's a matter of pride to me."

"Sir Rimuru, please," said Kagali. "I think Maribel is bent on destroying these ruins. In the ruins of Soma that I explored, there was a magical generator that I

think was used to run the city. This area looks similar to me, and if the generator goes out of control, it could blow up the entire area around us. And I think I'm the only one who can stop that!"

"...You think Maribel's gonna blow it up?"

"Supplying too much magical force to one can destabilize it. And if it hasn't been used for so long, there's no telling how it'd react..."

We weren't even sure if there was a generator like that in here, but if she was right, we had trouble on our hands.

"You know how those things work?"

"I thoroughly analyzed the one in Soma. If need be, I know how to stop one!"

A woman with her beauty sure had a lot of impact when she gave you a serious look like that. It wasn't just because of it that I nodded at her, but I sure did feel overpowered, yeah.

"Okay. You take care of that. Yuuki, get going!"

He was back to his usual breezy, aloof self, brimming with confidence. The two of them were now on Maribel's trail.

"Shion, Gobta, guide the expedition team up and regroup with the dark elves. Keep them guarded!"

"Yes, sir!"

"What about you, Sir Rimuru?"

"I'm gonna go back up Milim. If I don't hurry, the Chaos Dragon might start striking all of us soon."

Milim was doing her best to fight back, but even a stray shot of energy would devastate us. We didn't have time to waste here, so once we decided on something, we had to move.

"Let me join you!"

"No. Your wound's healed on the surface, but I'm sure you're still damaged inside. Just bodyguard the team for me!"

"Hmph. All right..."

Reluctantly, Shion agreed.

Yuuki and Kagali were already on their way into the crypt. Shion and Gobta had their orders. It was time to head out.



Maribel was running. But she hadn't given up on winning.

She had unleashed the sealed Chaos Dragon, one of the best cards in her deck. Under no circumstances could she let this operation fail.

But there was still one more card to play. Deep inside the crypt—the heart of the ancient elven city—the pinnacle of the old world's magical technology was still sleeping. She had heard about it, and so she wanted to overload it with magic and bury Rimuru with it.

*That's the only way I'll ever defeat that monster. My strongest pawn right now is Yuuki, and I'm sure he'll buy me a little time. In the meantime, I'll set that magical control reactor on the path to destruction...*

Yuuki's reports to her included information on the ancient ruins of Soma. She knew that Amrita was a city built by a similar ancient culture. If they worked the same way, it'd be easy for Maribel to control them.

Setting off a magical control reactor would cause vast amounts of magic-power destruction. If she triggered it right when Rimuru and Yuuki were locked in battle, she could catch them in the explosion, and they'd be caught powerless. An attack the demon lord Rimuru wasn't conscious of could absolutely defeat him—Maribel was certain of it.

Now she was in the central part of the crypt...but she couldn't find the reactor discussed in her report. In fact, there was nothing at all. The sarcophagi were empty, bereft of any accompanying decor or treasure. Yes, there were gold and silver baubles lying around, but no magic weapons—nothing of *real* value.

"That's strange," she reflexively whispered to herself. "So strange. What's going on...?"

Nobody was there to answer her...or so she thought.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! There's no magical control reactor in these ruins, you

know.”

“...!!”

“And by the way, there wasn’t one in Soma, either.”

“...Is that you, Yuuki?”

“It sure is.”

It was definitely Yuuki who answered her, standing tall where she could see him. Kagali was also there, nestled close to her.

“Aren’t you fighting the demon lord Rimuru...?”

“It’s over. I gave my all against him, but it was pointless. Rimuru had enough strength to go easy on me, but I didn’t stand a chance. If I *could* have won, I figured I would’ve beaten him right there, but...”

“I was so scared watching you! And I really thought you betrayed us, too.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, sorry. I figured it’d be more believable if I didn’t let you in on it. Besides, I always believed you’d understand my intentions.”

“Well, all right. Everything worked out fine, at least. If this is what you wanted, I’ve got nothing to complain about.”

Yuuki and Kagali were thoroughly enjoying themselves. Seeing them carry on, Maribel finally realized. Yuuki tricked her.

“That’s a lie. It must be a lie. But... Yuuki, did you break my force?!”

It seemed impossible to her, but it was a reality Maribel had to accept. But when, and how, did Yuuki manage to overcome the desires of her Avarice?

“...How did you do it?”

“Curious?”

“Just tell me!!”

“Heh-heh! All right. I will.”

Yuuki gave Maribel a look of pity, then showed her. As she watched, his brisk, cloudless demeanor suddenly appeared to have a dark pall over it.

“No... That’s a lie! A lie...”

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don't believe me? But it's the truth. I was pretending to be under your thrall from the beginning. What do you think? Pretty good performance, huh?"

Yuuki laughed, having a blast down in the crypt.

Maribel, on the other hand, looked ill. "No! My desires... They harness your emotions, to give you power..." Whispering to herself, she tried desperately to understand her situation.

"Yeah, your greed was something else. Sadly, though, my own desires are stronger than yours. This world, you know... It's like my sandbox. And it's my dream to become king of it someday. I didn't even need Anti-Skill to keep your Avarice from working on me."

The smile stayed on Yuuki's face. To Maribel, it was like having her death sentence read out.

"Don't count me out! I'm Maribel! Maribel the Greedy! Someone like you isn't even a threat to me!"

She drummed up all the energy in her soul, hurling it straight at Yuuki as she screamed. This was Greed Flare, a skill that transformed the power of her iron will into waves of physical destruction. It didn't work.



"Forget it already. You can't beat me."

Yuuki took her attack unguarded. The black waves dissipated like clouds around him. And at the next moment:

"Grrhh!"

The edge of Yuuki's hand shot straight into her heart—and that wasn't even the worst of it. Her force flowed out of her body as Yuuki's own absorbed it all.

"Nghh...ah... My power... You're..."

"You got that right."

"No... You—you can't...do that..."

The light faded from Maribel's eyes, the power draining from the arms clutching at Yuuki.

"If you were born into this world even ten years earlier, you might have taken the whole thing over. You just weren't lucky this time. Your body was too young to fully control your skills, wasn't it?"

"....."

Maribel didn't respond. She glared at Yuuki, frustration clouding her face... and then her soul flickered once, twice, before fading away. The one golden rule of this world had been upheld once more—the powerless always lose.

"You said it yourself, didn't you? You said I had too much ambition. Well, good night, Maribel. I'll take on that desire of yours..."

His words no longer reached her—and thus, Maribel, who lived in an era of near-constant upheaval, breathed her last.



Leaving everyone else to Shion and my friends, I rushed over to help Milim.

Right this minute, I was looking down on the Chaos Dragon. It was huge. Super-huge. A good three hundred feet or so in length, maybe. It made Charybdis look like a shrimp, and just beholding it drove the viewer to despair. The Chaos Dragon was now consuming the magicules around itself, growing

bigger and bigger. I could see it razing entire mountains with a single spout of breath. It was violence personified.

Even I had no chance against a monster like this. But Milim was different. Thanks to her super-dreadnought-level magicule stores, she had stopped the Chaos Dragon's advance.

"Sorry I'm late, Milim!"

"Rimuru? It's about time! I've got a little problem here. This guy's actually my friend. I wanted to seal it away, but it's just not working. I think it's gonna cause some damage soon...but I can't bump off my own friend!" She looked ready to cry.

Unlike Charybdis, the Chaos Dragon was bosom buddies with Milim. She must've wanted to give it the benefit of the doubt...but it was so huge that not even Milim had enough force to banish it away. Simply beating it would be doable enough, but she couldn't kill a friend like that.

I could understand that. It reflected well on Milim, in my eyes. So I smiled, trying to reassure her.

"It's all right now. I've got an idea!"

Milim's eyes sparkled as she watched me. I could tell she trusted me, but *man*, talk about pressure. I couldn't let it get to my head, though. Trying to look as confident as possible, I explained my strategy. "Listen. No matter how big this guy is, there has to be a core in it. You can attack him accurately enough to leave that intact, right?"

I figured Milim could preserve the Chaos Dragon's soul while striking the rest of it—much as I did with Charybdis to save Phobio, its vessel. This soul would be protected by the dragon's astral and spiritual bodies, but those bodies were already corrupted and breaking apart—or actually, they were broken to start with, hence this hate-driven corruption. It was also smeared head to toe with Maribel's desire, and I couldn't extract it out of the guy.

But its soul, though—the "heart" of Milim's best friend—still seemed to be working hard to me, shining as strong as always.

"B-but... If it's this big, it'll take a lot power to stab into it. If I mess it up, I

could blow away the whole thing..."

"I taught you how to go easy, didn't I? Your friend's trying its very best for you right now. You have to be strong for it!"

I couldn't let her make excuses. Momentum was key. If she starts thinking *What if I mess this up?* she'll fail at something she ought to succeed in.

"And I'll help you out, okay? Just follow my instructions and release all the magic force you've got!"

Yes, I told her I had a plan. I really didn't. I was just gonna rely on power here—Milim's power. But this wasn't the first time for me. I already saw it happen once, and it succeeded then. This was operating on an even huger scale, but the task before us was identical.

"All right. I believe in you, Rimuru!"

"Okay! We got this!"

I faked as much confidence as I could. Really, it was breaking my heart, acting so bold like this. If it failed, I was deathly scared of the consequences...but I had no other bright ideas, and I was the only one who could pull this off.

*You're on, Raphael!*

*Understood. Yes, my lord!*

I might be a pro at palming responsibility off...but for this moment, at least, I needed to perform. No mistakes would be allowed. I repeatedly told myself that this would go fine.

"This'll be easy, okay? It's the same thing over again! Do it, Milim!"

"Right! Yeah, you're right. Here goes, my friend. May the shining of the stars burn into your eyes! Drago Buster!!"

There was a flash, so bright that closing your eyes did nothing.

The enormous swirl of power Milim released reached the Chaos Dragon, smashing against its ominous wall of force. Power struggled against power—and as I watched it, I searched for the source of the Chaos Dragon's strength, relying on Raphael's calculations to control Milim's torrential might.

It was heavy. Incredibly heavy. I could tell it was draining my own magicule stores. But despite all the energy we poured into it, the Chaos Dragon was unscathed. This guy really *was* crazy.

It was about to break my heart, but if I gave up now, this would all be for nothing. All my previous experience was for this exact moment—I truly believed that as I threw everything I had at it.

Trying desperately to retain my peace of mind, I slowly brushed away the evil force that loomed around the Chaos Dragon's soul. In terms of time, it was less than a second, but the pressure made it seem like forever.

I saw it! The Chaos Dragon's spotless heart, blinking there amid it all. But I couldn't let up yet. Even without the black mist of desire, even without the hateful evil, I still had the dragon's broken, polluted spiritual force waiting for me.

Carefully, with pinpoint precision, I kept up my work. Then, out of nowhere, the black mist disappeared. Yuuki defeated Maribel!

"Yes! We can do this!" Hoping to seize victory, I set off Belzebuth. "Milim, we're finishing this now. Can you boost your output?"

"You got it! Raaahhhh—Drago-Nova!!"

Heeding my instructions, Milim finally got serious.

Feeling it all over again made me realize just how amazing she was. How could she turn the spigot any farther than that? The way she engineered incredible feats of strength like that—I could really tell she was on another level from the rest of us.

But watch out. Now's no time to stare at her, all amazed.

"Okay, Chaos Dragon. I'm gonna stop the pain for you."

Now for the final touch.

Timing was going to be key here. Milim's magic had to pulverize the Chaos Dragon's exposed spiritual body, breaking down its astral body as well. Not missing my beat for a moment, I waited until just before Milim's power shattered its heart, then triggered Soul Consume.

Ignoring all rules of time and space, Belzebuth did its work. Within my perception, it was done quicker than Milim's magic—and just as I planned it out, I had the Chaos Dragon's shattered heart in hand.

Without the core governing that massive cloud of magicules, the Chaos Dragon was already starting to disintegrate. But that was a problem of its own.

"R-Rimuru! This is bad news! It's gonna explode!"

Milim had already stopped infusing her magic at my signal. But now there was a massive energy field in the sky, twisting and warping the air inside. Force clashed against force, compressing the energy at eye-popping pressures. The reaction would come soon enough, a huge explosion that not even Milim could neutralize.

She gave me a panicked look. But I was calm. According to Raphael, I could apparently do something about this.

"It's all right. I'll figure it out!"

"You can do that?!"

She looked surprised. I appreciated her admiring eyes, but if I messed this up, I was gonna look like such a dumbass—ah, but now's no time for that.

*Are you sure this'll be okay, Professor?*

I couldn't help but ask.

*Affirmative. It is not a problem.*

Just as businesslike as ever. That seemed so reckless but kind of reassuring in a way.

With a smile, I looked at what used to be the Chaos Dragon. It was already just a shell at this point. No need to hold back.

"Gobble it up, Belzebuth!!"

Could it really consume such a vast blob of energy? My worries were instantly quelled by the fury of Belzebuth's appetite, astounding me beyond imagination as it swallowed every bit up like a midnight snack.

"Is...? Is it over?" Milim asked.

"No, not yet. We gotta do something about your friend here."

"Huh? You will?"

"Sure. I brought this along for times like these!" *Not really! But let's roll with it!*

I took out a pseudo-soul.

"...?"

No time to spell it out for the confused Milim. I focused on myself. Theoretically, this was possible. In fact, Raphael guaranteed it. I just had to believe in it.

Boldly, I did my work, trusting it was guaranteed to succeed. I picked up all the pieces of the shattered heart, then absorbed them into the pseudo-soul; Soul Consume patched all the pieces into a single unit for me, so it went easier than I expected.

The issue was what came after that. Can a core like this be housed in a pseudo-soul?

There was no reaction.

I began to sweat. Staying calm on the surface, I frantically tried to brainstorm a solution. What should I do at a time like this?

My brain finally settled on something I saw on TV dramas a lot.

"M-Milim... Did this Chaos Dragon have a name or anything?"

"A name? Nothing like that, no..."

*No? Crap. But calm down. There has to be another way...*

"...Gaia! I wanted to call it that someday. This creature's name is Gaia!!"

*Oh, it does have one.*

I breathed a sigh of relief and softly called Gaia's name.

*What a nice name that is!*

*So your name's Gaia, huh?*

*Hey, shouldn't you open your eyes before your friend starts crying?*

The pseudo-soul began to softly glow. We did it. The heart was in the soul.

Now I wrapped the master core in Gaia's pseudo-soul. That completed its avatar core, and now my job was done. Time would take care of the rest—and once Gaia's heart was healed up, it would be revived in the shape of its choice. In Gaia's case, that shape would be its actual body, not some other vessel. It'd be a new monster, coming to life right before Milim's eyes.

"It worked, Milim. This is the new Gaia. It hasn't been born yet, so it's kind of like an egg right now." I presented the avatar core to her.

"Right... Right! I just *knew* leaving everything to you would work out. I trusted you, Rimuru. Thank you. Thank you!"

Glad to be of service. That, and I'm glad I didn't screw that up. But more than anything, seeing Milim smile really did make me happy.

"Wanna head back? Everyone's probably worried for us."

"Mm-hmm! I need to tell 'em all what I did!"

*Sure, sure.*

*Good thing Milim came along, though. I couldn't have done a thing against that guy alone.*

From far away, we saw the palace, along with our friends nervously watching us. They all looked okay, which was reassuring.

That wrapped things up, then. I just wanted to go home and relax. A nice bath, followed by a cold beer. Basking in the joy welling out from me, I joined Milim as we went back down to regroup with our friends.

EPILOGUE

# THE ONE WHO LAUGHS LAST

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*

## EPILOGUE

### THE ONE WHO LAUGHS LAST

Yuuki had obtained Maribel's power.

"I really wish you'd talked to me about it first."

"Ha-ha-ha! I already explained why I didn't. That's why I was able to trick Maribel, you know?"

"But do you realize how hard it was not to let my 'outside' friends find out the truth?"

As Yuuki fought Rimuru, Kagali was forced to distract the expedition team so the secret behind Yuuki's powers didn't come out. Any strange activity on her part ran the risk of attracting Rimuru's attention. It was an ordeal for her.

Yuuki, meanwhile, didn't really care if people found out, so he didn't see it as a problem. Even if everyone knew he could cancel people's skills, it wasn't like someone could devise any kind of workaround against it. It was an ace in the hole for Yuuki, yes, but it wasn't even one of his last resorts.

"Well, you know, I trusted in you. It worked out in the end, so can you maybe let me off the hook this time?"

"You siphoned off Maribel's power, didn't you? Was that in your plans, too?"

"Yeah, more or less. They say 'sinful' unique skills are the most powerful ones out there, so I *did* have my sights on it. I heard Avarice was driven by the size of your desires, and I figured it'd be pretty appropriate for me."

"You really are crazy sometimes. It's not *that* easy to take somebody's skill, you know that?"

"I'm sure it's not. But Avarice kinda *chose* me this time. I still couldn't win against Rimuru, but..."

"...I'm sure you couldn't. He's so unfair like that."

"I know! But now I can pin all the negative stuff on Maribel. I've just been fully acquitted! I'm probably gonna have to mind my p's and q's for a little while, but now I've got something else to look forward to, you could say."

"Right. No need to hurry things now. And it's so unnerving, how wary the demon lord is of the people around him. I can't say I liked everything about your plans, but I think I can appreciate them now." Kagali's main complaint was how Yuuki ruined the crypt by blowing it up.

Yuuki told Rimuru that Maribel activated the reactor, then took her own life. The explosion, which razed the deepest section of the crypt but little else, was his way of hiding the evidence. Yuuki had prepared a magical bomb for just this purpose.

*"There wasn't much energy left in reactor,"* he'd explained to Rimuru, *"so the damage was pretty light, thankfully."* He even had the foresight to scatter the remains of a real reactor around the crypt to back up his story. Now he was prepared to stick to that story, no matter what he was asked.

But Kagali had her concerns.

"You were planning to abandon this place from the start anyway, weren't you?" Yuuki retorted. "So why worry about it?"

To Kagali, though, this was a familiar city, her home. Once everything was cleaned up, she wanted to restore it to its former bustling glory—but with the crypt now buried, she had a few gripes.

"...Not necessarily, I wasn't." She shrugged. "It was kind of my second home, you realize."

Yuuki gave her a grin. "Yeah. But we earned something from this. My name got cleared, which is huge, but other stuff, too. Maribel deployed her Blood Shadow troops, but did you see how they all cast *holy* magic? That's a lethal blow."

"You're right. I noticed that, too. It proves that the Council's connected to the Western Holy Church. That's why there's all the secrecy behind the Five Elders' true identities."

"Exactly. It showed up in the papers and everything, but after the war in Farmus, the reputation of the champion there took a huge hit. Then, at the same time, the Council started losing clout with the Western Holy Church. That points to only one truth! I'm thinking that Maribel's grandfather, Granville Rozzo, is actually part of the Seven Days Clergy."

"I see... That's a clever deduction, Sir Yuuki."

Kagali was just as sharp as him—and her reading of the situation matched his to some extent, convincing her it was the truth.

Yuuki looked at Kagali with a sinister smile. "Oh, it's nothing too impressive. But I've stumbled upon another really key possibility. You know what it is?"

He paused, gauging her reaction. Kagali couldn't think of anything else. She put up her hands in surrender.

"I tried tracing Maribel's thoughts, based on the actions she took. But she really forced things with this whole operation, you know? If she killed the demon lord Rimuru, there was a chance Veldora would go berserk on us. When she took over the Chaos Dragon, that really *did* enrage Milim, almost. You were terrified that she'd discover us, weren't you? So I really think she pushed her luck way too much with a demon lord as dangerous as that...to say nothing of a True Dragon."

"Putting it that way, you're right..."

"Maribel had to know the danger she was putting herself in, and I'm sure she worked out some countermeasures. But what were they?" Yuuki looked straight at Kagali. He didn't have an answer himself, but he figured asking would help organize his own thoughts.

"Hmm... Maybe she believed that she, alone, was safe the whole time?"

"There is that, yeah. But I don't think that's all."

"And maybe she was anticipating at least a little damage? She feared the rise of Rimuru, and if she thought some sacrifice now was worth it in the future..."

Yuuki nodded at this. "Well, me, I'd never do that if I had no idea how much damage there'd be. But if I could predict how much to expect, approximately,

I'd definitely weigh the losses against the gains on the scale."

"...Meaning?"

"I think Maribel had some kind of reason to believe things would work out, even if Veldora and Milim lost control."

"....."

"And what was that reason?"

"Granville..."

"No." Yuuki had arrived at an answer. He grinned. "Who did Laplace fight in the sanctuary?"

"Well, the demon lord Valentine—*Oh!*"

He chuckled, seeing Kagali's reaction. "Right. The demon lord Valentine is dead...but there's a demon lord Valentine in the Octagram. The *real* demon lord's even stronger than the fake one, I bet."

"Even at my peak, I was about equal with *that* Valentine. In that case..."

"In that case, the real one's even stronger! Now I'm sure of it. The headquarters of Luminism isn't just a religious site—it's a demon lord stronghold."

"You mean Valentine's really the god Luminus? That's insane..."

"But it's true. I really don't think I'm wrong." The confidence behind Yuuki's voice led Kagali to the truth.

"Yes... You're right. And it wouldn't be strange if Granville knew that."

"Not at all. And so did Maribel. That's why she figured Luminus was protecting the Western Nations."

It all seemed to make sense. Kagali had to accept it. There wasn't any room for objection. "Sounds like we'll need to rethink our strategy."

"Yeah. But I'm gonna have to move my base of operations to the East for a while anyway."

"Hee-hee-hee! You *are* a scary man. You say you're going to lie low, but it

sounds like you'll be moving around a lot, aren't you?"

"Well, sure. I'm gonna be king of this world, remember? I promised you I'd get a hold of it!"

"That you did. Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. I look forward to it. I really do. And I'm sure Clayman will be delighted, too."

"Yeah. So keep lending me a hand, okay?"

"Yes, of course. And please don't betray me, either, Sir Yuuki."

"Of course I won't. The world will be mine—and then we can all have a blast together!"

Yuuki and Kagali looked at each other and smiled. The laughs continued on and on; two magic-born aiming to seize the world like it was a game to enjoy. Their aim was childlike, but they were serious about it.

They wanted to conquer the world.



The Chaos Dragon was gone. Milim's friend was saved. And now that I was back on the ground, I was shocked to find the bottom section of the ruins all caved in.

According to Yuuki (who was safe), the cornered Maribel blew herself up inside. She wanted to take all of us along with her, apparently—she really wanted to take me out that bad? That was just too much, in a way...but she was hostile to me, so I didn't know what else I could do. No point moping about it.

After discussing matters with Kagali, we decided to restore the ruins back to their pristine condition. It would take time, but we planned to excavate the bottom portion as well. Eventually, we would display the artifacts we dug up and turn this palace into a museum. We wanted to make this into a tourist attraction, complete with a magitrain stop.

That would take who knows how many years, of course, and we had a ton to do before then. Unless we negotiated a peace treaty with the Eastern Empire, at least, this whole area was a front line. Just because it was Milim's turf didn't make it a safe zone, necessarily.

For now, at least, our plan was to work on restoring the site.

Negotiations were continuing to go smoothly with the Council. Several of the councillors got dismissed, though, which definitely affected its power as a legislative body.

The Western Holy Church was gaining more power now, and Yuuki, freed from Maribel's hold, was also making his presence more known. With things as they were, the Council was seeking a new unifying force. That, of course, would be us—or to be more exact, me.

Tempest had now become the biggest faction of the Council. Yuuki's Free Guild gave us a push along those lines, offering their public support of Tempest in exchange for financial backing. Hinata was working with us on this, too, in the name of stability among the Western Nations. Thanks to that, we had now obtained a pretty hefty amount of influence in the region.

*Still, I'm glad Yuuki's been cleared of everything. Now I can keep building up our alliance without any qualms.*

*Negative. The doubts have now been confirmed. The subject Yuuki Kagurazaka is definitely acting of his own free will.*

Huh?

*Wait, why didn't you say anything before?!*

*Understood. Because his motivations were simple and easily taken advantage of.*

*Was that why? Oh. I see. So you were keeping quiet for my sake?*

.....

*This is all thanks to my carelessness, isn't it?*

For one moment there, I hesitated to kill Maribel. Considering what the future held now, I shouldn't have wavered. If I'm damaged, that wavering disappears—but if someone hasn't been that much of a bother to me, I couldn't help but think killing was going too far.

Even with Gaiye, I thought killing him overstepped my boundaries. My heart must've softened up with Maribel along those lines.

*So did you keep quiet because you assumed I couldn't kill Maribel?*

*...Affirmative. It was decided that it was necessary to do so.*

That's so selfish...or maybe not. Just as Raphael predicted, Yuuki killed Maribel for me. And now he was resting on his laurels, assured that all the evidence was destroyed. I guess someone like that *would* be easy for Raphael to handle.

I was in no position to complain, but I still found it incredibly frustrating. Making Raphael worry like that, just because I'm so unreliable...

*Negative. That is incorrect. I did not want my lord to feel any anxieties.*

*Well, thank you. I wouldn't feel guilty this way, right?*

Yeah, I'm glad for that, but that's not gonna work for me. I need to face facts and decide things for myself. Otherwise, I'm a failure as Raphael's master. If I keep clinging to people like this, I'm never gonna grow and mature.

*So next time, report the whole truth to me, okay? I promise I'll accept it.*

*Understood. As you wish.*

No matter what Yuuki's scheming, I'm going to crush his ambitions. And I'm not alone. I have friends, partners I can rely on. Don't I? With Raphael, I can walk straight ahead, never making any mistakes.

I'd really believed I could. And maybe, just a little, I thought I felt Raphael "smile" for me.

## AFTERWORD

Good seeing you all again. This is Fuse.

To tell the truth, I was actually planning on zero afterword this volume. This was thanks to the page count ballooning to its biggest yet, after a successful diet last time. I'll never forget the resigned voice of Mr. I, my editor.

*But!*

Once we opened the lid, it turned out we had a few extra pages. They want me to fill around six of them in an afterword, they said.

Like I've written before, when I pick up a novel at the bookstore, I read the summary blurb, then go straight to the afterword. I figure the afterword's a good way to see whether a book is engaging or not. Even for a series like this one, I always read from the afterword first. I've got this habit of seeing if there's any new info, or maybe a release date for the next volume, before I enjoy the book itself.

That's why I think "an afterword is really important," but when I'm writing one myself, things change fast...

I mean, really... If I write about my private life, a lot of people won't care. If I write about the series, I'll end up talking about spoilers. I'm sure a lot of readers would prefer more story to more afterword.

If you have any requests on things to talk about in here, please write the editors at GC Novels! You may just see that reflected in future volumes.

So for now, I'd like to talk a bit about the series.



Here's a little behind-the-scenes info on the gun that appears in this volume.

I gave the full name of it in the text—the Walther P99, a real-life handgun. Glenda uses it in the story, but it's a semi-automatic pistol produced by the Walther company in Germany.

I was thinking about going with the Beretta M92 or Px4, but then people might confuse it with the character Beretta. After deliberating over my options, I picked the P99 in the end.

The Walther P38 is pretty well-known. In Japan, it's famous as the preferred pistol of that one master thief we all know and love. I thought I might follow that example but opted against it—I figured that, being a woman, Glenda would prefer a more compact firearm.

So that was my motivation behind choosing the Walther P99. It only gets named once, but I still had to do some research for it, even picking up an airsoft version to handle myself. It reminded me of how much I wanted one as a kid. I guess I'm just buying stuff like this now that I'm grown up and can afford it, can't I? Not that it matters.

Anyway, I plan to continue bringing handguns like this into the story. They may go under the same name, but between mechanical and magical mechanisms, they could be totally different inside.

The type Rimuru brought along on his adventure has completely original internals, although it looks the same from the outside. They even reproduced the blast charge, although making a lot of it is apparently a pain. They figured they could simplify things a bit, and so it has all the magic revisions described in the story.

I also hint a little that the Empire has guns of their own, but those will be a completely different model. The idea is that they went through the same thought processes as Rimuru and friends but developed their magic-driven guns in different directions—that kind of thing.

So those are the basics, but that's only the beginning of my problems.

I'm planning to introduce a family of demons named after classic super-cars, but at first, I was going to have a series of magic-born named after gunmakers, like Beretta. That was the plan, at least, but Beretta never did get any siblings in the web-novel version.

So now what? With the name Walther getting a mention, hopefully that jogs Rimuru's memory a little, but...

I mean, think about it. Sig, Colt, Glock, Mauser, Walther, Mateba, Remington. The twin brothers Heckler & Koch. Those are just a few of Beretta's buds, and perhaps we'll see them floating around Tempest in the future. I can already hear someone shouting "Don't do it! It's hard enough to come up with character designs as it is!" but I won't introduce them until they're absolutely needed in the story. Promise. But I'd love to put 'em in action in a side story or something.

\*

To wrap up this volume, I'd like to express some of the gratitude I feel on a daily basis.

Thanks to Mr. I, my editor, who's always happy to speak with me. I troubled him with yet another page expansion this time, but he said this was all for the readers, and as the author, that's a relief to me. Our phone conversations are always a nice mental break for me, so let's keep this going!

Thanks to Mitz Vah for all the wonderful illustrations every volume.

As mentioned, Maribel's design gave us a lot of trouble. Because of all that hard work, though, I think we've come up with a nice character. The cover and interior art's being worked on right now as I write this afterword, and I can't wait to see the results!

And to the proofers, designers, and the other many people who helped bring this book to fruition: Thank you!

Finally, to my readers.

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* has finally ascended to Volume 10. This is all thanks to the support you guys give us, and I want to answer your call. I promise we'll keep doing our best, right up to the conclusion!

Thanks again for your continued support of *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime!*



VELDORA LATTE ART

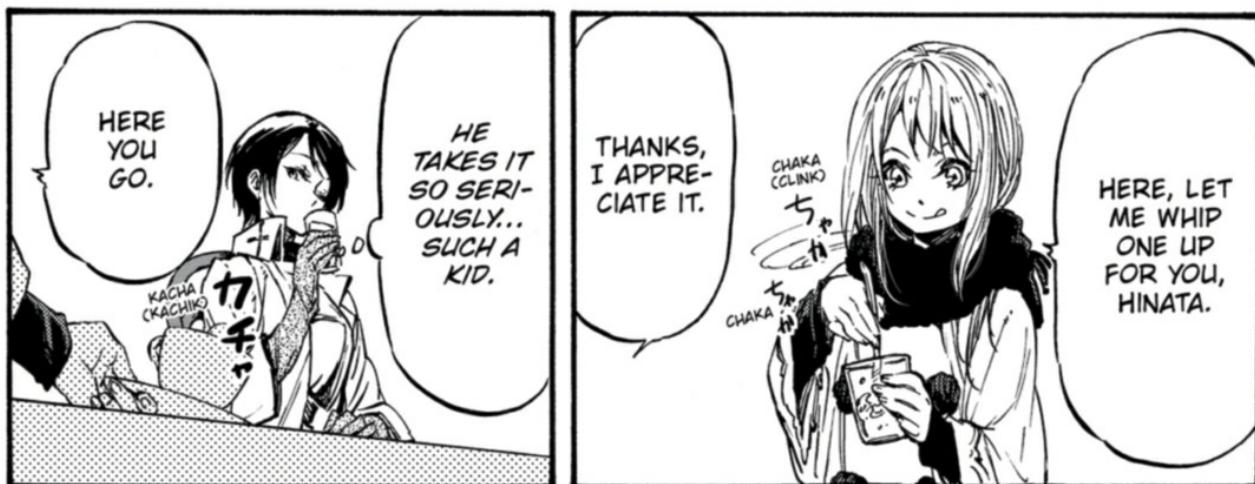
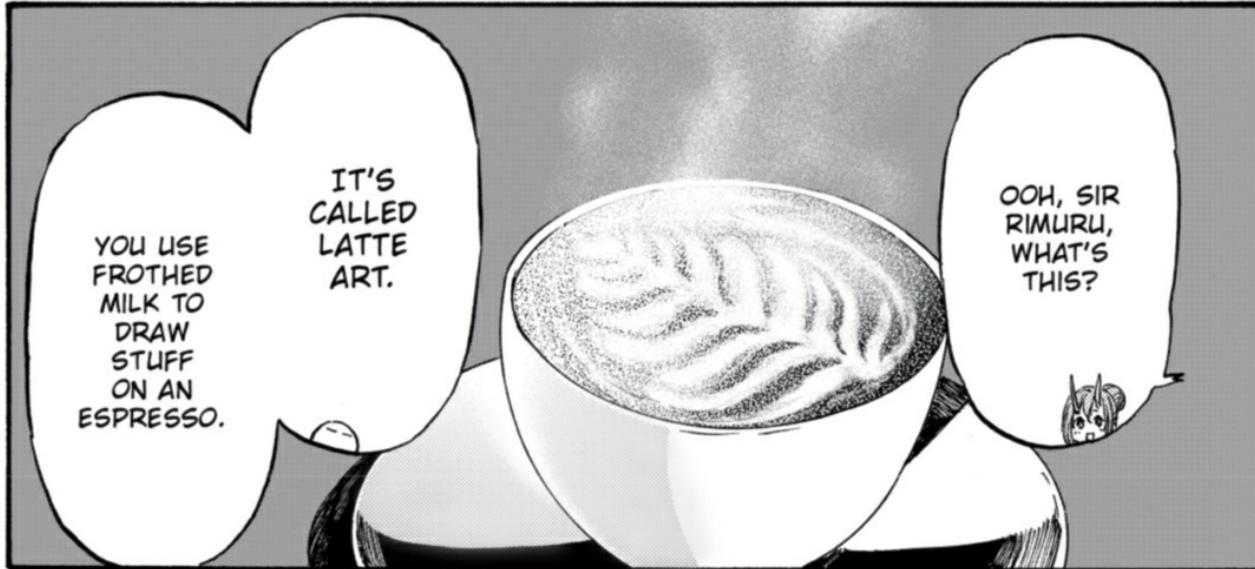


IT SEEMS 3-D LATTE ART  
WASN'T YET MAINSTREAM WHILE  
HINATA WAS STILL IN JAPAN.

←READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT!

## Latte Art

Art: Taiki Kawakami



HERE'S TO  
VOLUME 10!



ALSO CHECK OUT  
MY SPIN-OFF COMIC,  
THE WAYS OF THE  
MONSTER NATION!  
-SHO OKAGIRI

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